The End of the Road in Cincinnati?

The story of American Reform Judaism can be reviewed simply by walking up one side and down the other of the central hallway at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion’s main classroom building in Cincinnati. On those walls hang the pictures of every graduating class since 1883 (including mine in 2006) and every faculty member who taught us. Looking at those more than 130 class pictures, you can see when the movement was in a state of expansion or contraction, how attitudes have shifted about wearing ritual items like kippot and tallitot, which social norms have changed, and how the role of women has evolved. Our challenges, triumphs, disappointments, and struggles are all right there on display.

That hallway—lined with the classrooms where generations of our leaders have learned about Torah and humanity—is located, perhaps counterintuitively but surely luckily, in Cincinnati, right where the founders of the movement breathed life into it and where generations of dedicated men and women kept it alive.

Now, a small group of people seeks to shutter the birthplace not just of the seminary they claim to serve, but of the movement whose future has been entrusted to them. If the board of HUC-JIR allows it, we will trade yesterday for tomorrow and wind up with neither.

HUC-JIR (“the College”) consists of a Rabbinical School, a School of Sacred Music that trains cantors, a School of Education, a School of Jewish Non-Profit Management, a School of Graduate Studies, a D.Min. program in Pastoral Care, museums, libraries, other resources for the study of Judaism including the American Jewish Archives. But in a few days, the Board of Governors of the College will meet to consider a strategic plan that will, in the kind of euphemistic language one might expect from politicians or used car salesmen, “restructure the Rabbinical School.” In other words, after nearly a century and a half, they’ll stop training rabbis in Cincinnati.

The College was founded by Isaac Mayer Wise, the Cincinnati rabbi whose vision is considered to have founded the American Reform movement and who was vital in creating its institutions, in
Cincinnati was one of the country’s largest and most significant cities. The College opened a New York campus by merging with the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) in 1950. JIR had been established by Stephen S. Wise in 1922 over disagreements in the Reform movement about Zionism and the freedom of clergy to speak their minds from the pulpit. The College further opened a Los Angeles campus in 1954 and the Dodgers followed them there four years later—at least, that’s how I learned it.

In 1963, the College opened a campus just inside the Green Line in divided Jerusalem. For a movement that had, at first, been officially anti-Zionist, it sent an unmistakable message that, the State of Israel having been born, American Reform Jews would participate in her survival and growth as a center for Jewish life. Sixty years ago, it seems, the leaders of the College understood that choices about campus location send messages.

Throughout this period of expansion, the College—like the American Jewish community—thrived. It was ably led by world-renowned archaeologist Rabbi Nelson Glueck and boasted a faculty roster that included titans of American Jewish scholarship. It educated a student body that would go on to distinguish itself in service to the American Jewish community. It created and grew an extraordinary collection of Jewish literature and Judaica, housed today at the Klauber Library in, you guessed it, Cincinnati. It expanded outward from southwest Ohio because its product was unquestionably excellent. And it had no greater benefactor than the Jewish community of Cincinnati (Glueck’s hometown, as a matter of fact), which relied on its institutional heft and supported it—and supports it still—with reverence and generosity.

But, today, the College has undeniably fallen on hard times. According to its own publications, HUC has identified what it believes are the major problems: Enrollment at the College has steadily declined in the last 15 years; the College runs a large and growing budget deficit; other schools calling themselves seminaries have been founded in recent years and congregations seem willing to hire their graduates; and Jewish movement particularism and Jewish religious identity have both waned dramatically.

Opinions differ as to the causes of these problems and/or their solutions, but there is general agreement that these are, in fact, problems. (They are not, however, the biggest problems. We’ll get to those later.)

And so, the leadership of the College has proposed to the Board of Governors to close the residential rabbinical program in Cincinnati, turn that campus into some kind of glorified retreat center, and “develop a low-residency clergy program” there. This is the relevant passage from the strategic plan:

“We contend that a Rabbinical School with residential programs on two campuses and reimagined rabbinical education in Cincinnati will strengthen our flagship program and best enable us to continue attracting high-caliber students and educating outstanding rabbis.

It is, to be kind, debatable whether or not the College has been “attracting high-caliber students” or “educating outstanding rabbis.” But again, more on that later.

To bolster this contention, the College supplied us with a lot of disheartening information, none of which points to shutting down the Rabbinical School in Cincinnati as an obvious or even plausibly efficacious solution. The year I was ordained, 2006, there were 214 rabbinical students across the three American campuses of HUC-JIR. Last year, that number was 134. Next year, it will be 108. This is part of a larger decline at all non-Orthodox seminaries but seems to have hit the College the hardest. Those 108 students are disproportionately sent to the coastal campuses: 44 in New York, 44 in Los Angeles, and only 20 in Cincinnati. It is worth pointing out that the distribution has changed greatly since I was at the College, when students were assigned to a city and simply expected (with some appeals and grumbling) to matriculate to the assigned campus.

The strategic plan includes an extensive defense of consolidating rabbinical education to fewer campuses. None of those arguments, however, addresses why it should be Cincinnati that gets the ax. For that, you have to go to the Location Recommendation Memo.

You can read the memo for yourself, but it’s very difficult to do so without concluding that the primary finding is this: We have to get smaller and we don’t want to leave New York and Los Angeles because they’re New York and Los Angeles and Cincinnati is, well, barely separated from Kentucky by a river. And a brown river at that. Bless their hearts, the College tries to make it about partnerships and Jewish vibrancy but, really, it’s about Cincinnati being in the Midwest, literally on the Mason-Dixon Line, and the 36th-largest Designated Market Area in the country—just behind Greenville-Spartanburg, South Carolina. Would you want to go to Jew school in Greenville-Spartanburg? Of course not.

The documents prepared by the College to justify its decision are full of gaslighting and manipulation, which generally means the author intends to obscure rather than clarify. At one point, the College laments that, yes, the American Jewish Archives will be harmed by the decision, but “fewer than 17 percent of all researchers at the AJA have a connection to HUC-JIR” and “the actual number of faculty and students in Cincinnati who use the AJA for research is much smaller.” See? The students...
don’t even use the AJA! Perhaps that’s true, (it’s not—I used the archives). But imagine that all 108 students at the College’s three campuses and all 28 faculty members were consolidated to Cincinnati instead of the coasts. Would the percentage of AJA users who are HUC-JIR students and faculty go up or down? Want more students and faculty to use the world-class resources at the AJA that you’re never going to be able to afford to move? Here’s an idea: Stop sending them to New York.

Another reason for scaling back the College’s geographical reach is financial. Here, the College engages in magical thinking and fantasy about fundraising. The decision is not, they insist, a financial one. They will still have to maintain the property in Cincinnati. There will be little cost savings. But they’ll be able to raise more money. What’s stopping them from raising that money now is unclear. But it’s true that the College doesn’t raise enough money. Based on HUC’s own figures, $18 million in restricted funds may be at risk if the proposal is approved and another $11 million for the Klau and AJA. Many donors are driven by regional considerations—the Cincinnati campus is an enormous part of non-Orthodox Midwestern and Southern Jewry—and consider the closure of the rabbinical program to be violative of their donor intent. And there is a sneaking suspicion among many, myself included, that this plan is merely the first step in closing down or selling off the Cincinnati campus altogether. The proposed plans for the campus are completely unseverous.

At this point, you may be saying to yourself, “OK, but New York is New York and Los Angeles is Los Angeles and Cincinnati is basically one Chiefs game away from being Kansas City and has fewer Jews than Hartford.” Fair enough. And if one could only learn Torah by dancing Friday night away on the Upper West Side or getting a steak at Shiloh’s, you’d have a point. Now, rabbinical students definitely need formative experiences and exposure to a breadth of Jewish life and practice that isn’t native to Cincinnati. That’s why we spend our first year in Jerusalem. After that, what a rabbinical student really needs is the time and space and resources to learn deeply. They need to immerse themselves in text and philosophy and debate with other students and faculty, which can be done—in fact, has been done for nearly a century and a half—in Cincinnati.

This brings us to the big problems HUC-JIR faces. Chief among them: The product sucks. This is not to demean the quality or scholarship of the current faculty. Far from it! Thank God many of my beloved teachers are still trying valiantly to raise up rabbis. I merely point out that the institutions of the movement have swung radically from concerning themselves with creating a thriving American Judaism to concerning themselves with radical leftist politics masquerading as Judaism. The College now churns out a growing cadre of activists and a shrinking number of knowledgeable Jewish scholars. In fact, the College—again, not the faculty—doesn’t seem particularly interested in producing scholars. HUC-JIR now sees itself as a professional school in competition with a handful of other coastal professional schools for the same group of candidates, typified by bland, conformist slacktivists without an original thought in their heads.

This is the new Reform orthodoxy. You may know a Reform rabbi who totally defies this description. I’m blessed to know several. But, if you know many Reform rabbis and you’re honest, you know a lot more who embody it.

Another problem is that the College has forgotten what it is and what it exists to do. A fact my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Mark Washofsky, reminded us of in a spectacular, surprisingly in-your-face Founders Day address just a few weeks ago.

[Isaac Mayer Wise] intentionally modeled the Hebrew Union College not after the traditional yeshiva of which there were some tremendous examples in the late 19th century, but after the German Rabbiner-Seminar—the academic rabbinical schools of Germany—which in turn were modeled after the German university. Measured by way of maasei, of action, our founder’s vision was to create an institution that would educate rabbis according to university standards. The highest prevailing standards of, wait for it, academic excellence.

Today, a growing subof the Jewish community—including those of us who desperately wish it weren’t so—believe HUC-JIR offers a spiritually meaningless, academically frivolous product preparing candidates for a declining set of job prospects in a dying movement.

It doesn’t have to be this way. The Board of Governors doesn’t have to sit for this nonsense anymore. HUC-JIR can choose to be a center of serious Jewish learning again instead of the professional school it’s become. But it needs leadership that stops paying lip-service to serious Jewish learning and starts prioritizing it. It needs leaders who envision the ideal congregant of 2072 and start cultivating, recruiting, and training that congregant’s rabbis now. They can solve their budgetary problems and respect donor intent by consolidating the rabbinical program in Cincinnati. They won’t. But they should. This is the market differentiation the College has been looking for. It’s right in front of their faces. The College—indeed the entire movement—needs to reorient itself away from the production of political activists and toward the production of literate Jews.

Do these things, and the movement will survive because it will deserve to and because it will produce the kind of leaders who will rise to these and future challenges. Selling off our history—failing to preserve our archives and our sacred bibliography—may buy us another day. But the cost is too high and the reprieve too short.
The Russian invasion of Ukraine has made it clear that what Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s called “the cold peace” has given way to Cold War II. The first Cold War was a struggle not only of nations and alliances but also of systems—capitalism versus communism. The second Cold War is already a struggle among systems as well, pitting countries that focus on manufacturing (China) and resources (Russia) in the physical world against an alliance led by the United States, which for the last generation has sacrificed much of its own manufacturing and mining to specialize in global leadership in finance, services, and entertainment. To put it another way, the contest of models in Cold War II is not about ownership of the means of production; it is about material production versus immaterial service provision.

The other side in the new Cold War is very good at making things, mining minerals, and growing food. In contrast, the U.S. economy, although it still manufactures many products and is highly productive in energy and agriculture, rewards and celebrates those who make apps and loans—after a generation in which American business and financial elites made fortunes by offshoring industrial jobs and facilities to China and Taiwan.

Beginning in the Clinton years, policymakers and economists of both parties celebrated the shift of the United States to a “post-industrial economy.” In a speech titled “The Challenges of Success” to tech executives and investors in San Francisco on April 28, 1998, the neoliberal economist Larry Summers, then deputy secretary of the treasury, celebrated the allegedly immaterial information economy: “The twin forces of information technology and modern competitive finance are moving us toward a post-industrial age,” he said. Silicon Valley and Wall Street, not manufacturing or agriculture or oil and gas, symbolized the “new economy.” Summers listed examples of this new economy—“AIG in insurance, McDonald’s in fast food, Walmart in retailing, Microsoft in software, Harvard University in education, CNN in television news.” Let backward, old-fashioned East Asians and Germans make cars and TV sets and telephones and computers; America will sell insurance and infotainment to the world.

In the post-industrial economy, large firms regulated and supported by government and negotiating with organized labor would give way to spunky startups founded by overnight tycoons, according to Summers in 1998: “Look right here in California, where millions are invested before revenues, let alone profits come, and anyone with a good idea can make their first million before buying their first tie.”

A quarter-century later, when it turned out during the COVID pandemic that the United States had ceased making many essential drugs and medical supplies and was dependent on autocratic, anti-American China for many of them, the same Larry Summers was apparently shocked to learn that many things are no longer made in America. On March 21, 2020, Summers tweeted: “Thoughts at the end of a long week: Why can’t the greatest economy in the history of the world produce swabs, face masks and ventilators in adequate supply?”

Following COVID-19, Cold War II may finally discredit the fallacies of the free market globalist economists like Summers, Paul Krugman, and Glenn Hubbard who shaped the consensus among both Democrats and Republicans for three decades. Appropriately enough, for a financial and online business services superpower, the United States responded to the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine with more or less the arsenal described by Summers in 1998—“AIG in insurance, McDonald’s in fast food, Walmart in retailing, Microsoft in software, Harvard University in education, CNN in television news.” The United States waged financial warfare against Putin’s Russia, American credit card giants cut off Russian consumers, and, in a devastating blow, McDonald’s pulled out of the Russian Federation.

It may be that financial and economic sanctions are enough to force Russia to retreat or negotiate. But Germany, the major NATO economy after the United States, is dependent on Russian oil and gas, which Germans continue to buy, partly subsidizing Putin’s military. At the same time, the world’s largest nation and its biggest economy (in purchasing power parity terms), China, which has surpassed the United States in many areas of manufacturing if not yet software, is in a position to help Russia endure Western sanctions as part of a common crusade to drive the United States out of their regional spheres of influence.

Even the beneficiaries of U.S. dependence on China—Silicon Valley, universities, Wall Street, “green” technologies that need Chinese imports—are being forced to acknowledge that we still live in a material world in which countries can be great powers even if they do not dominate global banking and insurance markets, on the basis of mining energy and minerals, growing crops, and making physical things. Russia and Ukraine together are responsible for more than a quarter of global wheat exports. Russia and Belarus together produce nearly half of the global exports of potash, a critical nutrient used in fertilizers,
while Russia produces more than a fifth of the ammonia exports used in global agriculture.

For its part, China dominates global production of many essential minerals, both directly—producing 63% of rare earths and 45% of molybdenum—and indirectly, by investing in lithium mines in Australia, platinum mines in South Africa, and cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A few decades ago, the United States mined and refined many of the minerals it now imports. But thanks to cheap labor abroad, excessive environmental regulations at home, and the fantasy of the post-material “information economy,” the U.S. government allowed corporations to shut down many American mines even as other firms shuttered American factories. The energy analyst Mark P. Mills describes the result:

As recently as 1990, the U.S. was the world’s number-one producer of minerals. Today, it is in seventh place. …

More relevant, as the United States Geological Survey (USGS) notes, are strategic dependencies on specific critical minerals. In 1954, the U.S. was 100% dependent on imports for eight minerals. Today, the U.S. is 100% reliant on imports for 17 minerals and depends on imports for over 50% of 29 widely used minerals. China is a significant source for half of those 29 minerals.

Along with free market globalism, the environmental movement has crippled and endangered the economies of the United States and its allies. Rejecting the asceticism of the old Malthusian left that called for voluntary poverty, edgrowth, and population decline through anti-natalism, establishment environmentalist leaders like Al Gore and his European counterparts have optimistically claimed that existing technology permits a rapid “green transition” from fossil fuels and nuclear energy to solar, wind, and hydro power, with no need to lower Western living standards or cripple what remains of Western industry.

But according to experts on global mineral production who belong to SoS Minerals, in a letter delivered to the British Committee on Climate Change:

The metal resource needed to make all cars and vans electric by 2050 and all sales to be purely battery electric [in the UK] by 2035. To replace all UK-based vehicles today with electric vehicles (not including the LGV and HGV fleets), assuming they use the most resource-frugal next-generation NMC 811 batteries, would take 207,900 tonnes cobalt, 264,600 tonnes of lithium carbonate (LCE), at least 7,200 tonnes of neodymium and dysprosium, in addition to 2,362,500 tonnes copper. This represents, just under two times the total annual world cobalt production, nearly the entire world production of neodymium, three quarters the world’s lithium production and 12% of the world’s copper production during 2018. Even ensuring the annual supply of electric vehicles only, from 2035 as pledged, will require the UK to annually import the equivalent of the entire annual cobalt needs of European industry. …

Challenges of using ‘green energy’ to power electric cars: If wind farms are chosen to generate the power for the projected two billion cars at UK average usage, this requires the equivalent of a further years’ worth of total global copper supply and 10 years’ worth of global neodymium and dysprosium production to build the windfarms.

There is not enough cobalt, neodymium, or lithium being mined and refined in the entire world today for Britain to meet its green transition goals in the next generation. And Britain has only 67 million people. The United States has 330 million. The world has nearly 8 billion. Do the math.

“Clean” energy is not clean. No less than natural gas and oil extraction, extracting the minerals required for solar, wind, and hydro power equipment requires massive mines and destruction of local landscapes and ecosystems. For pointing out this obvious fact, the left-wing filmmaker Michael Moore’s documentary *Planet of the Humans* was denounced by the organized green lobby, and Moore himself has been canceled by the left.

While some democracies like Australia, Canada, and the United States have significant mineral resources, many of the countries with large mineral resources and reserves are autocracies or fragile postcolonial regimes: China (gold, tin, and bauxite, used to make aluminum), Indonesia (nickel, tin, gold), and Russia (oil, gas, nickel). Half of global cobalt reserves are found in one country—the Democratic Republic of Congo. Substitutes for some of these minerals may be discovered or synthesized. But in other cases, natural deposits of elements that are essential to an advanced industrial society may give particular countries enormous economic windfalls.

During and after the first Cold War, many Westerners assumed that capitalism was associated with democracy and liberalism, and communism with autocracy. But economies based on resource capitalism or a single commodity crop (“banana republics”) have so often been ruled by dictatorships or oligarchies that the phenomenon is known as the “resource curse.”

To excel in global manufacturing, a country has to have a well-educated workforce, while innovation requires a high degree of intellectual (if not political) freedom. But if a government or economic elite derives its income simply by selling other countries the products of its mines or farms or ranches, what Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson call an “extractive” regime, it has no incentive to educate most of the population or respect their rights and every incentive to enserf or enslave the miners or agricultural workers. And if the route to personal political power and wealth in a nation lies through control of the nation’s oil fields, mines, or agricultural estates, ambitious individuals will be tempted to dispense with cumbersome elections and to seize power and resources directly through assassination and coup d’etat.

We Americans should recognize this pattern in our own history. The “original sin” of the United States was not slavery or racism; it was plantation
To defend their rights, citizens protest with private commercial transactions, freezing bank accounts, and interfering with private communications, spying on private communications, and interfering with private commercial transactions. To defend their rights, citizens protest and engage in civil disobedience, suspending their obedience to law. In any particular such confrontation, from the trucker convoy in Canada to demonstrations against COVID public safety measures, protesters may be acting on the basis of sound or foolish or even disturbing commitments. But anyone speaking out against the infringement of individual rights appeals to some of the deepest intuitions of our common sense as members of a liberal democracy. This regime is founded on the idea that individual rights, enumerated (though not exhaustively) by our constitution, have not only a primacy in orienting our politics, but also a kind of sacredness. While rights may seem to express the mutually agreed upon limitations which we impose on each other and on the state, enabling a precious protected zone of private life, they embody even more profoundly our shared ideal of human freedom, the cultivation of which is the aim of our political life.

The very possibility of our life in common, however, is periodically threatened by emergencies that require the suspension of these rights. During wartime, for example, it is generally understood that censorship, the suppression of suspect political organizations, and the abrogation of normal judicial procedures may all be necessary to the survival of the state. Yet we also recognize the possibility that, on the pretext of real or spurious emergencies, our rights, and the very character of our regime, may be undone. The threat of another “Reichstag fire,” a catastrophe or apparent threat for the sake of which
politicians put aside respect for individual rights to such an extent that there is no hope of recovering them, looms over liberal democracies.

For radicals of the left and right, thinking about the problem of emergencies and their possible manipulation often passes through the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt and the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who appropriated many of Schmitt’s insights for the sake of his own idiosyncratic leftist politics. From their perspective, it can appear that liberalism, with its focus on rights and norms to protect them, is simply unable to deal with emergencies except through hypocritical dissembling. But, in his forthcoming book, Choosing War: Democracy Facing Its Enemies (Choisir la guerre: la démocratie face à ses ennemis) the French political theorist Alexis Carré, drawing on Leo Strauss’ and Raymond Aron’s critiques of Schmitt, argues that liberalism can confront this challenge (one that he considers is posed with special urgency by the paradigmatic emergency of war).

To do so, however, liberalism must undergo a “refoundation,” one that will require liberals to change the way they think about both emergency and everyday politics.

Carré constructs his argument on both a historical and a philosophical level. The former traces how Strauss and Aron, secular Jewish intellectuals born, respectively, just before and just after the turn of the 20th century, were shaken by the rise of Nazism, which expressed itself most powerfully on the intellectual level in the ideas of Schmitt. One of the chief critics of Weimar democracy before 1933, Schmitt attempted in the initial years of the Third Reich to position himself as the new regime’s preeminent intellectual defender. He argued that liberal states like Weimar are grounded in the notion of the rule of law, which depends on (at least) two faulty premises. First, it supposes that laws can be universally applicable, ignoring that there inevitably will be some situations in which a given law must be ignored for the sake of public safety. Secondly, the rule of law untenably attempts to separate legislation and execution of law, as if agents tasked with the latter, from the head of state to the bureaucrat or police officer, could be conceived simply as carrying out what had been decided by the legislature. In fact, the agents of the executive branch, or indeed, the judiciary, never just carry out the law; they make decisions about which laws pertain to the concrete case before them, and how those laws should be applied. In certain cases, they suspend the laws, even the most fundamental ones, in order to preserve the state for the sake of which the laws exist.

For Strauss and Aron, Schmitt revealed that there was an ineradicable subjective element to statecraft—it is, in the end, always individuals who rule, not laws. Schmitt insisted that the fundamental question of politics then had to be “who rules?”—meaning who decides how to apply the law, and what constitutes an “emergency” that justifies the suspension of the normal legal order.

Strauss and Aron found Schmidt’s formulation strange on the level of theory and terrifying on the level of practice. If the answer to “who rules?” is, or at least can be, “Hitler,” whose rule was a disaster even judged on the terms set by the Nazis (bringing Germany to ruin rather than global hegemony), the question seems wrongly posed: Schmitt provided no basis for responding to the more salient question of who ought to rule. Indeed, in Weimar-era texts such as The Concept of the Political, Schmitt argued that politics was a distinct domain of human activity separate from others. In line with certain strands of Nazi thought, he seemed to exalt the arbitrary character of political decisions, making them appear to be products of will that did not require, and could not have, any underlying ethical foundation.

Out of their meditation on this problem—and attempt to provide liberal democracies with questions, and answers, that would arm it against their enemies—Carré develops a compelling new vision of liberalism. He warns that the utopia of a “rule of law” in which no emergencies or contingencies would require the suspension of norms and the application of subjective judgement has as its counterpart another utopia, which he calls the “city in discourse” (la cité en discours). In this utopia, traceable back to Plato’s Republic, there is no need of law to constrain the action of leaders, because the latter have already been selected and trained to be wise. A perfectly wise person would not need to have his freedom of action limited beforehand by laws, which are necessarily imperfect and correspond imperfectly to specific situations or to the common good. The wise person’s own sense of what must be done (and not done) would therefore offer a much finer set of “particular restrictions” on his action than the “general restrictions” of the law. For example, in certain dire but imaginable cases, the common good might require deceit, murder, or other acts that would otherwise be abominable and that one would never countenance inscribing in law as a general principle of action—but which a wise ruler would undertake regardless, for the benefit of all.

In the utopian “city in discourse,” the wise rule with no restrictions other than the ones imposed on them by their own virtue and understanding. This city, however, can never be built. We are, and will remain, as far from the rule of the wise as we are the rule of law. We cannot trust each other—or our leaders—to know and do what is right without the guidance of “general restrictions.” Nor can we hope that the latter will suffice on their own without some degree of wisdom in those tasked with executing and upholding them. Therefore, we seem condemned to “acknowledge the possibility that some people are sufficiently equipped to act with wisdom some of the time.” This means that we will have to pose the question “who ought to rule?” and answer, “people who are sometimes wise enough.”

The need for this constant back and forth between the rule of law and the wisdom of rulers who break the law,
Carré argues, appears with spectacular clarity in emergencies where the law must be suspended, but also in countless everyday examples where the law cannot be applied successfully without some ethical and epistemic virtues on the part of its executor. As an example of the first case, Carré points to the examples of Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus during the Civil War, and de Gaulle’s fleeing France in 1940 to continue the fight against Hitler from London. It is not legal for the president to suspend constitutional rights, detain suspects or replace civil with martial law. Nor is it legal for a military officer to desert his post, defying his government’s orders. If we want to justify these actions as responses to emergencies, Carré insists, we must believe that Lincoln and de Gaulle had in view the good of their societies—and we must believe that they both rightly understood that good, and acted rightly to advance it. Such a knowledge inextricably binds together the practical (knowing what to do in order to bring about a desired outcome) and the ethical (desiring the right outcome).

It is not enough to assert, Carré observes, that Lincoln’s and de Gaulle’s violations of the law were justified by the extraordinary circumstances of their respective emergencies. “The mere consideration of the circumstances,” he argues, “loses sight of the undeniable fact that the same measures, taken by another person, would have been the end of the republic.” That is, if Lincoln or de Gaulle had been would-be dictators (as their enemies often alleged), and exploited the emergency in order to seize power, then their violations of the law would not be justified. That they were justified depends on Lincoln and de Gaulle having been virtuous men; virtuous here meaning that they acted in accordance with the common good of restoring the form of government cherished by their compatriots. Lincoln, in the middle of the Civil War, and de Gaulle, after his victorious return to France, both held elections, and were prepared to accept defeat. Their being wise (knowing when and how to violate the law) was inseparable from their being moral, in terms defined by a visible and enduring commitment to the regime in the name of which they transgressed the law.

It is uncomfortable for liberals to talk about such nebulous qualities as wisdom, morality, and leadership. Norms—laws and rights—have the advantage of being clearly articulated. But, Carré insists, “however fragile we may suppose it to be, the only guarantee of an agent’s action in a situation in which he cannot be directly guided by a law is his moral character.” Such situations appear not only in emergencies, or in the situation of deciding whether a given problem constitutes an emergency, at the highest levels of the state, but also in the quotidian actions of low-level government agents.

Consider policing, which Carré selects deliberately as a fraught but necessary example. Police officers are responsible for upholding the law, while respecting the rights both of innocent people who might be victims of crime, and also of suspects. But the category of “suspect” is inseparable from suspicion, a subjective judgment exercised by the officer. The decision to observe, approach, question, etc., a particular individual “cannot be referred back to a general, neutral norm, because suspicion is not a legal concept.” The choice of who to suspect—a choice that is perhaps even more loaded in the particular subset of policing having to do with what we call homeland security, the prevention of terrorist attacks—“necessarily rests on the practical competence” of individual agents. We may well wish that our police were more competent and moral—that is, wiser—but these qualities, while they perhaps can be selected for among, and educated into, recruits to the police, cannot be replaced by a set of rules, however comprehensive, banning or encouraging “profiling” of subjects or placing limits on who can be suspected of what under which circumstances, and how that suspicion can manifest itself on the part of an officer.

From the vantage offered by Carré, it appears that, whether we are confronting an emergency on the scale of COVID, or one of the everyday situations in which the application of the law requires an individual’s own judgment, the most important question is whether the law—or even individual rights—have been violated, because they inevitably will be. Nor is the question whether the crisis is a genuine one or a “Reichstag fire,” as if there were an external objective measure that could settle the issue. The question must be whether those who violate the law—whether those who are charged with deciding when and how the law may be violated—are “wise enough” to be trusted. Asking this question with reference to our current and recent leaders, Biden and Trump, must elicit bitter laughter.

Carré calls for a “refoundation,” “renewal,” and “rearmament” of liberal democracy around the insights opened by Strauss’ and Aron’s response to Schmitt’s analysis of liberalism’s apparent (but only apparent) incapacity to grapple with emergencies. This new understanding of liberalism, true to the elitist orientation of Strauss and Aron, particularly entails a focus on the moral education of a leadership class whose can see further than the narrow, self-interested horizon that seems to be predominant in modern capitalist societies.

Giving his analysis a more democratic bent, we might say that Carré shows us not only that we need wise

“Police officers are responsible for upholding the law, while respecting the rights both of innocent people who might be victims of crime, and also of suspects.”
Ayodhya, under the dirty gray monsoon sky, was a surprise and a disappointment. All the way to this town in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, the most populous, largest, poorest, and possibly most violent state in one of the most violent countries in the world, the promise of change had been insistent. It lay behind me, in the sheet metal cordoning off the heart of New Delhi and demarcating the $2 billion Central Vista project that will erect a new parliament complex and a new residence for India's prime minister, Narendra Modi. It glittered on the edges of the pristine, mostly empty airport at Lucknow, where I had flown in from Delhi, and along the freshly tarred highway that took me, in a four-hour drive, from Lucknow to the town of Faizabad. Most of all, it lay ahead, in Ayodhya, Faizabad's twin town, where Modi and his cohort of Hindu-right political groups are building a grand temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of a destroyed mosque.

In October 2022, the new parliament will be complete; in December 2023, the temple. In May 2024, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the political party that is the electoral wing of the Hindu right—expect to win national elections for a third consecutive term. In 2025, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the five-million-strong paramilitary organization that is the fountainhead of the Hindu right, will mark a century of existence. For a significant section of Indian society, all this, taken together, marks a beautiful convergence. It means that India is close to achieving its true self, a futuristic nation that has fulfilled, in spite of assaults by Muslims, communists, and the West, its grand promise as an ancient, supremely advanced, Hindu civilization.

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from the glorious temple architecture historically found in India. It is being designed by a Gujarat-based family close to Modi that specializes in contemporary Hindu temples, among them one in New Jersey raided last November by the FBI for using forced labor.

The hotel itself wallowed in sullen suspicion of its guests. The Canada-resident Indians who owned it had turned the white, once-elegant mansion—belonging to a former socialist legislator who had been defeated in 1948 by a Hindu right smear campaign about his atheism—into a shabby sequence of rooms, the large windows in the corridor firmly shut against the red-bottomed monkeys marauding along the rooftops. The Wi-Fi worked, but only near the reception. There was no bar. Meals were served only in the rooms, and the bathroom floor was uneven, collecting runoff water from the shower and clumps of the plentiful mud I tracked back from outside.

The streets outside weren't much better. Apart from SUVs muscling their way through the chaotic traffic and the occasional smartphone in the hands of a passerby, nothing seemed to have changed over the past half century. The Muslim driver, a boy in his late teens whose only glimpse of a world beyond came from a brief stint driving trucks between Lucknow and Delhi, voiced his despair quietly as he guided the car through the streets. He wanted to get out, he said, but he didn't know how.

He drove me around and showed me the sights available for those who couldn’t leave. There, he pointed out, was the afim kothi—the opium house—a haunted ruin of a mansion with crumbling boundary walls that marked the arrival of British colonialism in the late 18th century. The opium the peasants had been forced to cultivate had been exported to China, the descendants of the impoverished peasants shipped as indentured labor to Fiji and the Caribbean. Across from the opium house was the postcolonial Indian state’s contribution to the memory of this violence, a vast, open dumping ground littered with garbage.

We moved on. There was the Gulab Bari—the Pink House, characterized today by blackened onion domes and minarets, with echoing corridors where young Muslim men and women took selfies and a lone fakir silently contemplated the ineffable. A mausoleum for the 18th-century Shia Muslim monarch Shuja-ud-Daulah, it was built at a time when Faizabad had briefly been capital of Awadh, a tributary state to the Mughals. And there, finally, was the muddy brown Ghaghara river, which is called the Sarayu when it touches Ayodhya on its journey downstream. Ram had drowned himself in the Ghaghara around here, I was told; the temple to our left marked that event.

Rain came down hard on the new, slippery concrete paving the riverbank. People—priests, attendants, their families—napped inside the temple complex. Young men loitered outside, trying to find some pleasure in their surroundings, while ragged children scurried around selling peanuts and flowers. Most of all, the promenade seemed to belong to the cows, protected by a Hindu-right law that promises punitive measures against anyone “endangering their lives,” a piece of legislation that has resulted in roving lynch mobs targeting those suspected of bovine endangerment. Bony, whitish, and dirty, the cows were scattered everywhere, depositing their shit wherever they wanted. I stepped on a pile of cow shit and went down. The driver helped me up and we stared at each other in silent, mutual, despair. There was nothing to say.

In 1984, with only two members in India’s nearly 600-strong national parliament, the Hindu right seemed to have reached a terminal point in its turbulent history. Hindu political organizations had proliferated in the early 20th century under British rule, the most significant of them being the RSS. Funded and led by upper-caste men, the RSS combined ideas of Hindu revival spread by people like the late 19th-century monk Vivekananda with the racial theories increasingly popular in the west in the 1920s. M.S. Golwalkar, who became chief of the RSS in 1940 (and who is named by Modi as a major inspiration in his book Jyotipunj, or “Beams of Light”), wrote approvingly of Germany’s “purging the country of the Semitic Races—the Jews,” and urged Hindus to manifest a similar “Race Spirit” in regard to Muslims.

The end of colonialism in 1947 and the traumatic partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan allowed the Hindu right to carry out violent purges in areas where Hindus were a majority. At least a million people were killed, millions more displaced, hundreds of thousands of women and girls sexually assaulted, with Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs all caught up in the spiral of suffering and hate. But soon after these traumas, the RSS appeared to run aground. On Jan. 30, 1948, a Hindu extremist shot Gandhi dead for being too conciliatory toward Muslims and Pakistan. Although the RSS claimed that the assassin was no longer an active member of the organization, it was banned for a brief period and disappeared from mainstream public life.

As it turned out, being underground agreed with the RSS’s cultlike tendencies. Even after the ban had been revoked, electoral maneuvering was left to its political front, the Jan Sangh—which morphed into the BJP in 1980—while the RSS focused on its ideal of building a patriarchal Hindu nation. It recruited boys between the ages of 6 and 18, using doctrinaire lectures, a distinctive khaki uniform, and a routine of paramilitary drills to mold their “Race Spirit.” Individuals can be members of both the RSS and the BJP, and the latter’s top leadership, including Modi, inevitably worked in the trenches with the RSS before making the move into parliamentary politics.

It was a combination of decades-long deep organizing with a massive public campaign that finally overcame the Hindu right’s consistent electoral failures and handed it the keys to India. In December 1949, just as the Hindu right was emerging from the backlash that had followed Gandhi’s assassination, a Ram idol appeared mysteriously inside the Babri Masjid. The Hindu right’s version of this story was that Ram had manifested himself to seize back his birthplace; the more prosaic truth is that a Hindu monk from one of the most powerful monasteries in the area snuck
the idol in, aided surreptitiously by sympathetic Hindu government officials. As tensions rose, heavy iron padlocks were placed at the mosque gates. A complex legal dispute followed, with Muslims as well as three rival Hindu monastic orders claiming the right to worship in the structure while idol and mosque slumbered more or less undisturbed through the coming decades.

In 1984, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad—the World Hindu Council—demanded that the mosque be torn down, claiming that Muslims had destroyed an ancient temple that commemorated the spot as the birthplace of Ram and built the mosque on top of it as an act of deliberate humiliation. There is no historical evidence that Ram existed; that present-day Ayodhya coincides at all with the celestial Ayodhya spoken of in the Ramayana; or that any other temple previously occupied the spot where the Babri Masjid was built. But the VHP—one of numerous Hindu right groups affiliated with the RSS—was undeterred by these factual hurdles and demanded that a temple to Ram be built at the site. By 1989, its temple campaign was in full swing, with donations and shilas—bricks—being solicited from all over India and the wealthy Indian diaspora in Britain and the United States. Bricks to build the temple, some of them made of gold, wound their way across the country toward Ayodhya in long, ceremonial processions that were inevitably accompanied by violence. When the national elections took place that year, the BJP’s share of parliamentary seats rose from 2 to 85.

By the next fall, the temple-building campaign had moved up another notch. On Sept. 26, 1990, L.K. Advani, the avuncular-looking president of the BJP, began a symbolic rath yatra—a chariot procession—across the country in a Toyota pickup outfitted as an ancient Hindu chariot. His starting point was Somnath, a town in Gujarat some 6,000 miles southwest of Ayodhya where a Hindu temple had been sacked in the 11th century by a Muslim ruler from Ghazni, in present-day Afghanistan. The man in charge of organizing the procession was Narendra Modi, captured in photos as a brooding presence on the Toyota chariot. Like the procession of bricks, Advani’s chariot and the kar sevaks or volunteers who planned to build the temple with their bare hands provoked sectarian rioting in the cities, towns, and villages they passed through. Advani was arrested before he reached Ayodhya, but kar sevaks already in town stormed the Babri Masjid on Oct. 30. The ensuing police response led to the deaths of 16 men, according to the official account, while the Hindu right claimed that more than 50 had been killed. Riots broke out all over India while the BJP withdrew support for the coalition government then in power in Delhi. When a fresh round of national elections was completed in the summer of 1991, the BJP increased its tally of parliamentary seats from 85 to 120.

The increasing electoral success of the BJP against the backdrop of escalating violence meant there would be one final move in this phase of its temple campaign. On Dec. 6, 1992, while Advani and leaders of the BJP watched from a nearby rooftop, members of the Hindu right rushed the barricades around the mosque just as they had done two years earlier. Their numbers, this time, were far greater; the police were now partly intimidated and partly sympathetic to their cause.

Grainy footage from the time is available from the Indian television program Eyewitness and its reporter, Seema Chishti. It is just past noon, and thousands of men, some saffron-clad, clamber over the fence, banging away at the three domes of the mosque with whatever they have at hand; rocks, picks, hammers. In contrast to an early morning demonstration by RSS volunteers—purposeful, military—this is a crown in a state of frenzy. Nevertheless, there is enough forethought to carry out the Ram idol and its canopy before attacking the mosque. It takes two hours for the first dome to collapse, another 90 minutes for the second dome to be brought down. In six hours, the entire mosque has been leveled to the ground.

Dr. Anil remembers the demolition and the events leading up to it as a time of great clarity. His father had been a “leader” in the Samajwadi Party (SP), which had opposed the temple project and was in power in Uttar Pradesh when the first group of kar sevaks arrived in Ayodhya in 1990. Dominated by the Yadav caste, a largely agricultural group, the SP’s electoral success was built on an alliance between Yadavs and Muslims that challenged the upper castes consolidated around the Hindu right. Dr. Anil’s father, who was upper caste, was moved sufficiently by the fervor of kar sevaks passing through their village to nearby Ayodhya to switch political allegiance. “When he crossed the river, it was as a kar sevak to take part in the struggle against the mosque,” Dr. Anil said.

Dr. Anil appeared to think of this transformation in his father as only natural, the coming to life of a higher principle. “When Ram was here, there was no Islam, no Christianity,” he said. He would expand on that idea later, but that morning he was in a hurry to get the essential points of his life across. He himself had been loyal to the Hindu right from the beginning, starting as a member of the student wing of the BJP and eventually joining the RSS. Now he was the Prant Prabhari—the area chief—of the Rashtriya Muslim Manch, the Muslim wing of the RSS.

He seemed particularly proud of two achievements in this capacity. He had organized a ceremonial meal where Muslims had been served milk and fruit instead of biryani, the Persian-influenced dish of rice and meat more common on festive occasions. “Meat, fish, the eating of these things is a sin,” he said. In the switching out of meat for fruit and milk, he clearly felt that he had in some sense briefly liberated the Muslims from their sinful existence and converted them into upper-caste, vegetarian Hindus. He had also convinced local Muslims to donate money for the construction of the Ram temple. “The soil is India,” he explained. Ram was the
ideal Indian, they were Muslims living in India: Where was the contradiction?

I hadn’t known that the RSS had a Muslim wing, and I didn’t know quite what to make of Dr. Anil. Slid, balding, with a gentle paunch and lively eyes, he didn’t project the violence I associated with the RSS. He was a Kshatriya—the warrior caste—but it was hard to take him seriously as a combatant. He laughed a lot, although never at himself, and a boyish self-satisfaction radiated from him, remarkable for a man in his early 40s. He had arrived at around 8 in the morning in my hotel room carrying a motorcycle helmet, the very persona of a busy professional who started his days early and worked long hours. Dismissing my offer of tea because he was required, as an RSS man, to avoid all intoxicating substances, he filled the ugly, airless room with his soundbites: “The RSS is purely interested in the development of the nation, not individuals”; “The RSS is not a political party. It does not depend on the BJP”; “There is no casteism in the RSS.” To this, he occasionally added the specifics of his personal story. The “doctor” referred to his Ph.D. in library and information sciences. He now worked as “guest faculty” at Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia University (a university named after an anti-colonial, socialist politician). He also owned a computer and photocopying business near the university.

It was possible to read these details as characteristics of an entrepreneurial multitasker dabbling in politics, education, and business, someone exemplifying the energies that have been unleashed in Modi’s India. But then, there was the fact that, like almost everyone else I sought to interview, Dr. Anil came to the hotel room because there was nowhere else to meet in Faizabad-Ayodhya, no cafés or bars or restaurants offering the possibility of a social life. His guest faculty position had been terminated 15 days earlier because he had come to the end of a four-year contract; he had massive debts and his business wasn’t going well; he had pulled his daughter—the youngest of three children, the other two being boys—out of school because he didn’t have money for the fees and didn’t believe she was learning anything anyway.

The harsh truth about Ayodhya seemed to be that very little had changed there for the better even if the temple-building campaign had made its effects felt all over India by fueling the rise of the Hindu right throughout the country. Modi, in particular, seized on it, taking its combination of violence and spectacle further by giving it the distinctive stamp of his paranoid personality. In February 2002, on the 10th anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, 59 kar sevaks returning from Ayodhya to Gujarat were killed in a fire engulfing the compartment of the train they were traveling in. Later investigations suggested that the fire might have originated from a malfunctioning cooking-gas cylinder. The Hindu right blamed it on Muslims, some of whom had quarreled with the kar sevaks at the railway station just before the fire erupted. Modi, who had recently become chief minister of Gujarat, was accused of unleashing a series of riots in the state where nearly 800 Muslims were killed and 150,000 displaced.

In 2014, Modi, proudly flaunting this record of anti-Muslim violence, won the BJP the national elections and became prime minister. A second, even more emphatic, victory in 2019 was anointed by India’s Supreme Court in November with a judgment that gave the government the go-ahead for the building of the Ram temple.

On Aug. 5, 2020, while the coronavirus raged unchecked in India, Modi, dressed in shiny, flowing clothes and a white KN95 mask, carried out a long ceremony inaugurating the construction of the temple. While images of Ram and a model of the temple were flashed in front of diaspora supporters gathered in front of a giant screen near Times Square, Modi offered prayers to the Ram idol and the 88-pound silver brick that will serve as the keystone of the foundation. Addressing a subsequent gathering of Hindu-right grandees, many of them dressed in the distinctive saffron that is meant to mark the detachment of the Hindu ascetic from all worldly affairs, Modi did not forget to mention that along with Hindu pride and assertion, the temple would also bring massive economic development to the region.

The one area in which Ayodhya does seem to have grown is as a pilgrimage destination for rural pilgrims who are directed with casual brutality through metal barricades by armed policemen in khaki. Past shops selling sweets and flowers the pilgrims went, hustled by ravenous-looking men offering to be guides, past the competing shrines of dueling monasteries, the most prominent of them the steep, fortresslike shrine of Hanumangarhi that sits on the outer perimeter of Ramkot, the mythical fort of Ram. Beyond, behind more barricades and guarded by more armed police, lay the disputed center where the new temple was being constructed.

Had a great Hindu temple to Ram ever previously existed here? The claim is a surprisingly recent one. In 1990, B.B. Lal, an archaeologist who had conducted digs around the mosque in the mid-’70s and reported little of significance, suddenly claimed in a Hindu-right magazine that his excavations had actually revealed temple pillars predating the mosque. Lal went on to have a fruitful post-retirement career, publishing evermore speculative books asserting that Ram was a historical person and receiving two of the highest civilian awards in India from the BJP government in 2000 and 2021.

In 2003, another dig, ordered by the courts, began on the site of the demolished mosque. The dig was carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), a state body that reported to the BJP-led government in Delhi. Khalid Ahmad Khan, a septuagenarian who had been a member of the Muslim alliance opposing Hindu claims on the land, had described the dig to me in his house the previous day. Khan had been present as an observer on behalf of the Muslim petitioners, the court-appointed arrangements displaying a portentous attention to balanced representation; 33% of the 51-member team from the ASI had been Muslim, with the same proportion of Muslim labor chosen for the actual digging. The 2003 dig, according to the report eventually filed by the ASI, uncovered material going back as far as the 13th century BCE, including “glazed
pottery, tiles and bones.” But the ASI’s main contention was that “a massive structure” existed at the site “from the 10th century” CE on top of which the 16th-century mosque had been built, and that the “remains” recovered of this 10th-century structure contained “distinctive features found associated with the temples of North India.”

Khan did not believe that the material found provided evidence of a Hindu, as opposed to a Buddhist or Islamic site. Surrounded by voluminous files of legal documents and newspaper clippings, he gave the impression of clinging to the illusion of democracy and constitutional principles against an ever-encroaching reality. Anxious to assert his loyalty to India and his cordial relations with the Hindu religious leaders, Khan told me that the Hindu argument had been based entirely on faith and belief. The Muslims, however, had depended on evidence. “We produced revenue records, government affidavits, and artifacts. They said their records had been destroyed. I was there during the digging. They found no proof.”

Vineet Maurya, another opponent of the temple whom I had met in my hotel was also skeptical of the Hindu temple theory. Maurya, who converted in his youth from Hinduism to Buddhism, was engaged in a legal dispute with the government about its forcible acquisition of the structure.”

As significant as the verbal excess of the ASI report itself had noted defensively of its “evidence” that its work had been done hurriedly and under difficult circumstances, including heightened security checks, torrential monsoon rains, and monkeys who made a mockery of the court’s directions to preserve materials “under lock and seal.”

The Supreme Court judgment in 2019 that granted the site to Hindus spent an enormous length of time going over the arguments and counterarguments of the ASI report. The judgment, in keeping with the verbose nature of the Indian judiciary, is over a thousand pages long, filled with floral asides that bring in comparisons to ships and corporations. The five-judge bench delivering it was headed by Ranjan Gogoi, and the “distinguished archaeologist, Sir Mortimer Wheeler” thrown in.

As significant as the verbal excess of the judgment might be its extratextual aspects. The five-judge bench delivering it was headed by Ranjan Gogoi, who had been appointed as chief justice of the Supreme Court under the Modi government a little over a year earlier, in October 2018. Hounded by accusations of sexual harassment and persecution by a junior employee, Gogoi went on to deliver a series of controversial verdicts in favor of the Modi government, including the removal of a special provision for the Muslim majority in Kashmir and the creation of a register that targeted Muslims in Assam and stripped at least a million of them of their Indian citizenship. Eight days after delivering the Ayodhya judgement, Gogoi retired from the Supreme Court. Within four months of his retirement, he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha—one of the two houses of the Indian legislature—by Modi’s government.

“There is no specific finding that the underlying structure was a temple dedicated to Lord Ram,” the Supreme Court judgment conceded. It also agreed that the demolition of the mosque had been illegal and that the Ram idol had been smuggled illegally into the site in 1949. Nevertheless, on the basis of “documentary and oral evidence,” it decided, in tortuous prose, that the “faith and belief of Hindus since prior to construction of Mosque and subsequent thereto has always been that Janmaasthan of Lord Ram is the place where Babri Mosque has been constructed which faith and belief is proved.” It ordered the site to be handed over for the building of the temple, while an alternative location, on the outskirts of the town on the highway to Lucknow, was to be given to Muslims for a new mosque, to replace the one that had been destroyed.

One afternoon, I went to meet Dr. Anil at his copy shop. We were planning to travel to Karsevakpuram, the Ayodhya neighborhood that has gone from being a temporary encampment for kar sevaks in the ‘90s to becoming a permanent feature of the town. But elections for the Uttar Pradesh legislature were to take place in February 2022—which the BJP would go on to win on March 11—and Dr. Anil needed me to wait until a television crew had arrived to interview him. We waited in the shop, a cubicle dominated by a photocopy machine and a desk holding a computer and printer. Generous cracks ran across the unpainted floor, dust sat on open shelves built
into the wall, and brown plastic stools served as chairs, the brand name stickers still attached.

When the television crew arrived, we stepped out and went over to the edge of the highway. The name of the channel, according to the burly, bearded producer, was Newsprint. It wasn’t a joke. He was earnest, maybe slightly evasive as he told me the channel was based in Delhi and uploaded directly onto YouTube. I wondered if it was part of the Hindu right’s fecund disinformation network of talk shows, trolls, and WhatsApp groups, and if the intention behind filming outside was to create as much of a public spectacle as possible. Later, when I searched for the channel on YouTube, I couldn’t find it. In the moment though, the afternoon sun down beating down on the television crew and its subjects, the interview seemed both elaborately contrived and deeply revealing of conditions in Ayodhya.

The BJP was seeking reelection in the place that had changed its political fortunes, where a utopia once existed, where—according to a pamphlet widely available in Ayodhya—virtuous Hindu men and women lived in sky-high mansions where the floors were heaped with gems. I took a look at my surroundings. Across from me, the Buddhist-inspired domes of the Ram Manohar Lohia university offered a faint reminder of other histories of the region. And yet all pasts seemed irrelevant against the distressing reality of the present.

A billboard hemmed in by electric wires and hung crookedly from a tree looked down at the crew. The most prominent of the faces displayed on it were that of Modi and Yogi Adityanath, the shaven-headed, saffron-clad Hindu monk who is chief minister of the state and whose reputation for instigating anti-Muslim violence rivals that of Modi’s. The long years of their combined rule had not produced much: a newish sidewalk already cracked and smeared with garbage and cow shit; small, crammed shops similar to Dr. Anil’s; and bright, garish advertisements for banks, mobile phones, and tutoring agencies that promised a pathway to a government job. Over 40% of the population in the district is illiterate; nearly 40% lives below the poverty line.

None of this appeared to have any purchase on the interview that unfolded, the knot of people around the camera caught in billowing dust and exhaust from passing vehicles. The gathering was still small, but there was a practiced TikTok flourish to the young reporter as he began, twisting his body into a V and pivoting on his sandals as he held the mic in one hand and gestured with his other at the people gathered around. First in line was Dr. Anil, confident in his pronouncements. He was followed by a man called Haji Syed Ahmed, a member of the Muslim wing headed by Dr. Anil. Ahmed, too, spoke in sound bites, confident of the good work being done by the Hindu right, although the most distinctive thing about him was his elegance in that crowd of slovenly Hindu men. He wore a long gray kurta, white pajamas, and stylish blue sneakers. His neatly trimmed beard, his white skullcap, and blue checkered keffiyeh indicated his status as a devout Muslim, as did the adjective “Haji” before his name. Earlier, he had told me a convoluted story about his shop being forcefully occupied by another man with political connections and his hopes that the Hindu right would be able to get it back for him. He was, he admitted sorrowfully, more or less ostracized by other Muslims for his overt support of the Hindu right. There were others Dr. Anil had summoned to give their views, including a Muslim woman in a hijab who was distracted from the interview by her restless toddler children.

The lovefest for Modi and Yogi looked like it would go on forever, but two passersby decided to intervene. Both men appeared to be supporters of the SP, confident and articulate in spite of being vastly outnumbered. The BJP’s cow protection laws had resulted in feral cattle running wild and destroying crops in the fields, one of the men shouted. His companion, younger, more cerebral, responded to his hecklers with verve, talking about the corruption of the Hindu-right politicians whose names could be found in the Paradise Papers. The reporter got increasingly flustered, as did Dr. Anil. At the university across, classes had ended, and students slowed down on their way home to listen. A few were women, but they did not linger long. The Muslim woman had departed with her children, without speaking, and it was almost entirely a male crowd gathered now around the television crew.

Although it was all talk, there was a physicality to the scene, the height and burliness of the Yadav men offering a challenge that could not easily be quashed. The crowd got larger and louder, and small, independent quarrels began to break out on the edges, Dr. Anil struggling to be heard above the noise as he faced the camera once again. Another big man entered the scene, his political affiliation obvious from his Brahmin’s topknot. I got the impression that he had been summoned there to wrest the initiative back, which he did by ignoring all questions from the reporter and raising his voice in a chant. It was the war cry of the Hindu right coming out of his mouth, the same one that had resounded in the air the day the Babri Masjid was demolished, the same one that Muslims hear when pogroms break out, that clogs the television channels and social media networks in India as prelude or punctuation to a vitriolic outpouring of abuse. “Jai Shri Ram,” he shouted, and “Jai Shri Ram,” the crowd responded, tentatively at first and then louder by the moment. The Yadav men laughed, shook their heads disbelievingly, and exited the scene.

Another billboard featuring the Modi-Yogi combine graced the entrance to the site where the bricks gathered in the nineties are kept. It was hard to believe that these were the shilas gathered from all over India and abroad, blessed by priests in Sanskrit and trucked to Ayodhya in ceremonial processions of kar sevaks displaying unsheathed swords. The place had the feel of a storage shed, with waterlogged ground crisscrossed by policemen changing shifts, elderly kar sevaks in saffron dhotis going out for evening walks, and monkeys foraging for food. The bricks were stacked in untidy columns against the walls, along with elaborately carved columns that seemed to belong to some forgotten 1.0 version of the Ram temple.
Promises had been made that the bricks would be used for the temple being constructed, but it seemed unlikely that more than a few would find their way there. And yet what else was the entire project of Ram rajya other than endless symbolism evoked to obscure tawdry reality? A temple stood in the center of the yard, but it was not the temple that caught the eye as much as the murals decorating its outer wall. History had been turned there into a singular story of the oppression visited upon Hindus and their courageous resistance: Cruel-looking men in vaguely Arab outfits brandished swords and fired cannons at the temple supposedly torn down to make way for the Babri Masjid; next to them, the Sikh reformer Govind Singh was busy fighting on horseback, a deft touch meant to draw the Sikhs into the Hindu right project; below, the faces of two brothers from Kolkata killed in the police firing of 1991 looked out, the calm resolution of their faces borrowed from iconic representations of Indian anti-colonial revolutionaries.

Karsevakpuram itself was different, the symbolism held in check for the quieter machinations of power. It housed the offices of the VHP, which had fronted the assault on the mosque. Armed sentries were on duty around the large complex, neat and quiet, with flowers and well-watered lawns. It was the first time since I had been in Ayodhya that I felt a sense of order, and with it came the sensation of being in close proximity to authority.

Fifteen Hindu men comprise the committee in charge of the construction of the temple, which is already mired in controversy. A vast amount of the money donated for construction—there are committees, “is choosy about who it grants access to and what it reveals. But Dr. Anil—the original one—was confident that he could introduce me to Rai, and so we loitered inside Karsevakpuram, the quiet of the evening occasionally interrupted by monkeys jumping from rooftop to rooftop.

A convoy swept in, white SUVs disgorging men in crisp white clothes, the policemen and hangers-on attentive. Dr. Anil suddenly appeared diminished, but I could also see something of his determination as he attached himself to the men striding into the main office, introducing first himself and then me. I could sense the shimmering outline of a system built entirely on patronage and influence and that Dr. Anil’s stock had perhaps risen subtly because, in spite of his modest motorcycle, his failing copy shop, and his truncated position at the university, he had brought a journalist from the United States with him to this place.

Inside the office, Rai listened to my request for an interview, his smooth, clean-shaven face animated by something that could have been suspicion, or fatigue, or both. An Indian man wearing jeans was introduced to me as a North American working for the Hindu cause. We made small talk about New York. “I have no time for you today,” Rai said finally. “But tomorrow, I can give you 15 minutes. Come here at 5 p.m.”

The next evening, I waited for nearly an hour at Karsevakpuram. Neither Rai nor any of his entourage showed up. Instead, I found myself chatting with a man called Hazari Lal who sold incense and ayurvedic medicine at an exhibition hall near the front gate. A giant model of the Ram temple sat under bright fluorescent lights, beige rather than the ochre chosen for the version under construction. A large photograph of Ashok Singhal, the VHP president at the time of the demolition, squatted in front of the model, the base of the temple cluttered with random slabs of marble and what I assumed were consecrated 

Paint had flaked off in patches from the yellow guard rail around the model and the pink walls of the hall. A raised relief map of the temple site occupied the outer perimeter of the model; apart from a few yellow blocks indicating buildings, the rest was unpainted concrete, as if the maker had become exhausted halfway through the project.

Lal, insisting that I sit with him, brought plastic chairs out into the open so that we would see Rai if he showed up. Lal had been a kar sevak during the attempt to storm the Babri Masjid in 1990. Two years later, he returned for the successful assault on the mosque. He described climbing up to one of the domes and of falling from it, injuring his head and fracturing his left hand. He had been imprisoned for two weeks for his part in the demolition and then released on bail. Beyond that, there had been no legal repercussions for his actions.

There was no guilt, no self-consciousness, in Lal’s telling of the story. The mosque and Muslims were a foreign imposition to him, and his world, apart from that spectacular outburst in the early ’90s, appeared to have been largely side-stepped by modernity. Although only in his early 60s, he gave the impression of being an old man, aged according to the calendar of impoverishment that holds sway over so much of life in this part of India. There were hints of personal tragedy,
of a son who worked in a factory and whose little girl had died. When he posed for a picture for me or took out an old mobile phone to ask me to enter his number on its tiny keypad, I got the sense of a man mimicking what he had seen others around him do, which is probably why in spite of his violent past as a kar sevak and his proximity to power, he evoked mostly vulnerability. His right eye was opaque with a cataract. I recalled how the previous day, he had asked Dr. Anil if he could help him find a clinic where the eye could be checked out. Dr. Anil had been pleasant but noncommittal. Later, he had compared Lal to Rai. “Some have the capacity to rise, others don’t,” he had confided to me. “That is the only difference between men.”

One morning, as I made my way into the heart of Ayodhya with Dr. Anil, we bought pedas—round hard discs of sweet cream that look like cheese—as an offering from a sweet shop owned by one of Dr. Anil’s Hindu-right colleagues. We left our slippers there for safekeeping as well; our phones and wallets we had already given to the driver of the car, waiting in a parking lot on the edge of the pilgrimage zone. It was early but already crowded, the pilgrims clustered in front of Hanumangarhi, where three streets converge in a blur of noise and color.

The ground was slimy under our feet as we climbed up to the shrine of Hanuman, the monkey god. A beloved, all-action figure in the Ramayana, where he is Ram’s most devoted ally, Hanuman too has morphed in recent years into an icon of violent Hindu masculinity. He is now visible everywhere, particularly on motorcycle windscreensthe rear windows of cars, as “Angry Hanuman,” a contorted face in saffron and black that went viral after Modi praised the design of an opposing army. An excitement animated the crowd as we progressed through the labyrinthine corridor, accompanied by the shouts of policemen and the crush of bodies, uncertain of what to do.

Dr. Anil led me into the press of bodies and glided away. I stood there amid the crush of bodies, uncertain of what to do. I could barely make out the features of the Hanuman deity. Later, when watching Modi’s visit on YouTube, I would get a sense of it, diminutive and aniconic, a far cry from Angry Hanuman. I held my bag of pedas up, found a priest willing to receive it, and then I was out of the crush, relieved.

“Did you do with the pedas?” he asked. He stared at me with astonishment when he heard that I’d given them to the priest but not taken them back, as I apparently should have. When I first met Dr. Anil, all I had told him was that I was a journalist based in New York writing a story on the Ram temple. Dr. Anil had come to the conclusion that I was a devout, right-wing Hindu all on his own. Now I could sense a hesitation, as if he was considering for the first time who I might really be. Standing with my back to the crowd, I felt a wave of unease. Just the day before, The Guardian had published a piece of mine on the Modi government’s practice of planting malware on the computers of activists and incarcerating them for years without trial under an anti-terror law.

But the moment passed. Dr. Anil, happy to have a chance to laugh at me, decided that I was merely displaying the ignorance of someone not born in the Hindu heartland. We went into the office area to try and find the head priest, a man whose Persian title of Gadd-e-nashin—Keeper of the seat—indicated the origins of Hanumangarhi in the time of Muslim kings. The Gadd-e-nashin was not in, however, and Dr. Anil led me to another priest, a gigantic man who sat on an open platform meeting devotees. I went through the motion of seeking his blessing, which he granted perfunctorily, tossing some flowers in my direction while waving a white, ceremonial whisk with the other.

Although Dr. Anil seemed inclined to introduce me to one senior priest after another, I persuaded him out of Hanumangarhi. In front of us lay the site of the future temple and the temporary shrine housing the Ram idol. Dr. Anil was disappointed that we were approaching it from the commoners’ entrance rather than through the VIP access route that allowed important people to drive right up to the gate and avoid the crowds. Instead, we waited in front of the security booth in a long, straggling line, exposed to marauding monkeys and touts hustling people to leave their belongings in lockers available at nearby shops. At Hanumangarhi, the pilgrims had been mostly poor and local, many of them women and the elderly. Now I began to spot urban, middle-class men who had come from southern India and Kolkata.

Through the security booth we went, stepping into a corridor enclosed above and to the sides by wired netting, like a bunker from which to monitor the position of an opposing army. An excitement animated the crowd as we progressed through the labyrinthine corridor, accompanied by the shouts of policemen asking everyone to keep moving.

Everyone slowed down again as we approached the temporary shrine. The idol was set well back from the pilgrims sequestered in the iron corridor, attendant priests handing out packets of consecrated sweets through an opening in the wired netting. I lingered as long as I could. After the decades of violence in the name of Ram, portrayed in memes as a muscular uberman, all veiny biceps and chiseled six-packs, the appearance of the idol, small, dark-skinned, and with big manga eyes, was unexpected. Because this was Ram’s birthplace, the idol was of an infant Ram—Ram Lalla—and just a little over 6 inches tall.

This was the god who had changed the fortunes of a nation. He had been smuggled in under the cover of darkness, in 1949, and hurried out amid the noise of a mosque being brought down, in 1990, a god placed here and there by his followers. Now, he looked like a doll sitting in a temporary dollhouse in front of a bunker inside a fortress. We had
just seen the site of his future temple, marked by yellow earth movers stranded in the vastness of an empty square.

Not long after my visit to the temple site, I went to meet Dinendra Das, a member of the temple trust committee. Das is the mahant—head—of the Nirmohi akhara, a powerful religious order that owns temples and monasteries in a number of states in north India. It is one of the claimants to the disputed site in Ayodhya, but it has been sidelined by the Supreme Court’s decision that the Ram temple will be represented on earth by representatives of the VHP. Das’ presence on the committee seemed to reflect the compromise worked out by the Hindu right, where politicos like Rai and Mishra called the shots while the priests were kept onboard in symbolic positions.

I had been told that Das and his akhara were disgruntled with their secondary role, but Das revealed nothing of this discontent when I met him in his monastery. With his saffron garb and flowing grey hair and beard, he was far more personable in real life than the cross-eyed photo of his displayed on the temple trust website. It was obvious that his position in the committee, along with his status as an important religious leader, had brought some perks into his life. An official car was parked in the yard for his use, complete with government license plate and VIP lights. A personal bodyguard, a policeman in plainclothes, stayed present throughout my conversation with him.

Yet there was also a difference between him and power brokers like Rai as well as with aspirants to power like Dr. Anil. Das was far more awkward, flattered that a journalist from New York had arrived to interview him. There was something appealing about the transparency of his vanity, the way he adjusted his clothes when it was time for a photograph or the manner in which he conveyed to me that his favorite subjects as a college student had been English, economics, and Sanskrit. His original name had been Dinendra Kumar Pandey. Like all monks, he was required to dispense with his caste name and take on a common last name used by everyone. He became Dinendra Das in 1992, when he took his vows. In 2017, he became the mahant.

The wealth, ambition, and aspiration that the Ram temple had precipitated all around was more intermittent in its presence in the Nirmohi akhara. The mahant’s room was big and airy; the floor had been tiled recently and the ductless air conditioner on the wall was new and sleek. They were planning to rebuild the two other structures in the complex, grassy and overgrown, set back from one of the narrow lanes curling through Ayodhya. One building would be converted into a guest house for visiting devotees and monks. The other would be torn down for a new complex where the shrine would face outward, toward the road, in a concession to modern sensibilities that require even a deity to advertise its presence.

But if change was coming, indeed had already come, it had not yet made its full impact on the akhara. I was invited to lunch with the monks—the mahant ate separately—in the main building. It was in the old North Indian haveli style, with an inner courtyard around which the shrine and the quarters of the monks were arranged. The deity faced into this courtyard, and I was led past it by monks in their early teens who looked at me with curiosity. The kitchen was narrow, with old, high ceilings. The meal consisted of rotis and rice with dal and a vegetable curry.

We ate sitting on the floor, served by a muscular monk with a Brahmin’s topknot and a wicked sense of humor. When I apologized and said I hoped that they had not been waiting because of me—the interview with the mahant had gone on beyond their lunch hour—he replied, “You’re exactly the reason we’ve all been waiting with empty bellies.” There was no malice in the comment. When I later asked the assembled monks, ranging from the teenage boys to men in their 70s, how they had been affected by the coronavirus, the same man responded. “We’ve all come here to die,” he said, referring to the belief that by cutting off ties to family and the material world and living out their years on sacred ground, they had the opportunity to break the cycle of rebirth. “But god has a way of not giving people what they want,” he chuckled. “So those who want to live are dying, and those of us who want to die are living.”

I found his humor refreshing, displaying perhaps an awareness that lives, religious as well as secular, are built in part on fantasy. That had been apparent when I asked the mahant about the daily routine of the Ram Lalla idol. The mahant had been bemused by my question, but not annoyed. It had taken him a few phone calls to determine the exact details. The infant Ram was woken at 5 in the morning. He was bathed and then offered aarti, a ritual in which an open flame is waved to accompany songs, the first of five such aarti sessions punctuating his day. From 7 to 11, devotees came to visit Ram Lalla. He ate at 11:30, took a nap, and was woken again at 1:30 for a second round of visitors. At 6:50, he had a substantial dinner of puris, sabzi, and kheer. At 7:30, after a final dose of aarti, he was put to sleep and the shrine shut down for the night. Two bodyguards were always present, in eight-hour shifts, but they were not allowed to carry weapons.

There was something odd but endearing about a monastic order of childless men ostensibly devoted to taking care of a never-changing, never-growing infant. But these rituals of care were a long way from the Hindu masculinity I had seen in evidence all over Ayodhya. Khan, the Muslim opponent of the...
women like Mirabai, people removed from direct access to wealth, power, and knowledge. But these approaches to Ram are a long way from the toxic version on display in Ayodhya and in India at large, a version that always tends towards Purushottam Ram.

I recalled how Dr. Anil, after the visit to the temple site, had been in a gregarious mood that appeared to have nothing to do with his having visited Ram Lalla. As we walked back past shops selling religious souvenirs, saffron scarves featuring the Angry Hanuman prominent among them, the conversation had turned, somehow, to Muslims. “They had their chance in 1947,” he said. “They wanted a separate Muslim nation and they got it. Why do they still stay on here?” They were mostly Hindus who had long ago converted to Islam. To stay on in India, they should reconvert, he believed. What if they wanted to be in India as Muslims? I asked. He shrugged. “What can we do? We can’t kill them,” he said. They should have their voting rights and any state benefits taken away, he believed. They could live and work in India no more. It was a horrifying vision, one that has already been put into place in Assam and was the other part of the culture of Ram that the temple would bring into being.

Earlier in the day, just before we visited the Ram idol, Dr. Anil had wanted me to stop by at an apartment he had bought as an investment. It was close to the center of Ayodhya, and he described to me how everything would be transformed once the temple was complete. The river bank littered with cattle sheds and shit would be converted into a promenade. Condominiums would come up everywhere, as would a new airport being constructed not far from his photocopying business. Devotees with dollars in their bank accounts would be whisked from Delhi to Ayodhya by air or a high-speed train. They would relax in luxury, seven-star hotels on the outskirts of the town and be driven along wide highways directly to the new Ram temple. The website for the temple offered additional details. Visitors would be able to enjoy a “special peace zone for deeper meditation,” gaze at a “Lily-pond and Musical Fountains,” and check out the VIP cousins of the cattle I had seen everywhere being pampered at the “Adarsh Goshala” shelter for cows.

The highways existed—I had been on them. But Dr. Anil’s apartment was at the end of a grim block of concrete—housing bearing the unmistakable stamp of being built for the lower middle class by a government agency. There were cars parked in front of the two-story buildings in a demonstration of the upward mobility that had come to Ayodhya. But the electric wires ran in manic fashion from rusting, crooked poles, the paint had pecked off the walls, and mildew grew like an alien infestation on the window ledges. Dr. Anil led me to his second-floor apartment, empty, still in the process of being finished. He spent a long time washing the stainless steel sink. Then he showed me the squat toilet, which he said had been relocated at considerable expense because it originally pointed in a direction considered wrong by the scriptures. Everything about the apartment and its surroundings was miserable, but Dr. Anil’s energy and optimism seemed boundless.

I could understand why. Ayodhya, after all, is only the start of the liberation the Hindu right envisions for India. In Varanasi—a city far older and much more central to Hindu traditions than Ayodhya—the Gyan Vapi mosque sits surrounded by barricades and policemen while the Shiva temple next door is expanded along lines similar to what is being done with the new Ram temple. There are demands to install an idol inside a mosque in the town of Mathura because it supposedly occupies the birthplace of Krishna, another avatar of Vishnu. There is even talk that the Taj Mahal is really an ancient Shiva temple appropriated by Muslims that must be returned to its former glory. The Ram temple coming up in Ayodhya, built with stone from Rajasthan, designed by an architect from Gujarat, funded by dollars from the diaspora in the West, is only the beginning of an effort to construct a past that never was, in the hope of devising a future from which India’s Muslim inhabitants can be erased.
Just as the union effort was gaining momentum at Amazon fulfillment centers last fall, top executives had begun developing a workplace communication app designed to improve employee productivity and happiness but included a chat function that would ban the use of several words, including pay raise, union, ethics, compensation, living wage, restrooms, and petition. The app has not yet been implemented at Amazon, according to an Amazon spokesperson responding to The Intercept, which had obtained the banned words and details of the executives’ plan to launch the software this month.

Two recent incidents illustrate the reality behind the 400% increase in antisemitic hate crimes so far this year in New York City compared to the same period last year. The first attack last Friday was caught on video: A 21-year-old Hasidic Jewish man dressed in traditional garb was randomly attacked by six men and beaten in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. There were no “prior words of provocation,” according to police. The group reportedly carjacked an Uber driver after the assault, which left the victim with minor injuries. In the second antisemitic attack over the weekend, six Jewish teenagers were walking on the Upper West Side of Manhattan when they were threatened by a group of three teenagers. “The suspects brandished a knife, a crow bar, and a sword, and followed them toward their residence before fleeing,” according to a police spokesperson.

Viktor Orbán will remain the prime minister of Hungary after winning a fourth consecutive election on Sunday. Early polling suggested a close race between Orbán and the six-party block that united to oppose him, despite structural advantages in the voting system favoring the incumbents. But Orbán’s Fidesz party appears to have won in a landslide, securing 135 out of 199 seats in Hungary’s parliament. Given that Orbán is Vladimir Putin’s closest ally in the European Union, his victory Sunday also provides a boon to Russia in its war against Ukraine. When Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, in the midst of his campaign, Orbán made it a major issue by insisting that he would maintain Hungary’s neutrality while his opponents would draw the country into the war against Russia by arming Ukraine.

The clock is now officially ticking on the pandemic-era immigration policy known as Title 42. Rochelle Walensky, the director of the CDC, announced this afternoon that she has rescinded her agency’s order for the policy effective May 23, which will provide the Department of Homeland Security roughly eight weeks to implement a protocol to handle what recent press reports indicate could be an initial flood of some 170,000 migrants at the U.S. southern border.

An amulet from the Bronze Age that was discovered at an archeological site on Mount Ebal in Israel may be the oldest known reference to YHWH, the Jewish God of the Bible. The artifact was discovered in 2020, and it took researchers three years to technologically read the brittle item and decode its pre-alphabetic text; they revealed their findings at a press conference in Houston on Thursday. Dating to circa 1200 BCE, the “curse amulet,” as the two-centimeter folded lead tablet is known, proves that Israelites were literate and had already composed sections of the Bible at the time they entered ancient Israel; this would have enormous consequences for the dating of the Bible, which many scholars believe was composed centuries later than this tablet suggests.

Go ahead say gay: As what we in the Alphabet Community derisively call a “straight-acting” gay man, I’ve lost track of the times people have mistaken me for a heterosexual. Usually, this error takes the form of being asked about a girlfriend or a wife, a question that, depending on the location and the circumstance (reporting trips to various outposts of the former Soviet empire and the West Bank not being particularly welcoming places for those of the same-sex-loving variety), I politely deflect or answer candidly by stating that my partner is, in fact, a man. Although various self-appointed Alphabet Community spokespeople insist that I should take great umbrage at such displays of oppressive heteronormativity, rarely have I felt the need to reprimand my interlocutors, who are usually acting in good faith. Heterosexuality, after all, has long been regarded as the default orientation of the human species, an expectation that Gen Z is doing its best to upend.

In 2022, the vast majority of Americans understand that gay people, as Proust wrote, are a “part of the human whole ... numbering its adherents everywhere, among the people, in the army, in the church, in the prison, on the throne.” And they understand this primarily because they know openly gay people, something that was not the case when gay people were compelled by law and social convention to live secret lives.

—James Kirchick
Here Comes the Sun

Passover offers us a ray of hope during the pandemic

BY A.J. BERKOVITZ

I am really starting to appreciate the rather simple logic that sacrificing the right number of goats to the Sun God will result in, well, sunny days. Perhaps I ought to bring a flock of bleating animals to the Canaanite sun goddess, Shemesh, at her temple, or house: Beit Shemesh.

In the distant past, some Jews, falling into the error of idol worship, did pray to the sun. During the tumultuous times that closed the era of the First Temple, Ezekiel, that tragic prophet, described the following scene: “Then He brought me into the inner court of the House of the Lord, and there, at the entrance to the Temple of the Lord, between the portico and the altar, were about 25 men, their backs to the Temple of the Lord and their faces to the east; they were bowing low to the sun in the east.” (Ezek. 8:16) These Jews enjoyed both sunny days and the better times they portend. Many of us do.

To be clear, I am not actually a Canaanite. And while, as the Passover Haggadah says, “In the beginning, our ancestors were idol worshippers,” I only sacrifice my soul to the one true God. Yet two pernicious forces combine to animate my sympathies toward pagan’s ability to express this idea in rich mythological terms. And all the more so of her religious vocabulary, in which spring signals hope and renewal.

Under normal circumstances, I would not quite care. Wintertime offers a few pleasures that help pass its brutal months: the guilt-free consumption of hot cocoa, the dancing flames in a wood-burning fireplace, and even—in much moderation—compact snow for snowball fights. The wine liturgy holds the answer. Perhaps I am a tad jealous of the pagans’ ability to express this idea in rich mythological terms. And all the more so of her religious vocabulary, in which spring signals hope and renewal.

For those who enjoy the frosty nips of winter’s chill, I have some bad news for you: You are mistaken. Ever since humans could tell stories, they invented myths to explain the cause of winter and to hope for its end. These tales spoke of gods who would die, descend to the underworld, and then rise again. And no, I am not talking about Jesus.

Consider the Mesopotamian deity whose name we know so well but whose story we no longer tell. Long before he became a Jewish (and originally a Babylonian) month, two features marked the mythological life of Tammuz. Every year between February and March, he would (re)marry the goddess of fertility, Ishtar (Esther). And, during June or July—the month that bears his name—he would die, descending into the dark abyss of the underworld for a lonesome half-year.

An entire cult developed around this cycle. In the ancient Near East, kings bedded their high priestess to symbolically reenact the marriage between Tammuz and Ishtar. And Tammuz’s death would be commemorated by rites of mourning. This last ritual even penetrated into Judaism’s most sacred site. Ezekiel, in the same vision mentioned above, observes: “Next He brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the House of the Lord; and there sat the women bewailing Tammuz.” (Ezek. 8:14)

In short, winter is awful.

As the Passover Haggadah demands: “In each generation a person must imagine oneself leaving Egypt.” And as its opening liturgy, the blessing over wine, wants us to believe, that day is “the Festival of the Unleavened Bread (hag haminatzot), a time of our freedom.” Where might I find freedom in this interminable COVID-19 winter?

The wine liturgy holds the answer. In the most ancient of times, Jews and Canaanites were incredibly similar. They belonged to a Semitic ethnicity, refrained from eating pork, and worked within the same rhythms of daily life. Because of these similarities, the Torah created a framework to ensure that Jews thanked the correct, and only, God for their seasonal bounties and burdens. It overlaid the shared agricultural calendar of the Land of Canaan/Israel with fragments of distinctive historical memories, differentiating Jew from gentile.

In this manner, most major Jewish holidays took on a dual identity: one
seasonal and the other historical. The annual Harvest Festival (ḥag ha’asif) became Sukkot, a holiday that celebrates the time that the Israelites dwelled in booths. And the Wheat Harvest (ḥag hakatzir) morphed into Shavuot, an event connected with the Exodus (Deut. 16:12) and eventually with God giving the Torah to the Jews at Mount Sinai.

Passover, which we primarily associate with the story of Jews leaving Egypt, also underwent such a transformation. Consider Exodus 23:15, the first time that the phrase “Feast of Unleavened Bread” appears in the Bible and it draws its inspiration: “You shall observe the verse from which the wine liturgy on the third day of Passover is quoted four times: Exodus 13:8. The verse instructs parents to teach their children about Passover. It is the kind of verse that the ancient rabbis adored; it can be read in two ways, one a straightforward reading that makes sense in context and the other an ultra-literal reading that reveals another perspective. The “sensible” contextual reading agrees with most translations of the Bible, as well as many English-language Haggadahs: “You shall tell your child on that day, ‘I do it on account of what the Lord did for me when I went out from Egypt.’”

Rashi reads it the second way. He asks, “On account of what?” What “this” is referred to here? For what purpose did God take the Israelites out from Egypt? Rashi concludes that the word “this” refers to commandments such as eating matzo and bitter herbs, which we now observe at the Passover Seder. He might gloss the verse like this: It was on account of future Seders that God acted in the past on behalf of the Israelites, liberating them from Egyptian bondage.

In two of the four places that the Haggadah quotes this verse—both of them in the passage about the four sons—it clearly means for Exodus 13:8 to be read in the first way. The wicked child and the simple child need to be told why the grown-ups are making such a big deal of the Seder. The answer, with a different emphasis for each child, is that “I do this (now) on account of what God did for me (in the past).”
“After 15 days of careful preparation, everything about this meal makes it sound like wolfing down a sandwich while waiting for the bus.”

In the other two places, the Haggadah makes more sense if you read the verse Rashi’s way. First, just after the passage about the four sons, the Haggadah expands the phrase “on account of this” into “on account of matzo and bitter herbs,” that is, on account of the Seder. Then, in the section after “Dayenu” when we are explaining the meaning of the Seder symbols, Exodus 13:8 is brought in to support the idea that “in every generation a person is obligated see himself as though he personally had come out of Egypt.” In other words, “the Lord acting for me” in Egypt—that is, so that I, thousands of years later, would tell the story and experience the moment of stepping from slavery into freedom.

In some contexts the Haggadah sensibly assumes that the Seder commemorates the Exodus. In other contexts it hints at the opposite: The purpose of the Exodus was that the Israelites would later perform the Passover rituals—that they would one day become tellers of the Passover story.

In the Bible, the prototype Seder is organized around creating memories. It happens while the Israelites are still slaves. The ninth plague has ended, darkness has lifted over Egypt, Pharaoh has been warned about the killing of the first-born, and everybody is in waiting mode. God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites that on the 10th of this month each of them shall slaughter it at twilight. After 15 days of careful preparation, everything about this meal makes it sound like wolfing down a sandwich while waiting for the bus. It is this ritually hurried meal that will be the model for the long, slow Seders of the future.

The Israelites at the first Seder are in a state of instability. They stand on the threshold between slavery and freedom, with one thin doorway separating them from the death swirling around outside. They are commanded to intensify their unstable condition by acting it out with a ritual meal. Leaving Egypt, all the members of the community will have the same taste in their mouths, a powerful taste that will forever recall this moment. This will be the taste of the departure from Egypt.

In this story, the idea of remembering comes before the thing remembered. Before they slaughter and cook their lamb, before they eat the meal, before they escape from slavery, the Israelites are told three times that they are supposed to be creating memories. Exodus 13:8 is one example. Here is another:

They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw, or cooked in any way with water, but roasted—head, legs, and entrails—over the fire. (Exodus 12:8-9)

This is a recipe for street food: Take some flat bread—maybe a laffa—and smear it with spicy sauce. Grab some meat off the grill and wrap the whole thing up. This is a meal that can be eaten with one hand. There are to be no leftovers, no Tupperware containers to distribute, and the dress code is very specific:

You shall not leave any of it over until morning. If any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is a Passover offering to the Lord. (Exodus 12:10-11)

In biblical language, girded loins, sandals, and staff in hand signify traveling clothes. After 15 days of careful preparation, everything about this meal makes it sound like wolfing down a sandwich while waiting for the bus. It is this ritually hurried meal that will be the model for the long, slow Seders of the future.

Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the 10th of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household. But if the household is too small for a lamb, let him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby, in proportion to the number of persons: You shall contribute for the lamb according to what each household will eat. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a yearling male. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month. Then the entire assembly of the congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. (Exodus 12:3-6)

A great deal of discussion will be required to organize the whole neighborhood into lamb-sized pods, taking into account appetites and preferences. Then the selected lambs must be guarded so they don’t sustain any injuries that might make them unkosher. So far, it sounds like the weeks before Thanksgiving: Invitations are flying, matches are being made for the lonely, and turkeys are being ordered. Then, a few days before the holiday, all the turkeys come out of the freezer to defrost just at the right speed—they mustn’t spoil, but they have to be ready for Thursday morning.

But there the similarity ends: On Thanksgiving, everybody will dress in their finery and sit down for a leisurely meal. At the first Seder, the instructions specifically call for a meal on the run:

They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with

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were once slaves? At the Seder we taste both slavery and freedom. Through what goes into our mouths and what comes out of our mouths, we learn and re-learn every year that we are travelers out of Egypt. We are neither enslaved nor free. We occupy a world that is poised between slavery and redemption, and our challenge is to live a life infused with both realities.

The tool we have to meet this challenge is the story. It changes us by bringing a collective past into living memory, teaching us gratitude for redemption. From another angle, the value of the past is that it gets the story started. It is only by living inside this story that we can become people on the road to redemption.

This article was originally published on March 25, 2013.

### The Festival of Cleaning

**Whether you’re a hoarder or a neat freak, Passover gives families a chance to get rid of the mess—together**

**BY JUDY BATALION**

Passover is known as a holiday of liberation, salvation, even constipation, but to me, it was always a holiday of sanitation.

I grew up in a family of compulsive hoarders. My mom was born in 1945 in Kirgizia, on my grandparents’ postwar journey from a Siberian work camp back to Poland, a refugee before she ever knew what home was. Years later, in Montreal, both Bubbe and Mom stuffed their homes with bargain skirts, tuna cans, Russian whole-wheat loaves, obsolete fax machines—a disorganized morass that grew over the decades. Report cards were lost forever in the maelstrom of my mother’s old newspapers.

Mom may have collected Dollar Store clocks, but our ultra-bohemian household was not regimented, everything running late, all of us eating meals at our own times and places.

Most of the time as a child, I felt unseen in the chaos, anxious, blocked from Mom by her piles, physically and emotionally; if I had a nightmare, there was no room to crawl into her bed. I received gifts I didn’t want, had to stuff reams of fake Howard the Duck T-shirts into my cupboards lined with mom’s clothes. I was ashamed of the junk, the depression. The growing piles of yellow bargain shampoo glared like neon signs of dysfunction.

Passover was a welcome respite from this chaotic domestic existence. My family wasn’t particularly religious, but weeks before the holiday, my parents began to stock up on supplies: kosher-for-Passover toothpaste, gum, salsa. For once, this stockpiling didn’t bother me, because I knew each item would have its place, laid out neatly on paper-towel-lined, newly washed Passover cupboard shelves.

The night before Passover came the domestic deep cleanse. Mom directed, Dad schlepped, my brother and I unpacked and organized. Trash bag after trash bag of Pesach dishes emerged from the cellar—treasures, a reminder that there was, hidden in a pocket of our basement, a stash of normalcy. Hope. Out came barely used mugs, a salt shaker, and a single set of glass plates (for milk and meat), shiny, transparent, light, and airy. Our kitchen was transformed.
The counters—normally covered with cereal boxes, Danish rings, a reservoir of Sweet’N Low packets—were cleared so the white Formica tops sparkled like sand. The dishwasher rumbled with confidence, able to hold its load.

Then, the Seder. It was the opposite of the usual disorder—Seder means order—beginning with a chronologically determined to-do-list, and ending with a repetitive chant about goats. Ten plagues, four glasses, two hand washings, one ton of leftover gefilte fish. (I used to joke that Passover was a holiday of OCD until a psychologist revealed that the extremely rigorous demands of the holiday—the rules about yeast-based cosmetics and crumb classification—can genuinely worsen symptoms. There’s even a form of OCD around a fear of moral imperfection called “scrupulosity.”)

To the background harmony of vacuum cleaners that exfoliated the carpets of their crumbs, and the Mr. Clean lemon-lime perfume of my fantasies, I set the Seder table according to diagrams. I’d never been taught about place settings or silverware; the haggadah was my finishing school. In my house of complicated boundaries, hard rules were my emotional salvation, suggesting that someone was looking out for us. I did as instructed, adoring how the food on the Seder plate was labeled, divided by type, with small portions, neat circles like a solar system, a warp zone to a different existence. I added my own flourishes in the geometric parsley stack, the perfect positioning of the white egg. Smooth, white, life. Every sense was considered—the cinnamon nose, smooth shank bone, matzo crunch—mingling with the malka hayam falsettos and the new spring sun that lingered a little bit longer in the sky, a symphony of order. A vacation, in my own home.

But then, after eight days of aesthetic nuance, the holiday would end, and we were back to the same old; and with all the unused Passover items, the mounds grew even bigger than they’d been before, the domestic crash diet backfiring.

I eventually fled home for college in the United States, beginning my journey toward the opposite. If my parents’ home was a hot Yiddish mess, I would become a cool minimalist.

At first, I returned to Montreal for the Seders, hoping that my near-empty dorm room meant my old bedroom had magically also morphed. But soon after, Bubble died, and Mom’s hoarding amplified. I was devastated to find that the sacred Passover dishes had metastasized, the set now containing juicers and spice racks. The next year, I skipped home and Hillel for a tour de Spain with an Anglican boyfriend, ogling Gaudi rather than humming Chad Gadya. Soon after, I moved to sophisticated London to work in pristine art galleries. (As I’ve said before, “curator” was the least Yiddish word I knew, and I wanted in.) I hosted the odd Seder in the lounge of a flat I shared with three British hardhouse DJs: My non-Jewish guests knew about the meal from their years studying Chad Gadya. Soon after, I moved to New York, and together, we decorated a spotless apartment with white walls, carpets, and sofas, and little else.

That’s when, upon the arrival of spring, I began to wonder how to clean for Passover when there was no mess? I didn’t want to be extreme, boiling chametz off doorknobs and Swiffering ceilings, but to turn a meaningful reaction into a meaningful action. So much Jewish ritual takes place in the home, a mini-temple. The bulk of Pesach practice happens not in the synagogue, but in the dining room. Did our cleansing rituals have other functions? Were we burning more than just our breadcrumbs?

Jewish scholars referred to “the leaven” as impure and timeless, arguing that it needed to be occasionally stopped and purged. A Chabad website suggested that examining the corners of your house mirrored looking through internal corners. By doing the rote, habitual work of tidying, we were free to focus inward (a trendy progressive preschool philosophy, too). Bread symbolizes our haughtiness; matzo, our humbleness. As we clean briefcases and window blinds, go through every drawer and crevice, hiding nothing from guests nor from ourselves, we must reflect on our own arrogance with the aim of changing it. Another Hasidic blog explained that the most difficult sites to clean are the storage rooms we never use. It’s important not to let areas of our minds gather dust; mental inactivity leads to anxiety, depression, and sin.

Then there were non-Jewish takes—if not on Passover specifically, then on the value of cleaning. Marie Kondo’s decluttering bible The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up advocates that we jettison excess objects. Her approach—meticulously examining every single domestic object, investigating each closet corner, a purge to take place quickly in just a few days—reminded me uncannily of the chametz search. Kondo’s reasoning: Keep only what you love; your environment should be filled with things of beauty and worth. Environmental psychologists agreed that it was important for us to have identity-marking objects clearly visible around us for a coherent self-concept, not to mention simplifying our surrounds to reduce stress. Even
ANCIENT SPOUSES
A poem for Noel Corngold, 1929–2022

We are, if nothing more, witnesses to one another that we exist, that we lived once without tubes, without spoon feeding with teeth, our wits intact. We remember how each other’s names should be pronounced that you earned a PhD that you were kind.

—Emily Adelsohn Corngold

my yoga teacher had spent a whole class droning on about decluttering the soul through stretching the hamstrings. I took his advice to be what all these others seemed to be offering: We needed to rid blocks and tensions to get to a truer, leaner version of ourselves. Eliminating excess reveals who we are, now.

Everything changed with my first positive pregnancy test. My home became a battleground of toys and vegetable mash. To cope, I cleaned for an hour a night, essentially searching for chametz every day.

I downplayed Passover in the general mayhem of those baby-making years, but once my two daughters were a bit older, and I finally felt like “me” again, I wanted to do Pesach like we did in the old days.

But how? Despite the changes children brought, our apartment was still largely uncluttered, tidy, and arranged so that I knew where everything resided. Two kids in, and our sofas were still white(ish). Sure, defined areas of chaos reigned: My daughters’ room contained mounds of plush toys strewn with glitter, beads, and microscopic Legos as well as pony-based works-in-progress scenes. Our storage area was bloated with carseats, and my “home office” (principally a chair in the corner of a closet) looked like a Post-It note warzone. Perhaps because of these mini-messes, I transferred my attention to my all-white kitchen, which had become my prized minimalist canvas. My low-carb shelves were spick and span. My fridge contained only enough food for a few days. Passover made little difference—I banished bread and babka, but the domestic landscape went pretty much unaltered. I placed our specially marked Passover food on the counter, in a corner lined with paper towels (as my parents had done), so if anything, there was more clutter rather than less as the holiday approached.

As I unpacked my matzo-based groceries a few weeks before Passover, I brushed my hand along my crumb-free counter-top, reflecting on the holiday cleaning I wasn’t doing. Cleaning had been my coping mechanism, my freedom, but at times my oppressor. My excessive neatness could block me from intimacies; when as a new mom, I scrubbed the floors while my husband rocked our baby to sleep, or scoured the highchair instead of letting my daughter feed me, leaving her hanging with a spoon in her outstretched arm.

Zelda, now a preschooler, ran in, as if reading my thoughts. “Mommy, can I help you put the food away?”

That’s when it hit: Of course, I loved the clean house of Pesach, but more than that, I loved the cleaning of the house, the fact that my family had prepared ensemble. The rules of Passover tidying were bigger than us and united us in the same room. We ordered and arranged without question, with verve and house-pride, in concert. As a family, we partook in an activity that was unusual, and special. Nine months of pregnancy, three foremothers, two tablets. The one meal of the year my family ate at the same time—in the house that we all cleaned, together. “Sure,” I told her, and watched as she confidently grabbed a box of yeast-free noodles and made for the cupboard, only to topple over a bag of cheesy Goldfish. Orange crumbs sprinkled across the pristine shelf. I was about to lunge for a Wet Wipe but then halted. In a few weeks’ time, we would have something to clean, hand in hand.

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STONE COLD TRUTH

elite against everyone else.... College is pointless... No one’s having babies, it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn’t between left and right. It’s the elite against everyone else.... College is pointless... No one’s having babies, and it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are
Chocolate Mousse Pie for Passover

BY SHANNON SARNA

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE CRUST
- 1 1/2 cups sliced almonds
- 2/3 cup sweetened, shredded coconut
- 6 Tbsp butter or margarine
- 3/4 cup dark chocolate pieces
- 1 tsp sea salt

FOR THE FILLING
- 8 large eggs, separated
- 10 oz dark or bittersweet chocolate
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1 tsp orange zest
- 2 Tbsp orange liqueur (optional)

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE CRUST

Step 1
Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Step 2
In a glass or microwave-safe bowl, melt chocolate and butter for 20-second intervals, stirring in between, until completely smooth and glossy.

Step 3
In a food processor fitted with blade attachment, add almonds, coconut, salt, and butter-chocolate mixture. Pulse until mixture is like thick, crumbly sand.

Step 4
Split the mixture into two pie pans. Using your hands or a rubber spatula, push mixture into pie crust pan until bottom and sides are covered. This takes a little time and patience. Chill for 10 minutes.

Step 5
Bake crust for 10-12 minutes. Set aside to cool.

TO MAKE THE FILLING

Step 1
In a microwave-safe bowl, heat chocolate for 30-second intervals until melted. Stir with spatula until completely smooth and shiny. Set aside to cool slightly.

Step 2
Beat egg yolks with 1/2 cup sugar until pale yellow in color. Whisk in olive oil, zest, and orange liqueur.

Step 3
Using an electric mixer or a stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, whisk egg whites until soft peaks form. Add 1/4 cup sugar until stiff peaks form.
Step 4
Gently fold egg whites into chocolate mixture until color and consistency is uniform. Divide mixture and spoon into pie crusts. Smooth out top.

TO ASSEMBLE THE PIES

Step 1
Split the mousse in half and fill each pie crust with the mousse filling. Chill overnight until completely set.

Step 2
Garnish with raspberries and orange peel; a dusting of powdered sugar; or fresh whipped cream.

Yield: 2 pies

Time: 24 hours