

THE TAB

CONTENTS

- 1 The Kveen**
An English Jew pays his respects
- 4 Hezbollah Is Now on Israel's Border**
War fears are no longer alarmist as the terror group supplants U.N. forces, increases military readiness, and becomes more reckless on Lebanon's southern border
- 6 The U.S. Government's Vast New Privatized Censorship Regime**
Censorship of wrongthink by Big Tech at the behest of the government is government censorship, which violates the First Amendment
- 10 Beyond Abstinence**
Unitarian Universalists rethink sex education—in their churches, and in schools
- 13 The Genizah of the Self**
I bid goodbye to my boxes
- 17 From Trotsky to Torah**
Searching for God, or at least a picnic, on Rosh Hashanah

T MORE TABLET



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

ARTS & LETTERS

The Kveen

An English Jew pays his respects

BY HOWARD JACOBSON

It's October 1954 and I, along with thousands of other Mancunians, am standing in the rain waiting for the queen's car to pass. The school has distributed flags for us to wave but I don't wave mine. Waving a flag is like singing along and I am not a singalong sort of person. But that doesn't mean I am a republican. Since she has taken the trouble to visit the North so early in her reign, I feel I am obliged to return her curiosity. And besides, this is history and I would like to be a small part of it. Who knows? One day it might interest my grandchildren to be told I was there and saw her. But I don't have the confidence to push my way to the front of the crowd lining the pavement or ask the people blocking my view at least to lower their umbrellas, and so only know from the roars around me that her car has been spotted, that she is near, that she is here, and that she has gone.

Later, my grandmother and my aunty, who are royalists of sorts and have coronation mugs in their display cabinet, ask me what she looked like. Very pretty and very regal, I tell them. Every inch a queen. Not that I could see many inches of her in that big car. And, to be honest, I thought she looked a bit remote under her crown. Crown! Well, tiara then. And did she wave to me? I tell them I can't be sure she waved to me in particular but I

think she might have. What color were her gloves? Blue. Or black.

In fact, I thought it possible that she did glimpse me through the dripping thicket of umbrellas because I was the only boy not waving a flag. In all likelihood, the only boy not waving a flag in the whole of her kingdom. The following day I started to write a story about a queen who saw a boy not waving his flag as she drove past and fell in love with his independence of spirit. She sent her courtiers out to scour the land to find him but they never did. Little by little she sank into a depression that none of her physicians could diagnose or cure. I had read fairy tales about unsmiling princesses who are made to laugh again by the antics of uncouth, provincial lads. *Sleeping Beauty* is a variation on that very theme, even if, in some tellings, the uncouth provincial lad is replaced by a handsome prince. I didn't ever finish writing the story because I couldn't think of any way of ending it that wasn't preposterous, but I do wonder if some of those intruders who have scaled the walls of Windsor Castle or Buckingham Palace were likewise imagining themselves, if not as the provincial lad, then as the prince.

Ten years after the coronation, the then-Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, who had already written of the profound and passionate feelings of devotion the queen inspired, embarrassed

the entire nation by welcoming her to the state opening of parliament in Canberra with words taken from the 17th-century poet Thomas Ford: “I did but see her passing by / And yet I love her till I die.”

It might be going too far to say that it’s among the first functions of royalty in our great age of commoners to make us daydream, but there are too many myths and fables about kings and queens in the cellars of our national psychologies for the few real monarchs that are left not to reawaken, even in the most republican-minded, some of the old awe and fantasy. Goodness knows what poem Menzies would have dredged up had he lived to see that fairy tale incarnate, Princess Diana, passing by. To her great credit, Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor chose a more prosaic role for her reign, always allowing that a prosaic princess might still understand herself as divinely appointed to be queen.

Like the rest of the country, I’d watched the coronation on a small-screen black-and-white television. Today we carry screens that size on our wrists. But there was no diminution of the day’s gloriousness. The music sent shivers down our spines, the diamonds sparkled like the heavens, we smelled the incense and swooned. Our teachers had discussed the idea of the divine right of kings to better prepare us for the event, and now we could see exactly what they meant. If God wasn’t in that abbey making sure everything went according to His plan, he couldn’t have been very far away. The expression of a national religion, when it has the breath of the people in its sails, can overwhelm the senses. The soon-to-be queen herself, defender of the faith and supreme governor of the Church of England, seemed daunted by it. How much more intimidating and foreign, then, did it feel to the son of second-generation immigrants from Lithuania and Ukraine. And yet, as the service progressed, it became impossible, at least if one concentrated on the words, not to notice the Church of England’s—and therefore the queen’s—essential Jewish lineage.

As she entered the abbey, Elizabeth

“It became impossible, if one concentrated on the words, not to notice the Church of England’s—and therefore the queen’s—essential Jewish lineage.”

was received with Psalm 122, praying for the peace of Jerusalem and the plenteousness of its palaces. In the moment before the archbishop laid his hand upon the Ampulla, he called upon God to bless and sanctify his chosen servant Elizabeth as he had of old consecrated kings, priests, and prophets to teach and govern “thy people Israel.” Suddenly I was the bedrock on which this majestic edifice was built. Enter, soon after, with the assistance of Handel, Zadok the Priest. “And as Solomon was anointed King / by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet. / So be thou anointed, blessed, and consecrated Queen.” Thus, with all conceivable pomp, did Elizabeth become the recipient of her divine right to rule not only in language taken from the Jewish Bible, but with precise reference to the Jewish Bible’s understanding of the solemn not to say controversial negotiations entered into before God would entitle a monarch to serve in his place.

I am not, of course, saying that the coronation was just a bat mitzvah with more smoke. Or that all the Old Testament allusions were apparent to me at the time. But language penetrates the mind, just as ceremony permeates the soul, in unaccountable and long-lasting ways. Zadok and Nathan, to take a trivial example, would forever be the

name I chose for a fictional firm of Jewish tailors.

It is the case, anyway, that English Jews repose great trust in the royal family and feel a respect indistinguishable at some points from affection for the queen.

Jonathan Romain, the rabbi of Maidenhead Synagogue, tells of how Princess Margaret, visiting the synagogue in 1990, was surprised to hear the prayer for the good health and wise counsel of the queen, which is read in every synagogue on the Sabbath, as it is in many a Jewish celebration. “How lovely,” Princess Margaret remarked. “They don’t do that for us in church. I’ll tell my sister.”

To explain why a synagogue might express more fulsome royalist sentiment than a church would take a lengthy excursion into Jewish history and the lessons which the Jewish people have learned in the course of their extended exile. But there’s a clue in the urgings of the prophet Jeremiah during the Babylonian captivity two and a half thousand years ago: “Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to Yahweh for it; for in its peace you shall have peace.” And while that advice hasn’t, in all ages and in all countries worked to the advantage of Jews,



UPCOMING HOLIDAY

ROSH HASHANAH
The Jewish New Year



tabletmag.com/sections/holidays/rosh-hashanah

they have by and large followed it, as much out of good manners as prudence. The *Times* columnist Daniel Finkelstein reports his grandmother saying, “While the Queen is safe in Buckingham Palace, we’re safe in Hendon Central.” It’s Jeremiah brought up to date for Londoners.

But the practical advice of Jeremiah and the sweet optimism of Daniel Finkelstein’s granny won’t alone account for the enthusiasm with which Jews regarded the person of the queen.

Though I hadn’t been able to see her for umbrellas when her motorcade drove past my school in 1954, I think my description of her as remote wasn’t far off the mark. Going solely on newsreels of her greeting a rather sad and lonely looking Prince Charles after they’d been apart for months, I thought her formal to the point of coldness. I didn’t come from an indiscriminately huggy family myself, but those aloof handshakes made me feel I had never been out of my mother’s arms. And yet, yes, I got it. I understood that she would never be able to show all she actually felt—that’s if she did indeed feel more than she actually showed—because she wasn’t, and never could have been, “actual” in the way everyone else was.

With the entire world as witness, she had taken it on herself to “stand firm and hold fast from henceforth the seat and state of royal and imperial dignity which is this day delivered unto you in the Name and by the Authority of Almighty God.” No woman born of mortal could have risen from the coronation chair that day with such words vibrating through her and then got on with her day-to-day life, unless she considered the whole shebang to be one great theatrical imposture and her part in it to be frankly fraudulent; and while it is given to none of us penetrate the secrets of another person’s heart, the queen never for a single moment *looked* as though—or was described as though—she had been playing a role in which she didn’t believe.

Of her reputed spirituality it is impossible, not to say impertinent, for anyone who didn’t know her to speak, but the Christian sentiments she expressed in messages to the nation—her avowed

“She would never be able to show all she actually felt because she wasn’t, and never could have been, ‘actual’ in the way everyone else was.”

submission to a higher authority than her own—seemed heartfelt. Even critics who thought her an expensive anachronism and reserved the word sacrifice for more heroic acts, agreed that she carried out her public duties with extraordinary conscientiousness, was tireless but not pettifogging in upholding protocol, was graceful in small-talk, patient with fool prime ministers, respectful to wise ones, never allowing the habituated gravity of her expression to decline into boredom or disrespect. How often must she have wanted to run away or at least tear up her diary for a year? How often, in silent communion with herself, must she have imagined another existence?

Whatever the truth of her personal life, she did not carry her face lightly. It might be fanciful to say that abstemiousness and renunciation were etched into it, but nothing in the way she looked out at us—her subjects, her people, the commonfolk, call us what you will—suggested that craven invitation to intimacy we have come to expect from those we call celebrities. The queen commanded more column inches than any of them but she wasn’t on an errand to be better known or loved.

I have no warrant to talk for other Jews, but if there was one thing about her comportment that spoke to me

as a Jew it was precisely this seriousness. Life was not a lark to her.

When Jews speak of being chosen they are not asserting spiritual superiority. The covenant God made with them demanded a renunciation of frivolity and self-assertion in favor of the pursuit of ethical purpose. Call it a covenant of impersonality and disinterestedness. In 1954 the queen entered into a near identically sober and demanding covenant.

British Jews have had good reason to feel safe under the protection of the British royal family. It is well-known that the Duke of Edinburgh’s mother, Princess Alice of Battenberg was honored by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem for hiding Jewish children in her house during World War II. In accordance with her own wishes, she is buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Prince Charles is a regular guest at Jewish charitable events and has spoken out often and eloquently against antisemitism in all its forms. Whether or not the interest the royal family takes in Jews extends to their knowing many or reading the books they write or trying the food they eat, I can’t pretend to know. But atmospherically, by virtue of its principled a-political lukewarmness, the royal family seems to promise refuge.

The queen herself had less to say, in public anyway, on these matters. But it served her well to be above the fray, not only above politics, which ends up muddying whoever it touches, but above definitiveness. Wasn’t it some such symbolic abstraction that was enjoined on her when she was anointed in quasi-Old Testament language? The God of the Jews is invisible, an idea, the more sacred for being impalpable and quite probably not there at all. Whenever I looked at a portrait of the queen, or heard her speak, I thought I saw, not indifference to the storms that shook the country, but the dispassionateness of someone who listened to a higher authority than parliament or the people. ■

This article was originally published on September 21, 2022.

Adapted from a talk originally delivered on BBC Radio 4.

Hezbollah Is Now on Israel's Border

War fears are no longer alarmist as the terror group supplants U.N. forces, increases military readiness, and becomes more reckless on Lebanon's southern border

BY SARIT ZEHAZI

Friktion between IDF soldiers and Hezbollah operatives a few years ago was considered an unusual event; now, it happens daily. I see Hezbollah's men every day as I tour the border. Some of them are commando operatives who returned two years ago from the fighting in Syria. They don't usually wear uniforms; an ordinary person won't notice they're armed. Sometimes I see them patrolling in a long column, walking along the fence, stopping and making threatening gestures and then continuing on their way. Sometimes they pop up from observation posts with binoculars and cameras, documenting every Israeli movement along the border.

For 15 years, I have been touring the Israeli-Lebanese border, showing guests from abroad the integration of Hezbollah into the civilian domain in Lebanon. I would explain to the guests that we don't see Hezbollah but they see us, and reference the tens of thousands of missiles hidden in the Shiite villages that are visible to the naked eye. But in the last year, the situation on the border has visibly changed. Everywhere I go along the border, Hezbollah operatives see me. I'm followed or threatened. For its part, the IDF has renewed the construction of the land barrier. All this happens in the shadow of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's latest threats against Israel, should no compromise be found between Israel and Lebanon regarding the maritime border and exploration of natural gas reservoirs.

Hezbollah is a terrorist army with a high level of adaptability. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the war in 2006, forced Hezbollah to change its operational doctrine. The resolution "Calls for Israel and Lebanon to support a permanent ceasefire and a long-term solution based on the following principles and elements: full respect for the Blue Line by both parties; security arrangements to prevent the resumption of hostilities, including the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL [the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon] ..."

Hezbollah's first big investment in the postwar years was in a military deployment within the urban areas of Shiite villages, using the local civilians as human shields to conceal its military activities. UNIFIL, with a total of 10,000 troops, is not permitted entrance into private areas. Hence the houses in the Shiite villages in south Lebanon, within UNIFIL's active area, quickly became rocket depots, headquarters, and launching positions.

Hezbollah also sought to create operational redundancy by mapping the entire territory of southern Lebanon up to the Litani River (UNIFIL's full area of activity) and defining it as the "first line of defense." Within this area, Hezbollah stores mainly mortars and short-range rockets or missiles: Grad and Fajr multiple rocket launch systems, with a range of 75 kilometers, and Burkan mobile short-range ballistic missiles, with

a range of 5 kilometers. Antitank and anti-aircraft missiles are also stored in these populated areas, putting ordinary Lebanese at risk of being used as human shields.

A few years after the 2006 war, Hezbollah began to exploit uninhabited areas and geographical features for training areas, shooting ranges, and perhaps rocket launches while gradually barring UNIFIL from these areas. Hezbollah implemented its strategy through intimidation and threats, blocking roads and claiming that UNIFIL is prohibited from patrolling this area without a Lebanese army presence. Over the years, these incidents have been communicated in UNIFIL's reports, and analyzing these reports makes it possible to pinpoint Hezbollah's areas of activity outside the villages, mainly in wadis and forested areas. At the Alma Center, we have publicized 10 out of about 20 such areas. Among them is the area of activity in Yater, where Hezbollah apparently uses natural caves for military purposes.

Another area was located near the village of Zibqine—the same location where Hezbollah trained for the cross-border abduction of Israeli soldiers in 2006.

In the latest follow-up report on Resolution 1701 published last July, ahead of the resumption of the UNIFIL mandate at the end of August, UNIFIL reported three shooting ranges detected from the air by helicopter patrols. Until now, UNIFIL has not been given access to these shooting ranges, and it has refrained from disclosing their exact locations.

Another example of Hezbollah's presence in the uninhabited areas was a video interview with a Hezbollah operative in south Lebanon conducted a few weeks ago by a TV station affiliated with Yemeni rebels. The interview took place in an area known for Hezbollah military activity. The operative, in uniform, displayed a kind of underground "museum" with bunkers, rocket launchers, and missiles used to fire rockets against Israel in the 2006 war. Everything seemed ready for reuse. In concluding his remarks, the operative sent a message to Israel about the capabilities of the resistance today, explaining that "it is clear that the

resistance has developed since 2006 and has other great surprises for the Israeli enemy.”

Alarming, in recent months, Hezbollah appears to have moved UNIFIL away from the border and positioned itself directly facing Israel, building some 20 positions along the border under the cover of a civilian organization with the cynical name “Green Without Borders.” Some of these positions consist of portable structures that can be evacuated quickly. Some are built with bricks to a height of two to three floors.

Green Without Borders was registered as a Lebanese civic association with the Lebanese Ministry of the Interior in 2013. Hezbollah established the civilian activities of Green Without Borders by planting trees, putting out fires, and assisting in constructing public gardens. Starting in 2017, individual Hezbollah positions occasionally surfaced on the border under the Green Without Borders banner; the IDF reported to the U.N. that Hezbollah operatives were carrying out intelligence gathering from these positions. In 2019, Hezbollah fired an antitank missile from between two Green Without Borders positions against a military ambulance traveling on the Israeli side of the border.

But what is happening today is unlike anything we have seen before. The personnel manning these positions do not pretend to be activists concerned with the environment. Instead, armed military operatives belonging to Hezbollah’s military units man these positions around the clock. Some belong to Hezbollah’s commando units, the Radwan Brigades, whose mission in the case of war will be to infiltrate Israeli territory and attack IDF posts and civilian communities inside Israel. Others belong to the Nasser unit, which operates on the western part of the border and up to the Litani River, and the Aziz unit, which operates on the eastern part of the border as far as the western Beqaa Valley in the north.

Hezbollah’s military operatives monitor and document every civilian or military movement on the Israeli side. Sometimes they also provoke IDF soldiers. Through this activity, Hezbollah

aims to improve its intelligence gathering capabilities and operational readiness to respond to or initiate an incident. Hezbollah also uses the Lebanese Army’s observation towers (touring the border, they can be recognized by their black color), which are not routinely manned.

Symbolically, such a position also surfaced at the point where Israeli soldiers were abducted in 2006, a few meters from a U.N. flag on one side and a Hezbollah flag on the other.

According to various reports, Hezbollah is on its highest alert since 2006. The terror group reportedly conducted a competency test for its command posts and military communications system. Its reserve array of about 20,000 to 30,000 reservists was put on alert (but not yet mobilized). Hezbollah units were called back to Lebanon from Syria, and operatives in south Lebanon were reinforced. On social networks, Hezbollah is waging a campaign to “rally the troops,” preparing them for war with clear threats against Israel while demonstrating its ability to attack in the air, at sea, and on land.

Recently, the Alma Center received a version of an internal Hezbollah flyer, which addresses Hezbollah operatives and encourages them religiously, spiritually, and psychologically in preparation for possible combat (the authenticity of the flyer has not yet been verified by us). The flyer declares that victory is imminent, the commanders and operatives are ready, and “Sahib-al Zaman” (the Mahdi’s nickname) stands alongside the activists. It also states that the enemy (Israel) is frightened and trembling in his house.

The flyer mentions three battles fought by Hezbollah, regarded by the terror group as “heroic victories”: the Battle of Maydoun in 1988, in which Hezbollah fought against the IDF; the Battle of Dabsha in 1994, in which Hezbollah operatives managed to hoist their banner on the outskirts of an IDF post (the “Dla’at” outpost) in the security zone; and Jarrod, referring to the battles against ISIS and the Syrian rebels in Al-Qalamoun and Aarsal (on the Lebanon-Syria border) during the Syrian civil war.

Why now?

There are several reasons for the evolution in Hezbollah’s deployment along the Israeli border.

In the first years after the war in 2006, Hezbollah was engaged in civilian and military reconstruction. Around 600 Hezbollah operatives were killed in the war, demonstrating low battlefield capabilities. At the same time, Hezbollah also lost support within Lebanon due to the great damage caused by the war. In 2011, the civil war broke out in Syria; by 2019, Hezbollah was busy fighting there.

In 2019, two things happened: First, the civil war in Syria ended in most areas, and Hezbollah’s military operatives began to return home with a great deal of military experience and aggressive ambitions. Second, the IDF exposed and blocked or blew up Hezbollah’s cross-border tunnels, which meant that Hezbollah had to find another way to get closer to the border, which it did by overpowering UNIFIL and preventing its access to the border. In 2020, COVID-19 emerged, accompanied by worsening economic and political crises, including the May 2022 parliamentary elections.

Today, the pandemic is over. The election results were not to Hezbollah’s satisfaction. On the border, military operatives are itching for action. Lebanon is in such a severe state of economic and political crisis that peacetime may be less desirable than wartime, in which Lebanon would receive exponentially more unconditional international aid.

We cannot assess with certainty whether Hezbollah is interested in an imminent war with Israel. But without a doubt, its military preparedness and the level of friction its military operatives have sought at the border leave plenty of room for concern. ■

This article was originally published on September 19, 2022.

SCIENCE

Everything you need to know at
tabletmag.com/sections/science

The U.S. Government's Vast New Privatized Censorship Regime

Censorship of wrongthink by Big Tech at the behest of the government is government censorship, which violates the First Amendment

BY JENIN YOUNES

One warm weekend in October of 2020, three impeccably credentialed epidemiologists—Jayanta Bhattacharya, Sunetra Gupta, and Martin Kulldorff, of Stanford, Oxford, and Harvard Universities respectively—gathered with a few journalists, writers, and economists at an estate in the Berkshires where the American Institute for Economic Research had brought together critics of lockdowns and other COVID-related government restrictions. On Sunday morning shortly before the guests departed, the scientists encapsulated their views—that lockdowns do more harm than good, and that resources should be devoted to protecting the vulnerable rather than shutting society down—in a joint communique dubbed the “Great Barrington Declaration,” after the town in which it was written.

The declaration began circulating on social media and rapidly garnered signatures, including from other highly credentialed scientists. Most mainstream news outlets and the scientists they chose to quote denounced the declaration in no uncertain terms. When contacted by reporters, Drs. Anthony Fauci and Francis Collins of the NIH publicly and vociferously repudiated the “dangerous” declaration, smearing the scientists—all generally considered to be at the top of their fields—as “fringe epidemiologists.” Over the next several months, the three scientists faced a

barrage of condemnation: They were called eugenicists and anti-vaxxers; it was falsely asserted that they were “Koch-funded” and that they had written the declaration for financial gain. Attacks on the Great Barrington signatories proliferated throughout social media and in the pages of *The New York Times* and *Guardian*.

Yet emails obtained pursuant to a FOIA request later revealed that these attacks were not the products of an independent objective news-gathering process of the type that publications like the *Times* and the *Guardian* still like to advertise. Rather, they were the fruits of an aggressive attempt to shape the news by the same government officials whose policies the epidemiologists had criticized. Emails between Fauci and Collins revealed that the two officials had worked together and with media outlets as various as *Wired* and *The Nation* to orchestrate a “takedown” of the declaration.

Nor did the targeting of the scientists stop with the bureaucrats they had implicitly criticized. Bhattacharya, Gupta, and Kulldorff soon learned that their declaration was being heavily censored on social media to prevent their scientific opinions from reaching the public. Kulldorff—then the most active of the three online—soon began to experience censorship of his own social media posts. For example, Twitter censored one of Kulldorff’s tweets asserting that: “Thinking that everyone must be vaccinated is as scientifically

flawed as thinking that nobody should. COVID vaccines are important for older, higher-risk people and their caretakers. Those with prior natural infection do not need it. Not children.” Posts on Kulldorff’s Twitter and LinkedIn criticizing mask and vaccine mandates were labeled misleading or removed entirely. In March of 2021, YouTube took down a video depicting a roundtable discussion that Bhattacharya, Gupta, Kulldorff, and Dr. Scott Atlas had with Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, in which the participants critiqued mask and vaccine mandates.

Because of this censorship, Bhattacharya and Kulldorff are now plaintiffs in *Missouri v. Biden*, a case brought by the attorneys general of Missouri and Louisiana, as well as the New Civil Liberties Alliance (NCLA), which is representing them and two other individuals, Dr. Aaron Kheriaty and Jill Hines. The plaintiffs allege that the Biden administration and a number of federal agencies coerced social media platforms into censoring them and others for criticizing the government’s COVID policies. In doing so, the Biden administration and relevant agencies had turned any ostensible private action by the social media companies into state action, in violation of the First Amendment. As the Supreme Court has long recognized and Justice Thomas explained in a concurring opinion just last year, “[t]he government cannot accomplish through threats of adverse government action what the Constitution prohibits it from doing directly.”

Federal district courts have recently dismissed similar cases on the grounds that the plaintiffs could not prove state action. According to those judges, public admissions by then-White House press secretary Jennifer Psaki that the Biden administration was ordering social media companies to censor certain posts, as well as statements from Psaki, President Biden, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, and DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas threatening them with regulatory or other legal action if they declined to do so, still did not suffice to establish that the plaintiffs were censored on social media due to government action. Put another way, the judges declined to take the government at its word. But the

Missouri judge reached a different conclusion, determining there was enough evidence in the record to infer that the government was involved in social media censorship, granting the plaintiffs' request for discovery at the preliminary injunction stage.

The *Missouri* documents, along with some obtained through discovery in *Berenson v. Twitter* and a FOIA request by America First Legal, expose the extent of the administration's appropriation of big tech to effect a vast and unprecedented regime of viewpoint-based censorship on the information that most Americans see, hear and otherwise consume. At least 11 federal agencies, and around 80 government officials, have been explicitly directing social media companies to take down posts and remove certain accounts that violate the government's own preferences and guidelines for coverage on topics ranging from COVID restrictions, to the 2020 election, to the Hunter Biden laptop scandal.

Correspondence publicized in *Missouri* further corroborates the theory that the companies dramatically increased censorship under duress from the government, strengthening the First Amendment claim. For example, shortly after President Biden asserted in July of 2021 that Facebook (Meta) was "killing people" by permitting "misinformation" about COVID vaccines to percolate, an executive from the company contacted the surgeon general to appease the White House. In a text message to Murthy, the executive acknowledged that the "FB team" was "feeling a little aggrieved" as "it's not great to be accused of killing people," while he sought to "de-escalate and work together collaboratively." These are not the words of a person who is acting freely; to the contrary, they denote the mindset of someone who considers himself subordinate to, and subject to punishment by, a superior. Another text, exchanged between Jen Easterly, director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), and another CISA employee who now works at Microsoft, reads: "Platforms have got to get more comfortable with gov't. It's really interesting how hesitant they remain." This is another incontrovertible piece of evidence that social

media companies are censoring content under duress from the government, and not due to their directors' own ideas of the corporate or common good.

Further, emails expressly establish that the social media companies intensified censorship efforts and removed particular individuals from their platforms *in response to* the government's demands. Just a week after President Biden accused social media companies of "killing people," the Meta executive mentioned above wrote the surgeon general an email telling him, "I wanted to make sure you saw the steps we took just this past week to adjust policies on what we are removing with respect to misinformation, as well as steps taken further to address the 'disinfo dozen': we removed 17 additional Pages, Groups, and Instagram accounts tied to [them]." About a month later, the same executive informed Murthy that Meta intended to expand its COVID policies to "further reduce the spread of potentially harmful content" and that the company was "increasing the strength of our demotions for COVID and vaccine-related content."

Alex Berenson, a former *New York Times* reporter and a prominent critic of government-imposed COVID restrictions, has publicized internal Twitter communications he obtained through discovery in his own lawsuit showing that high-ranking members of the Biden administration, including White House Senior COVID-19 Advisor Andrew Slavitt, had pushed Twitter to permanently suspend him from the platform. In messages from April 2021, a Twitter employee noted that a meeting with the White House had gone relatively well, though the company's representatives had fielded "one really tough question about why Alex Berenson hasn't been kicked off from the platform," to which "*mercifully* we had answers" (emphasis added).

About two months later, days after Dr. Fauci publicly deemed Berenson a danger, and immediately following the president's statement that social media companies were "killing people," and despite assurances from high-ups at the company that his account was in no danger, Twitter permanently suspended Berenson's account. If this does not

qualify as government censorship of an individual based on official disapproval of his viewpoints, it would be difficult to say what might. Berenson was reinstated on Twitter in July 2022 as part of the settlement in his lawsuit.

In 1963, the Supreme Court, deciding *Bantam Books v. Sullivan*, held that "public officers' thinly veiled threats to institute criminal proceedings against" booksellers who carried materials containing obscenity could constitute a First Amendment violation. The same reasoning should apply to the Biden administration campaign to pressure tech companies into enforcing its preferred viewpoints.

The question of how the Biden administration has succeeded in jawboning big tech into observing its strictures is not particularly difficult to answer. Tech companies, many of which hold monopoly positions in their markets, have long feared and resisted government regulation. Unquestionably—and as explicitly revealed by the text message exchanged between Murthy and the Twitter executive—the prospect of being held liable for COVID deaths is an alarming one. Just like the booksellers in *Bantam*, social media platforms undoubtedly "do not lightly disregard" such possible consequences, as Twitter's use of the term "mercifully" indicates.

It remains to be seen whether Bhattacharya and Kulldorff will be able to show that Fauci and Collins explicitly ordered tech companies to censor them and their Great Barrington Declaration. More discovery lies ahead, from top White House officials including Dr. Fauci, that may yield evidence of even more direct involvement by the government in preventing Americans from hearing their views. But Bhattacharya, Kulldorff, and countless social media users have had their First Amendment rights violated nonetheless.

The government's involvement in censorship of specific perspectives, and direct role in escalating such censorship, has what is known in First Amendment law as a chilling effect: Fearing the repercussions of articulating certain views, people self-censor by avoiding

controversial topics. Countless Americans, including the *Missouri* plaintiffs, have attested that they do exactly that for fear of losing influential and sometimes lucrative social media accounts, which can contain and convey significant social and intellectual capital.

Moreover, the Supreme Court recognizes that a corollary of the First Amendment right to speak is the right to receive information because “the right to receive ideas follows ineluctably from the sender’s First Amendment right to send them.” All Americans have been deprived—by the United States government—of their First Amendment rights to hear the views of Alex Berenson, as well as Drs. Bhattacharya and Kulldorff, and myriad additional people, like the reporters who broke the Hunter Biden laptop story for the *New York Post* and found themselves denounced as agents of Russian disinformation, who have been censored by social media platforms at the urging of the U.S. government. That deprivation strangled public debate on multiple issues of undeniably public importance. It allowed Fauci, Collins, and various other government actors and agencies, to mislead the public into believing there was ever a scientific consensus on lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccine mandates. It also arguably influenced the 2020 election.

The administration has achieved public acquiescence to its censorship activities by convincing many Americans that the dissemination of “misinformation” and “disinformation” on social media presents a grave threat to public safety and even national security. Over half a century ago, in his notorious concurrence in *New York Times v. United States* (in which the Nixon administration sought to prevent the newspaper from printing the Pentagon Papers) Justice Hugo Black rejected the view that the government may invoke such concepts to override the First Amendment: “[t]he word ‘security’ is a broad, vague generality whose contours should not be invoked to abrogate the fundamental law embodied in the First Amendment,” he wrote. Justice Black cited a 1937 opinion by Justice Charles

Hughes explaining that this approach was woefully misguided: “The greater the importance of safeguarding the community from incitements to the overthrow of our institutions by force and violence, the more imperative is the need to preserve inviolate the constitutional rights of free speech, free press, and free assembly ... that government may be responsive to the will of the people and that changes, if desired, may be obtained by peaceful means. Therein lies the security of the Republic, the very foundation of constitutional government.”

The Founders of our country understood that line-drawing becomes virtually impossible once censorship begins and that the personal views and biases of those doing the censoring will inevitably come into play. Moreover, they recognized that sunlight is the best disinfectant: The cure for bad speech is good speech. The cure for lies, truth. Silencing people does not mean problematic ideas disappear; it only drives their adherents into echo chambers. People who are booted off Twitter, for example, often turn to Gab and Gettr, where they are less likely to encounter challenges to patently false posts claiming, for example, that COVID vaccines are toxic.

Indeed, this case could not illustrate more clearly the First Amendment’s chief purpose, and why the framers of the Constitution did not create an exception for “misinformation.” Government actors are just as prone to bias, hubris, and error as the rest of us. Drs. Fauci and Collins, enamored of newfound fame and basking in self-righteousness, took it upon themselves to suppress debate about the most important subject of the day. Had Americans learned of the Great Barrington Declaration and been given the opportunity to contemplate its ideas, and had scientists like Bhattacharya, Gupta, and Kulldorff been permitted to speak freely, the history of the pandemic era may have unfolded with far less tragedy—and with far less damage to the institutions that are supposed to protect public health. ■

This article was originally published on September 21, 2022.



Album of the Week

Santigold, *Spirituals*

Santigold has a new album out, *Spirituals*, and it’s fantastic. It’s only her fourth album, her first proper album since 2016’s *99¢*, and her first release since 2018’s dance hall mixtape *I Don’t Want*. Santi White, the artist who goes by Santigold professionally, describes *Spirituals* as a “celebration of human resilience,” born out of California fires, Black Lives Matter protests, COVID, being a mother, and the general insanity of the last few years.

This comes through on the album’s opener, “My Horror.” On a slow, wavy, deconstructed reggae beat, Santigold describes having a hole in her head and feeling paralyzed. “Me in my horror / A day in my horror” she sings, letting the warm, skeletal, sounds contrast with her lyrics.

Spirituals lacks a radio-ready single. It’s a contemplative album that offers more to explore on each listen. The video for the album’s single, “Shake,” offers a good example of what’s here. The keyboard groove is infectious, the chorus is a ghostly yelp, and Santigold gets blasted with water in a minimalist tribute to the attacks on civil rights marchers in Birmingham, Alabama.

Spirituals is also an ambitious album by a musician who has consistently tried to push music forward. It’s a deeply solitary album that’s seeking out companionship, which makes it one of the most intriguing releases of the year.

—David Meir Grossman

THE REST

→ More than **half of car sales in the United States will be electric by 2030**, according to a Bloomberg analysis, with the tax incentives packed into the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act considerably hastening that timeline. Bloomberg's earlier projections, made before the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, expected 43% of car sales in the United States in 2030 to be electric; that number, in the wake of the bill, grew to 52%. Such growth marks an extraordinary shift in the automobile market, which as of 2021 only saw 5% of its sales going to electric vehicles. This surge in demand, however, is **driving a surge in the price of lithium**, a vital component in electric batteries.

→ President Joe **Biden told 60 Minutes on Sunday that if Taiwan were to be invaded by China, the U.S. military would intervene** and defend the island. "Yes, if in fact there was an unprecedented attack," the president said. Following the interview, the White House said that, despite Biden's statement, U.S. policy on Taiwan, which contains no formal promises to defend the independent island nation, hasn't changed despite the president's own claims to the contrary. It's at least the fourth time that White House **officials have clarified remarks made by Biden** that seem to contradict the long-standing U.S. policy of "strategic ambiguity" toward threats against Taiwan's sovereignty.

→ Moscow officials said they would honor requests to **hold votes for annexation in regions of Ukraine where the Russian military remains largely in control**, but the referendums, set to begin later this week, have already been widely denounced as illegal by several nations. In New York for the U.N. General Assembly, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that it's "very, very clear these sham referenda cannot be accepted, that they are not backed by international law." With Ukrainian forces continuing to recover territory that they had initially lost to the Russian military, the move by Moscow to push for the referendums in four Ukrainian regions, including Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, could serve as the legal basis, however flimsy, for Russia to deploy nuclear weapons to fend off Ukrainian advances in what it will soon call its own territory.

→ "We are **depressed, anxious, tired, and distracted**," The New York Times concludes after reviewing the United States' medical data since the start of the pandemic; more than a quarter of American adults are taking medications for one of these conditions. Prescriptions for antidepressant drugs have skyrocketed, especially for teenagers. Since 2017, there has been a 41% increase in antidepressant use among teenagers, leading the Times to inaugurate our "age of distraci-pression."

→ Since 2020, when COVID-19 lockdowns triggered a mass migration to remote work, **companies have taken to spying on their employees to keep track of their productivity**. "One in three medium-to-large U.S. companies has adopted some kind of worker surveillance system, and the total fraction using such systems is now two in three," a senior member of Gartner, a technology and consulting firm, told The Wall Street Journal in an article published over the weekend. Examples of the kind of monitoring tools used by employers include "software that can take a screenshot of a worker's computer every 10 minutes, while also recording what apps and websites that worker visited, and how long she stayed."

FROM THE BACK PAGES

Front and center at the third installment of the National Conservatism Conference held last week in Miami was the campaign of the "New Right" to fight against the power of Big Tech and social media. Where old-school Republicans might have championed big business, the more nationalist, populist, and traditionalist elements of the so-called New Right find the tech companies to be a direct threat. What they're prepared to do about it remains to be seen.

A common concern is how digital media is eroding communities, which was a theme of cultural commentator Alex Kaschuta's speech, "The Tragedy of Our Commons." Others focused on the way social media sites that offer free entertainment and digital "connection" lure users into data-scraping surveillance traps. Some attendees argued that the popular Chinese-owned video-sharing company TikTok should be banned in the United States. Many are disturbed by the level of control that Big Tech exerts over the news flow, as was the case with the suppression of the Hunter Biden laptop story. Gov. Ron DeSantis told attendees that private citizens should be able to sue Big Tech for "political discrimination."

Unlike Mitch McConnell and the older stalwarts of the Republican Party, the members of the New Right who gathered in Miami see tech as a direct threat to their values, socially, economically, politically, and metaphysically.

—Katherine Dee

SUBSCRIBE TO THE SCROLL



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

Beyond Abstinence

Unitarian Universalists rethink sex education—in their churches, and in schools

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

School is back in session throughout the country, and since it's a midterm election year, American politics is embroiled in one of its recurring cultural debates over the role of sex education in public schools. In various states, bitter arguments over what kind it should be, when it's appropriate to teach it, and whether it's even needed are taking place. Often, advocates of more comprehensive sexual education point to the religious right's historic and ongoing role in championing abstinence-only curricula. These discussions pay little attention to those on the religious left, though, who offer a holistic approach to the subject—one that includes information on contraception and guidance on healthy relationship-building and boundary-setting, and also takes LGBTQ students into account.

Since the 1970s, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), together with the United Church of Christ (UCC), has published its own alternative, secular sex ed curriculum, which offers content geared toward different ages and stages of development, beginning with kindergarten, and continuing all the way to adulthood. Known today as *Our Whole Lives* (OWL), the curriculum is taught at Unitarian and UCC churches, as well as at public, private, and charter schools across the U.S.

This kind of public-private cooperation on sex ed is well-established, albeit usually in the opposite direction. Indiana, for example, funds faith-based sexual risk-avoidance education (this term is something of a recent rebrand; this type of curriculum is better known as “abstinence-only” or “abstinence-plus”) for middle and high schoolers. There,

the Evansville Christian Life Center's Truth Talk program trains facilitators in a curriculum called *Creating Positive Relationships*, which they say is utilized in public schools, and takes place without the sharing of personal beliefs.

While sex education that discouraged premarital sex and stressed the difficulties of family life had existed for decades in the U.S., it became more ubiquitous in the mid-1990s, after the Republican-controlled Congress passed and President Clinton signed landmark welfare-reform legislation. Republicans attached \$50 million in funding to states that offered abstinence-only sex education programs, in an attempt to nudge out-of-wedlock birthrates down, thereby also decreasing the need for welfare benefits among unwed teen parents. At the time, in order to qualify for the funding, programs had to meet certain standards, including: focusing on the physical and mental benefits of abstinence, setting marital sexual intercourse as the ideal standard, upholding abstinence as the only real way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, offering guidance on rejecting sexual advances, and discussing the difficulties facing parents and children in the wake of out-of-wedlock births. The debate over funding for abstinence programs flared up again in 2010, when federal funding for abstinence-promoting curricula in the form of five-year block grants was revived as part of the Affordable Care Act, after funding was briefly slashed as part of the 2009 omnibus spending package.

When the UUA took on the challenge of providing a holistic sex ed program in the 1970s, it was a response to what they describe as an “urgent request from parents and religious educators” at the time. The result was the publication of

course materials known as *About Your Sexuality*. Some decades later, the OWL curriculum was developed, and today, the UUA website explains that OWL builds on *About Your Sexuality's* initial foundation and “the idea that sexuality is an important and sacred part of being human, offer[ing] accurate information, and [guiding] participants to make their religious and moral values central to their understanding of themselves as sexual beings and their relationships with others.”

According to a white paper from the UUA assessing OWL's alignment with current educational standards, the curriculum is in use in some public schools. An Oregon education official confirmed via email that it is taught at some schools in the state. In recent years, OWL also appeared on the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction list of sex ed curricula that meet state standards for the subject.

Around the time Congress was beefing up spending for abstinence-only curricula in the states, the UUA and the UCC were looking to write a curriculum that updated the mission of *About Your Sexuality* for a new generation. They put out a call for authors, and recent Ph.D. in sex education Eva Goldfarb answered it. The OWL curriculum has been updated in the ensuing decades, and Goldfarb has gone on to author the *3 R's* curriculum that is being adopted around the country to meet national sex ed standards. But when she was first selected to co-author the curriculum along with another recent Ph.D., it seemed like a chance to do something that no one else was doing.

“At the time, the big debate was going on about abstinence-only-until-marriage education, versus what was called comprehensive sex ed, but was really what I and others term ‘abstinence-plus education,’” she said. As the name suggests, abstinence-plus curricula mention the use of condoms and contraception as runners-up to prevent disease and pregnancy. Because same-sex marriage was still illegal, Goldfarb said, “LGBTQ kids were completely left out of the picture.”

Goldfarb wasn't interested in the confines of what she said was a “a tired

debate.” She defined true comprehensive sex education as something “much broader,” something “developmentally, culturally appropriate, medically accurate, it looks at the whole person.” That way, “young people feel good about themselves and their bodies, and their sexuality,” and learn “to appreciate the sexuality and the rights of others, and to make good healthy decisions throughout their lifetimes, which includes family planning and contracepting and all that.” An effective sex education program, Goldfarb said, “looks at sex as a positive force in life that can be pleasurable, and can be a joy.”

Goldfarb remembers that the OWL curriculum listed at its beginning a set of values taken from Unitarian Universalist values. In her experience, for the Unitarian Church, OWL is “a very common Sunday school program for kids,” likely going against most Americans’ conceptions of what goes on at Sunday school. The affirmational non-judgmentalism that characterizes Unitarian Universalists might have come as a surprise to the New England Puritans, from whom the Unitarians trace their roots. Independent Puritan congregations came to America for the freedom to practice their more austere version of Christianity, one free of the still-too-Roman-Catholic-feeling pomp and hierarchy of the Church of England. According to *How We Got Our Denominations*, a 1959 “Primer on Church History” by former U.S. Council of Churches press secretary Stanley Stuber, the Puritans planted the seeds of what came to be called “Liberal Christianity” in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as the Pilgrim fathers’ Puritan churches became what we know today as Congregationalist churches, which carried on their emphasis on the autonomy of congregations, free from the interference of bishops, and the autonomy of the individual conscience. The Encyclopedia Britannica entry on Congregationalism asserts that over time, this worldview led to Congregationalist churches being characterized by advocacy for civil liberties, as well as for separation of church and state.

Unitarians formally split from the

“The affirmational non-judgmentalism that characterizes Unitarian Universalists might have come as a surprise to the New England Puritans, from whom the Unitarians trace their roots.”

Congregationalists in 1825, after a gradual cleavage between their beliefs and those of their fellow Puritan descendants. Stuber wrote that unlike the Calvinism that held sway among the early Puritan Protestant reformers, Unitarians believed in the perfectibility of humankind, rejecting the Reformation doctrine of “total depravity,” the belief that as a result of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, people are alienated from God, sinful in every aspect of their being, and totally helpless to be otherwise, without God’s grace. Unitarians also rejected Trinitarian doctrine, the belief that God and Christ are one-in-being, despite being two distinct entities, with a Holy Spirit that proceeds from the relationship between the two of them. For Congregationalists of a Unitarian bent, Jesus was not a deity, but he was divine, with a lot to offer in terms of practical teaching about loving God and loving one’s neighbor. Far from Jonathan Edwards’ “sinners in the hands of an angry God,” Stuber wrote that Unitarians developed a belief that the doctrine of hell was not compatible with an all-good, loving God, and that all humanity would eventually be saved. Although they set aside the traditional Christian creeds and the Protestant belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, the Unitarians maintained the

Congregationalist model of independent congregations. They organized a national conference in 1865, and today meet in an annual General Assembly to “worship, witness, learn, connect, and make policy.”

For their part, the Universalists trace their ancestry to late-18th-century America, when Congregationalists in Gloucester, Massachusetts, built a church that they called the Independent Christian Church. They were known as Universalists, and preached a universal salvation that rejected the stringent Calvinist doctrines of predestination and damnation. In 1961, the two churches merged, creating what is known today as the Unitarian Universalist Association. While still eschewing a creed, today it espouses what it calls its Principles and Purposes, which do not mention Jesus Christ by name, and affirm instead the wisdom of Judaism and Christianity, as well as of humanism, and “earth-centered traditions.” Members can be Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist, or agnostic.

“Our faith tradition grew from Christianity,” the UUA website says, noting that while their churches might have Christmas or Easter observances, they are celebrated “with a liberal and inclusive twist.” And although some Unitarian Universalists “have a relationship with Christianity,” and some UUA churches “are Christian in orientation,” the site’s careful wording distances the denomination from “the traditional God-as-Trinity that most Christians promote.” The all-loving God of the Unitarians and the Universalists “is too big to be contained in one person, one book, one tradition, or one time in history.”

“Is Our Whole Lives more relevant now? It is much needed,” OWL program director Melanie Davis said in an email. “But whether it can be used depends on the values of the school and its legislative mandates. Our Whole Lives is a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate curriculum for grades K-1, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12. It also has editions for Young Adults, Adults, and Older Adults. Each level embodies the values of Self-Worth, Responsibility, Sexual Health, Justice and

Inclusivity (simplified for the youngest children). If a school is prohibited from discussing anything other than heterosexual orientation, or cisgender gender identities, Our Whole Lives won't be the right fit."

While gender identity content (which OWL has beginning from the earliest grades) is a sticking point in the sex ed debates, for Goldfarb, it remains a problem that many programs are still abstinence-only or abstinence-plus: "Not only does it not work, but it can be very harmful to young people, and stigmatizing," she said. She appears to have a point. While the conservative Heritage Foundation could be seen touting the benefits of such curricula in the early 2000s, there don't seem to be any defenses published more recently than 2010. And states where abstinence education is the rule don't necessarily have the outcomes its advocates might like to see. Texas, where sex education isn't mandated (and where it is taught, predominantly stresses abstinence), is among the states with high teen birth rates. States that lead the nation in teen birth rates also either do not mandate sex education, or give primacy to abstinence where it is offered, including Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Mississippi. Of course, correlation is not causation, and while it may be something of a chicken-egg scenario, there is another risk factor for teen pregnancy in which these states lead: single parent households.

If the children are our future, few seem to be willing to invest in it. American culture warriors' preoccupation with children and the prospective harms threatening them at school obscures the reality of a declining U.S. birth rate. But when there is less of a given commodity, its value tends to go up. So for the minority who are willing to invest, a kind of bidding war has ensued. And with a bidding war, come speculators, eager to exploit the rush for personal gain, often with bad faith arguments intended to score political points. "What's going on now," said Goldfarb, "with the arguments that are being made now, are this whole idea that people in sex education are 'groomers.' Sex education does the exact opposite."

QUOTE There's a whole world out

there that is just dying to teach children around sex and sexuality, and it's likely not the values that most parents or professionals would want our kids to learn.

She explains the OWL curriculum for kindergarteners, first, and second graders as she conceived it when writing OWL, an approach she said was "groundbreaking" at the time: "We're talking about things like bodily integrity, and I get to decide who hugs me, and you get to decide who hugs you, and treating everybody with respect and dignity, and there's no such thing as a girl toy or a boy toy. And you may feel differently than the way people expect you to feel because of your gender, you're perfectly OK the way you are. I mean, these are very basic concepts that are taught in early grades. And," she asserts, "they are very effective at helping to reduce child sex abuse." The other things they do, according to Goldfarb, is lay foundations for later in life, when the way we relate to others becomes more complex. Failing to lay these foundations for sex education later on, she said, is like teaching algebra without first establishing with students the concept of numbers.

Before the release of the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, Pew Research published poll results that showed 60% of Americans support expanding sex ed in schools. Even in Utah, it seems, a majority of voters favor going beyond the abstinence-only curriculum paradigm. But in addition to advocating for comprehensive sex education, Goldfarb also believes parents are important when it comes to teaching kids about healthy sexuality, and the OWL curriculum today continues the emphasis on parental involvement. "There's no such thing as keeping children innocent, especially in today's environment," she said. "But there's a whole world out there that is just dying to teach children around sex and sexuality, and it's likely not the values that most parents or professionals would want our kids to learn." Parents and other authority figures remaining silent on these topics, said Goldfarb, creates a vacuum. "The way most young people learn about sex is from other kids on the playground," she said. "It's [from] older siblings, or the internet, or from pornography." It's about helping

them to become "critical consumers" of the things they see on screens, which she believes are impossible to avoid, and to help them "figure out what's real and not real." For her, naivety is not an advantage in a hypersexualized culture like ours, which is hemmed in by a border between fantasy and reality that is porous at best. Parents not talking to their kids about sex, she said, "is not the same as being neutral." Rather, it demonstrates to children that the topic is taboo, and "that brings the shame, and they will not come to you when they have a problem."

"Many wonderful resources exist for parents and caregivers who want to be their children's primary sexuality educators," Davis said in her email. "Each of our organizations offers a version of Parents and Caregivers as Sexuality Educators, which is a free, downloadable curriculum. It's designed for groups but can be used privately as well. We have also created Under Your Wing videos to help adults with grades K-1 children to start conversations about bodies, babies, gender, and more." Likewise, the OWL website states that the program "affirms parents as the primary sexuality educators of their children."

But although sex ed was initially primarily intended to prevent teen pregnancy, today, the fact is young people (and Americans in general) are having less sex. They aren't even getting married. While this trend was already underway before the pandemic, it's not hard to extrapolate outward that less social interaction, combined with more screen time, might stunt young people's understanding of relationships and intimacy. Just like the developmental delays among younger children likely caused by pandemic-era restrictions, to some extent, that seems to be the case with rites of passage for teens. For example, a 2021 *USA Today* article stated that members of Gen Z tend to get their driver's licenses later now than teens in years past, a trend that actually predated the closure of DMV offices in the spring of 2020. In this context, what is comprehensive sex ed really for?

To answer that question, cars and driving may be something of an instructive metaphor, given their linkage in the

American popular imagination with adolescent experimentation, risk, and freedom. But while it is one thing to show a teen how to change a tire, it is quite another to model a healthy relationship for them from their earliest memories, to address uncomfortable topics with them, or to answer difficult questions. For Goldfarb, sex education is more than watching film strips about puberty in PE class. It's about "helping young people to be able to get into good relationships, and stay in healthy relationships," she said, "And recognize unhealthy relationships." And with more Americans living without a spouse or a partner, real-life examples could be getting scarce.

While secular, the UUA is careful to note on its website that OWL "is not value-free." It is rooted in UUA principles about the worth of the human

person, and about justice, responsibility, and inclusion. It also stems from the faith's commitment to science and reason. Goldfarb understands that specific information about sex and sexuality isn't always something parents are equipped or comfortable providing to their children, which is why she believes comprehensive sex ed curricula like OWL in schools can fill a need in a developmentally appropriate way.

But even so, were Mississippi, Louisiana, or Arkansas to enact such curricula, many students would still lack the experience of a committed two-parent household. Goldfarb believes family dynamics are decisive: "Kids see how their parents live," she said. "Parents model what love looks like, parents model what relationships look like, parents model how they talk to people, and how they

treat people, and what kind of physical affection they show or don't show. Just from living, kids absorb that. Families are definitely the most critical educator around values, and beliefs, and ideas about gender roles. That comes from parents and family." But if current U.S. demographic trends around family continue, for increasing numbers of young people, programs like OWL may be one of the only places these values are taught. ■

This article was originally published on September 19, 2022.

This story is part of a series Tablet is publishing to promote religious literacy across different religious communities, supported by a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Genizah of the Self

I bid goodbye to my boxes

BY MARCO ROTH

FOR AF, IN MEMORIAM

We shall carry it set
Down inside a pitcher
Out into the field, late
Wonderers errant in
Among the rich flowers.
Like a star reflected
In a cup of water
It will light up no path ...

—John Hollander

Over a year ago—it was last Tisha B'Av—I found myself moving house for the third time since 2019. This move was the big one, resulting from the sale of the apartment in Philadelphia that my wife and I had bought together, renovated together, and had

lived in for six mostly happy years and three mostly difficult ones. From the spring of 2020, we'd rented it out, furnished, once we began the final unraveling of our common life. Moves bring inevitable reckonings, moves like these exceptionally so.

Amid the furniture, the books, the rugs, and various objects—both those I'd acquired independently and those passed down from ancestors—I kept five boxes, two of them equal parts tape and cardboard, containing an archive of my mental life, or at least my professional mental life. There was a box full of contracts for various articles and my book contract, drafts of that first and so far only book with copy-editor marks. Here were all the college and grad school syllabi and papers; notebooks from 10 years

of higher education; xeroxed articles from course packets and research; graded tests; graded papers with comments; drafts of early, never-completed stories on legal notepads; drafts of my never-completed Ph.D. dissertation; there was my undergraduate thesis on Proust; my first semester graduate school paper on Benjamin's Arcades Project; all the worksheets and tests for the "Italian for Reading Knowledge" summer intensive course I'd needed to pass my last language requirement; there was that undergrad paper with a professor's telling remark, "brilliant but self-defeating," a memento from a riskier and more insightful era of student-teacher relations.

How could I possibly hold on to all this stuff? What purpose did I think it served? It's not as if I intended to return to my Ph.D. research at this point in my life, although all of it was in there, somewhere. The stories were juvenilia, or else written in my late 20s—which amounts to the same thing. Someone more dedicated to the art of memory or their own cult of achievement would have already digitized all this material, or at least alphabetized it. They would have arranged it lovingly, according to some clear principle, with accurate labels. Instead, I'd thrown everything into

boxes as if in a traumatic flight from some invading army. Except that the trauma here was nothing more (or less) than the reality of my own existence. For almost 15 years, possibly 20, I hadn't acknowledged that I'd failed to live up to my own ambitions, or someone's ambitions for me. Instead of facing up, I'd run away, with the boxes trundling along behind.

I'd been—I still felt, even in my late 40s—"too young to hold on, too old to just break free and run." The lyrics of Jeff Buckley's immature love-gone-bad ballad seemed no less true for my relationship to my historical self. The boxes were supposed to have contained the records of my ascent through American society (and, oh yeah, there it was, tucked inside a course packet, my college diploma!). I'd kept hold of all these documents not to provide myself with an index of failures and false starts, but because I believed myself redeemable in the way someone of my generation had been mostly trained to understand "redemption"—that is in terms of official recognition in the form of salaries, diplomas, prizes and certificates, gold stars. Perhaps I'd hoped my child might one day, after my death, become interested in the father she at present has absolutely no interest in knowing. Or with even more grandiosity, I'd imagined the interest of some future biographer. But what had this faith given me except a backache, some extra moving costs, and cramped closets?

I no longer felt the pleasant melancholia and hint of promise that had greeted me the first two or three times I'd moved these same boxes. I no longer had the necessary belief that my own future work would redeem their contents. I looked at my leavings, unpacked and stacked in piles on the floor of what I hoped would be my new writing room. Could I just throw it all out, Marie Kondo style, and give myself to the eternal sunshine of the spotless home office? I was too old to break free and run. But was it only vanity and shame—vanity's silent partner—that held me back?

Both vanity and shame were there, for sure. But neither felt like the main obstacle. If it was only vanity and shame, I'd be just as capable of burning it all in

an act of defiant rage, of announcing a clean break with a past that I believed I'd absorbed and transcended. I could tell myself that it was the contents of the boxes that had failed me, not I who had failed. What vanity had made me keep, vanity would also make me obliterate: what shame had me keep, shame would make me disown.

There was something else in those boxes that I couldn't quite figure out. I would describe it as a scruple. It felt bigger and older than me. It wasn't on my own account that I was blocked from throwing out these papers.

For a while, I've cultivated a detached, semirepressed interest in what might be called "crypto-Judaism": The survival of certain traditions and habits of Jewish religious practice among Jews—myself included—who have become uprooted and disconnected from any meaningful observance of either Jewish custom or law. The lines quoted above, from John Hollander's poem "Violet," allude to one such instance of "crypto-Judaism" among certain communities in northern Mexico and New Mexico who—perhaps even to this day—go out into the fields on Friday nights with candles "set down inside a pitcher." The tradition outlasted the memory of its origin, and it took genetics and anthropology to connect these villagers back to their Marrano past. These were descendants of forcibly converted Jews, driven to the margins of the Spanish empire, who continued to observe an occulted Kabbalat Shabbat for generations, until the meaning of the practice became a secret even to themselves.

The enduring legacy of this hidden Sabbath is one melancholy instance of the phenomenon. But others can just be funny. In a moment that came to seem like an allegory of my interfaith marriage, my wife and I were once laying out a new summer blanket on the bed (she was already by this point well on her way to the new age spiritual transformation that would bring about the marriage's end a few years later). I noticed we'd put the factory label face up, at the head of the bed, right at nose-tickling height. "We'll have to start again," I said. Without a word, my wife left the bedroom, returned with a pair of

scissors, cut out the label, and removed the stitches.

I'm not usually what contemporary psychobabble calls "OCD"; I don't have particularly ordered habits; I don't make the bed when I get up in the morning unless someone asks me to. But that moment, when my wife appeared with the scissors, was fraught with a kind of spiritual struggle for meaning and existence, like everything else we did together in those days. I—who have never been part of a kosher household, never had separate dishes, never performed the weekly *Havdalah*—I couldn't stop myself. I said, "But now we'll never know which is supposed to be the top and which the bottom."

My wife looked at me like I was being an idiot. In the word's root sense of someone gripped by a private language and experience that can never be properly communicated, I was indeed being an idiot. It didn't matter which end was up, so long as nothing tickled your nose when you tried to sleep. But somewhere inside me, at that particular moment, I understood the label to have the force of a divine seal. Without a way of marking and observing distinctions, like the distinction between the top and bottom of the blanket, a part of me felt an urgent sense of loss that can be read as a kind of displaced halachic yearning.

This same displaced yearning was the other thing inside my boxes; the same sense that I would be doing something "wrong" if I just dumped all these papers into garbage bags and abandoned them on the curb. But where was the wrong? What was I yearning for? I continued to make half-hearted efforts to clear up and sort through the piles. Some things I even succeeded in throwing out, though I can't tell you what they were. I was just a blind fury equipped with a paper shredder. Then, from an unlabeled file folder slipped a xeroxed essay, "The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts." That was when I understood what I was dealing with. I'd made a genizah of the self.

A genizah, for those unfamiliar with the word, is an ossuary for any text that contains any version of the literally ineffable names of God. The most famous of these sites, a storeroom in the old Ben

Ezra synagogue in Cairo, where these once-holy documents were kept awaiting a sanctified burial that—for reasons unknown—never quite happened, became the indispensable archive for Jewish historians of late antiquity, medieval Jewry in the Arab world, and centuries of Ottoman dominance. From the sixth to the 19th centuries of the common era, everything from Torah commentaries, philosophical texts of Maimonides and other sages, poems of Yehuda HaLevy, a simple “Baruch Hashem” in a letter from a traveler, payment records for laborers, or a merchant’s log found its resting place there. The Cairo genizah was also unusual for broadening the interpretation of what was to be preserved and thus sanctified. At some point, not only texts containing the holy name, but also anything at all written in Hebrew script was deemed eligible for the genizah: so one also finds a child’s Hebrew lessons, complete with doodles, not so different from my Italian and German exercise books, texts in Ladino from before the expulsion of the Jews, and in Yiddish from the 17th century. In Cairo, an entire archive of collective Jewish selfhood was created and preserved, literally under- and over-written by God, or a sacred language through which the universe speaks.

The thought that my boxes were my own genizah, that I’d created a genizah of the self, is no doubt absurd to any Orthodox Jewish reader. Did I think I was God, possibly? Sort of, maybe ... But if I had delusions, I came by them honestly, and I probably share them with many fellow Jews living in various forms of estrangement from organized religious observance. Secularism is not the same thing as atheism: It is the transmutation of the old idea of a separate divinity into an ineffable something within ourselves—our bodies, our lives as citizens, or consciousness itself. Between the tradition observed even in forgetting—as with the Mexican Marranos—and my idiotic desire to know which end is up on a blanket, falls an entire range of observances and sacred practices inherited in mutated, transposed, or retranscribed forms over the multigenerational journey from strict observance to liberated American selfhood.

The cult of the self that I’d erected belonged to this shadowland of habits severed from beliefs, yet not reattached to anything rational. It was a kind of zombified form of worship, or superstition. My respect for the written word, or name—mostly in the form of my words and my name—had only really congealed into a vague sense of taboo: “Thou shalt not obliviate.” But there was no project there that I could connect with the meaning of my own life.

My sense of myself, in other words, did not exactly rise to the level of godhead. It fell, in fact, quite a ways short of it. My imagination had never reached the conceit of a writer like Salman Rushdie, who wrote an entire semi-autobiographical novel (*Midnight’s Children*) in which Saleem Sinai, Rushdie’s alter-ego narrator, is also a literal embodiment of the modern state of India. (In the same manner, Rushdie once began a talk with the sentence “Rock and Roll and I share a birthday.”) I belonged to the generation of Jewish men about whom it made little sense to boast “My son, the doctor; my son the lawyer; my son the writer; my son the publisher.” We were already the doctors’ sons.

I’m part of the more problematically self-absorbed generation born after Philip Roth’s “The Conversion of the Jews,” the story that—in intellectual historical terms—succinctly articulates the paradigm shift in the American Jewish imagination that replaced devotion to *HaShem* with the cult of “My Son!!” But the story does more than that. When Ozzie Freedman, who believes in opening his mouth, climbs up to the roof of the synagogue to protest being slapped by the rabbi for asking a question, making everyone say they believe in Jesus’ immaculate conception before he agrees to come down, he thereby enacts a double secularization: not just of Judaism but also of Christianity. Belief in Jesus is incidental to the more important promise Ozzie extracts from the kneeling congregation: “you should never hit anybody about God.” The story affirms the sanctity of individual self-expression and the uniquely American optimism of that triumphant generation.

My genizah of the self, on the other hand, was the result of what happens

when God is no longer seen as worth hitting anyone about, but the self too is also taken for granted, no longer a triumph to be earned. It was evidence of the congealed half-life of two vestigial inherited traditions, neither of them truly flourishing in me: the sanctity of the ineffable name within Orthodox Judaism, and the sanctity of progressive Jewish American immigrant success within liberal Judaism.

My former wife, in the decade since she’d left her home in the Balkans, had become far more American than me, at least in spiritual terms. She had come to reorder her life around an entity she called sometimes “the sovereign self,” other times “the higher self,” and at other moments “the true self.” At least as far as I was able to understand the cosmology she received in the form of spiritual revelations during long meditation retreats with other like-minded people, this higher self was—as a Christian might put it—consubstantial with God, the creator. It was God in the self. The true, higher, sovereign self might be said to be the spark of the divine in all of us, unburdened from the weighty trappings of modern selfhood, beginning with the ego.

Although she said she’d also transcended such things as “judgment” or negative emotions of any kind, I could see the pity and impatience in her face when she saw me stacking the file boxes in the hallway of our old apartment for one more move. “You are keeping that?” she asked. The question and the look both told me that she believed that only when I could let go of my genizah with a genuine cheerfulness and peace of heart—as she had let go of all accumulations from her earlier life as an architect, an immigrant from the former Yugoslavia, a dutiful daughter and sister, and also my spouse—would I be on the road to replacing the false self of centuries past with the true self she liked to tell me was mine to claim.

This implied suggestion felt to me like a different and more complete kind of blasphemy than my own meek idolatry: not only the assertion that the self was God, but that the true self did not include the particular sum of experiences, stories, failures, successes, hopes,

dreams, fears, and other emotions that made up a unique but limited “I am.” She was saying that having failed at who I imagined myself to be, so I must become someone else and call that other thing by the same name. So I took my boxes with me again.

I was still left with the problem of what to do with my papers. I did not feel any closer to a peaceful liquidation of my old self and its leavings; I felt burdened by them. A clue to the resolution of my genizah problem appeared in the same xeroxed text that had helped me name the problem to begin with: “The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts” is part of a collection by the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, one of those deeply complicated thinkers who emerged out of the ashes of the Second World War. Born in Lithuania in 1905, raised in Paris, educated in Germany, Lévinas became first a disciple of Martin Heidegger’s thought. Having survived the war in a POW camp for French officers, he dedicated his life work to overturning Heidegger in Heideggerian terms.

Against Heidegger, who put Being or Ontology at the origin of philosophy, Lévinas argued that Ethics was primary, that Being or Essence in a philosophical sense only arises from a primary ethical relationship to another: be that mother, God, or just the face of the stranger. Philosophy is thus the project of trying to understand our relationship to otherness, not to ourselves, not to some grand abstraction called “Being” or “God” or “Nothingness.” To give the most famous example from his work: The commandment “Thou Shalt Not Kill” is not merely a proscription offered by a third party—called God—about the relationship of one human being to another. It is literally what the face of God says whenever it appears, especially in the form of other human faces. Killing isn’t just violence against the other, it’s violence against the self, against the whole of creation, which can only really ever exist in relationship to others. Selfhood, for Lévinas, is almost a meaningless concept in the abstract.

After the war, Lévinas also returned to the religious Judaism of his Vilna upbringing, but within a spirit of modernist

contradiction: Judaism occupied the same role for Lévinas as ancient Greece did for Heidegger—a kind of etymological and mystical grounding for his philosophical intuitions and arguments. Accordingly, Lévinas’ readings of the Talmud and of Jewish law focus more on the exceptional than the customary, those moments when the habits of traditional observance are troubled or shaken. So it’s not surprising that in his remarks on the “Name of God,” Lévinas is mostly interested in when it’s permitted to erase it.

He focuses on two related instances mentioned in the Talmud: The first is an ancient trial by ordeal of a woman suspected of adultery without proof. The woman is supposed to appear before a priest who simply says to her, “If you have slept with some man other than your husband, then God [written as the tetragrammaton] make you an execration!” The woman then says, “amen.” The priest writes this all down and then “erases them in the waters of bitterness.” This act of erasure, which also erases the holy name, performs the reconciliation between husband and wife. It’s worth noting that it doesn’t really matter if the woman is truthful, so long as the ritual itself is performed.

The second instance is related to the first and involves that adulterous King David, who, according to a legend, attempts to locate the spring that will serve as the source of running water for the Temple that Solomon will build—the Temple that David cannot build on account of his desire for the wife of Uriah the Hittite. According to the legend, the water rises up and “threatens to submerge the universe.” God then tells David to write the holy name and let it be washed away by the waters, “If, for the purpose of establishing harmony between man and wife, the Torah said, ‘Let my name that was written in sanctity be blotted out,’ how much more so may it be done in order to restore wholeness to the world!”

The insistence on the ineffable sanctity of Being, of the name, of identity is in this way transcended by the demand for peace, wholeness, healing, and recognition. Neither God nor the self is in any way “absolute,” only that which

permits us to offer, to grant and be granted absolution.

In my own version of this story, I am the secretly adulterous woman and also the adulterous king. And what I thought I was sitting on all this time, guiltily—a record of my infidelity or my double infidelity—both to myself as a secular, emancipated Jewish American of the late 20th century and to the God of my ancestors—can indeed be “effaced” but not by being thrown out, abandoned and destroyed, but by being “submerged” into something else.

It was not for my own sake that I’d kept these boxes, but rather for Lévinas’, for Marina van Zuylen’s syllabus on “Boredom, Aestheticism, and Artistic Autonomy,” for Andreas Huyssen’s syllabus on the Frankfurt School and debates in the German avant-garde, for David Bromwich’s artfully arranged course packet on “Practical Criticism,” for David Pike’s notes on modernism and urbanism. What was in the box was less my past than the records of other minds that had come into my possession and been passed on to me. To the extent that I had mixed these records up with my own, had confused them for myself, I had complicated their preservation and also unnecessarily complicated myself. I was not keeping records any more than the Jews of Cairo’s Ben Ezra synagogue were keeping records when they put a fragment into the storeroom. My boxes were part of my relationship to others: my teachers, my friends, a life-world of an education at a particular moment in history that was increasingly understood, by the culture at large, to be an inaccessible, dead past that should properly be erased. By keeping these papers, I was keeping a little spark of that world going.

This wasn’t to say that it felt like my task to redeem that world, wholly, in this one life. Only that I was being asked to keep the flame in the pitcher. Everything else, the stuff that was just me, the stories, the contracts, the diploma, the notebooks, was no longer mine to preserve. I was allowed to erase them. ■

This article was originally published on September 22, 2022.

From Trotsky to Torah

Searching for God, or at least a picnic, on Rosh Hashanah

BY KATHLEEN HAYES

Late last summer, when I told my mother I'd be attending a Jewish New Year ceremony at the harbor the next evening, she shrieked: "You're going to become *Jewish?!?*"

I considered telling her what so many Jews had told me, even if I didn't really believe them: that I already am Jewish—and so is she. Despite my mother's 84 years aspiring to be like everyone else, a Jewish identity lies behind her exile from her Dutch homeland. And so does a string of murdered, mostly faceless relatives. I was 15 when my grandmother told me about those family members; until then no one had suggested we weren't as American as Wonder Bread. Having told me just enough to upend what I thought I knew about myself, Oma refused to say another word. I absorbed the message that our Jewishness was best forgotten.

So I might have left it, if not for an interminable, embarrassingly predictable midlife crisis. I felt an emptiness that might have simply indicated loss of meaning and loneliness, but might also suggest a need for something more ineffable. Whatever this void was, I'd recently started to think exploring Jewishness might help. Being Jewish had to mean more than a terrible legacy of victimhood. And there was no better time to begin discovering that "more" than Rosh Hashanah, a time for new beginnings.

But I didn't say these things to my mother. I knew that if I did, she'd just continue looking at me as if I'd started speaking Cantonese. So I mumbled that I was "curious," and retreated into her guest room to reflect on the day ahead.

"Cold treats provided and BYO picnic," the synagogue's website read. A picnic!

I envisioned myself surrounded by new friends on blankets laden with food, talking and laughing as the evening drew to a close. I wanted to come in a spirit of generosity. I saw myself saying, "Take some, I've got loads," and proffering tasty morsels I'd prepared with my own hands. I saw myself becoming part of their community through the sharing of food.

Harder would be explaining why I was there. I would not humiliate myself by revealing too much to people who would go home with their families and forget about me.

These are among the things I would not say:

I was a devoted member of a small, insular, Trotskyist organization for 25 years. I quit a few years ago and now think it was something of a cult, not to mention rife with antisemitism. I'm extremely sorry about helping to spread such beliefs and have made fighting antisemitism my mission. I also regret apparently wasting my life. Still, even now, sometimes I miss the party and my comrades so much I ache.

I'm 54 years old, just separated from my husband, and living with my mother until I figure out what to do with the rest of my life. I don't know what this might be.

I'm so numb I barely have a pulse.

It occurred to me the things I could not say might pose a conversational challenge. Yet my image of myself at my picnic—laughing, eating and talking, awash in sunshine and conviviality—persisted. I would find words, even if I didn't yet know what they would be. And I would bring the perfect Jewish feast.

Judaism for Dummies was my guide to the ceremony. At *tashlich*, I read, Jews empty their pockets of crumbs and lint (this synagogue would use stones) "in a

symbolic gesture of casting away guilt and letting go of the previous year."

Guilt. I've got more than my share. Comrades used to joke that I must have grown up Catholic because guilt seemed to run through my veins. I'd laugh and say no, I'd been raised without religion, but it seems to me guilt is justified when one has harmed others. And it's the harm I've done to Jews that flooded my mind.

How righteous it felt. It must be, because my heart burned with love for my comrades and such a transcendent feeling must be pure. We were dedicated to the noble struggle for socialism; and lamentably, Jews kept placing themselves on the wrong side of history. From Soviet Jews who demanded release from the workers state to the ADL and other Jewish organizations to Israeli Zionists: Our face of evil reaction was Jewish. I was oblivious to the stench of antisemitism. Smelling it would have threatened everything, but above all my sense of belonging.

So I picketed Natan Sharansky, in 1987 when I was 19, at the party's behest just before joining its youth organization. I marched against Israel countless times, alongside not only my comrades but all good people. I believed crazy claims about Zionist malignity through the ages, because they came from people I revered. My reward was what I felt to be their love. And despite everything I now know, losing that love, and eventually my husband's, has left a hole perhaps nothing will ever fill.

The ceremony took place on a gorgeous evening. Sunshine set the harbor aglow while ocean and sky merged in a vision of blue. On the pier a few dozen people of various ages formed a tranquil group. I edged my way onto the periphery, hauling a tote bag containing enough food for a small but hungry Jewish troop.

Soon people approached and made me feel welcome. A chatty woman about my age introduced me to the rabbi, a youngish man with a toothy smile, after which I talked with a young father distractedly minding twin toddlers. I started enjoying myself, just as I'd imagined. Then the shofar sounded and the cantor, a slender young woman with long brown hair and

hoop earrings, sang in a lovely soprano. I was captivated.

After her the rabbi spoke, invoking the call to cast away the sins of the past, and I wondered again if I deserved to cast away my guilt. Then the rabbi and cantor sang to the accompaniment of a guitar and others joined in. A handsome young man put his arms around the rabbi and they sang together, swaying to the melody and looking rapturous.

Hearing the repeated word “Hallelujah,” I started struggling. I’ve spent my life mocking such overt religiosity. I remembered my dead father, a staunch atheist: How he’d smirk if he were here. So would my estranged husband, former comrades, sister, brother, mother: Almost everyone I knew would think I’d lost my mind; and maybe they’d be right. Anyway, the last time I joined something bigger than me, I ended up in the party.

Then I remembered something a new Jewish acquaintance said. I wrote to him saying I’m an atheist and he said he was, too, for most of his life. As he aged, however, he came to feel that although he doesn’t know, the world is a nicer place with the thought that a loving God exists. At that moment I decided: not to believe in God, but not to let my nonbelief barricade me against the world. It’s music and community and joy on a beautiful evening. Why not try to go with it? And I thought I felt some of my cynicism fall away.

When it was time to cast my stones into the harbor, I thought about how far I’d come from my beloved Trotskyist sect. I was alone, but I had acted as I saw right and had the strength and integrity to continue. Maybe it was enough for forgiveness. I held the stones, cool and smooth in the palm of my hand; and when I was ready I tossed them into the water where they disappeared without a sound.

If I had any dignity, I’d end my story on this uplifting note. I’d hint that I began my unflinching journey to spiritual awakening and a sense of belonging. But if I had such an abiding sense of dignity, I probably wouldn’t have spent quite so many years brandishing placards screaming for the unconditional

military defense of the deformed workers states. And it wouldn’t be true.

After we’d tossed our stones, the rabbi announced that an ice cream truck had arrived and everyone could get a ticket entitling them to a treat. I watched as squealing kids and grown-ups mobbed the ticket distributor and darted down the pier. Soon it was nearly empty.

I walked down the pier with my ponderous tote bag and lingered near the ice cream truck. People seemed to be dispersing in all directions after getting their ice creams. Soon almost everyone had disappeared, and I felt too foolish to ask someone the question raging in my head: *Where is the picnic?*

Finally I spied the rabbi with a woman and several children walking away. He’d know where the picnic was. He was talking with the kids and I felt shy, so I trailed behind them. I felt like a stalker. It also crossed my mind that, in these antisemitic times, a rabbi with his family might find it discomfiting to be followed by a stranger toting a bulky bag. He ended up at a parking lot and I watched the rabbi and his family pile into a large vehicle. Around this time it occurred to me there was not going to be a picnic.

I turned and lugged my tote bag to a nearby nature center. I crouched in the parking lot on a curb facing the ocean. Reaching into my bag, I grabbed fistfuls of the food I’d prepared to share with my new community and shoveled them into my mouth as I gazed alone at the sunset. I managed not to cry until I’d returned to my mother’s guest room.

Since then I’ve continued to explore what it means to be Jewish, although something prevents me taking more than baby steps. My mother is extremely anxious about COVID-19, so although we’re both fully vaccinated I stayed away from in-person activities the long months that I lived with her. Alone in my room, I started slowly reading the Torah and find it resonates in some ways while it disturbs in others. I followed the Jewish holidays with Abigail Pogrebin’s *My Jewish Year* and through Twitter: “liking” *hanukkiot* at Hanukkah, Seder plates at Passover. On Yom HaShoah, feeling like an impostor,

I tweeted commemoration of my great-grandfather and great-aunt, Henri and Lucie van den Bergh, and wished again for a Jewish identity based on something more than distant, terrible family victimhood.

I attended one Shabbat service, at a Chabad center. I liked the rabbi and was deeply moved by the ceremony, but the congregation was a bit too eager to make me one of them, in a way I recognized that made me uneasy. Some displayed a smug assurance, also familiar to me, that theirs is the one true path; and I was especially turned off by a couple who insisted the parting of the Red Sea happened exactly as it says in Exodus. (“You can Google it,” one guy said, to which I didn’t respond that you can Google anything.) I’m glad I went, but don’t think I’ll be back.

So I resumed my solitary improvised weekly observances. For most of the year, after wishing people on Twitter “Shabbat shalom,” I walked to the beach from my mother’s home before sunset. I said the prayer aloud to the indifferent ocean, then sat on the sand watching the waves crash as the sun ebbed. Now that I have my own apartment, I light the candles and wait for a feeling of Jewishness to descend on me, like a vapor. It hasn’t yet.

But Jewishness is clearly impossible without living, breathing beings, and I have to confront my diffidence about again belonging to something—a mistrust that matches my yearning to. As a new New Year approaches, I’m thinking about reaching out to the synagogue of last year’s *tashlich*. I won’t tell the rabbi about stalking him. I’ll once again throw my stones in the harbor, and ask again for forgiveness. I don’t know if I’ll ever believe in God. But if He exists, I wish He’d seen fit to give me that picnic. ■

This article was originally published on September 22, 2022.



PODCASTS

Hundreds of episodes at
[tabletmag.com/podcasts](https://www.tabletmag.com/podcasts)

Adam Sobel's Holiday Brisket

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 1** high-quality kosher brisket (about 6 pounds)
 - ½** cup olive oil
 - 3** carrots, peeled and sliced into ¾ inch chunks
 - 2** large onions, quartered
 - 5** ribs celery, with the greens, cut into 2-inch chunks
 - 5** cloves garlic, smashed and peeled
 - ½** cup red wine vinegar
 - 2** tablespoons honey
 - 4** tablespoons fresh grated horseradish
 - 2** tablespoons brown Dijon mustard
 - 4-6** cups beef broth
 - 2** bay leaves
 - 6** sprigs fresh thyme
 - ½** bunch parsley
- Kosher coarse salt and freshly ground pepper to taste**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Preheat the oven to 250 degrees.

Step 2

Season the brisket liberally with salt and pepper. Then add half the olive oil to a braising pan or a pot large enough to hold the brisket. Heat the pan and sear the brisket on all sides. When the brisket is seared evenly, remove it from the pan and set aside for a few minutes.

Step 3

Add some more oil to the pan then add the carrots, onions, celery and garlic and sauté for about 2 minutes, stirring occasionally, and sprinkling with more salt and pepper.

Step 4

Stir the wine vinegar, honey, grated horseradish, and mustard in a small bowl until smooth.

Step 5

Pour the liquid into the pan and deglaze, stirring to get up any bits that have attached themselves to the pan, and letting it reduce for about 3 minutes.

Step 6

Return the brisket to the pot and then add enough beef broth to just cover the brisket. Add the bay leaf, thyme, and parsley and bring to a simmer. Once at a simmer, cover the pot and place in oven for 5 hours.

Step 7

Remove from the oven and let sit until the brisket reaches room temperature. Then refrigerate overnight in the cooking pan. When ready to serve, remove the fat that accumulates on top of the brisket. Then cut the brisket against the grain into slices about an eighth to a quarter of an inch thick. (If you're making the brisket ahead of time, you can freeze it after slicing.) Heat the liquid in the pan, then strain out the vegetables if you want. I like to keep them. Return the cut brisket to the pan, heat, and serve..

Yield: 12 servings

TABLET RECIPES



Hundreds of recipes at
tabletmag.com/recipes