

THE TAB

CONTENTS

- 1 **The BDS Pound of Flesh**
Using lies and social pressure to force students to disavow Israel is a strategy aimed at raising the psychic and professional cost of being Jewish
- 3 **Inside the Temple**
For the first time in almost 50 years, the Beltway landmark opens its doors to those who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- 6 **The Certainty Trap**
The solution to our broken political conversation won't be found in censoring 'misinformation' but in recognizing the profound limits of our own beliefs
- 10 **The Ghost Writer's Mistress**
New York psychoanalyst and novelist Arlene Heyman recalls her youthful relationship with Bernard Malamud
- 14 **My First Bible**
Fiction: Stories of life, death, and divided houses

T MORE TABLET



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NEWS

The BDS Pound of Flesh

Using lies and social pressure to force students to disavow Israel is a strategy aimed at raising the psychic and professional cost of being Jewish

BY EINAT WILF

Several years ago, after I spoke at an AIPAC conference about Israel, Zionism, and the slow rise (at the time) of anti-Zionism in the West, a couple of concerned parents approached me. “Look,” they said, “we’re here, inside the conference, we get what you’re talking about. But our kids, who are the ones who should be hearing it, are outside, protesting with IfNotNow.” It was the first time I’d heard of the group, which calls itself “a movement of Jews to end Israel’s occupation and transform the American Jewish community,” but I saw nothing special in its apparent appeal to young people. I assumed it was just the way of the world for kids to rebel against their parents, reflecting changing values and circumstances. I understood that these kids grew up in a world in which the notion of a threat to Jewish life appeared distant, even ridiculous.

Over the years, however, I’ve found that attributing this anti-Israel activism to the different conditions under which the younger generation of American Jews came of age failed to account for the growing virulence of the activists, and the ever-growing demands placed on Jews to join their ranks. I now hear less from parents concerned that their kids are voluntarily joining

anti-Israel organizations than from parents alarmed that their children are being pressured to do so—to the extent that it is now a significant consideration for many American Jewish families in deciding where to apply for college.

The demand on young Jews to be less visibly and confidently Jewish as the price of toleration is an ancient one.

The demand on young Jews to be less visibly and confidently Jewish as the price of social acceptance and toleration—which only found its most recent and visible expression in a *Harvard Crimson* editorial endorsing the boycott movement against Israel—is an ancient one. Call it the “pound of flesh,” the mirror image of Shakespeare’s famous formulation in *The Merchant of Venice*: the intimidation of Jews into mutilating their own identities and giving up a part of themselves. In some cases, the pound of flesh is visual, like demands to remove yarmulkes, Israeli flags, jewelry with stars of David, or IDF T-shirts. In other cases, it’s written or vocal, like demands to disavow support for Israel or declare support for Palestinian political movements.

The historian Tom Holland, in his excellent book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, described this centuries-old dynamic as “a program for civic self-improvement that aimed at transforming the very essence

of Judaism.” Holland describes how Western ideas of enlightenment and human rights still have at their core the now-secularized and universalized but ancient Christian “dream that Jewish distinctiveness might be subsumed into an identity that the whole world could share—one in which the laws given by God to mark the Jews out from other peoples would cease to matter.” Despite this being a dream that in modernity was “garlanded with the high-flown rhetoric of the Enlightenment,” Holland explains, it “reache[s] all the way back to Paul.” Faced with this all-encompassing, new-old campaign, “Jews could either sign up to this radiant vision, or else be banished into storm-swept darkness.” Holland clarifies that “if this seemed to some Jews a very familiar kind of ultimatum, then that was because it was.” The ancient roots of the pound of flesh dynamic suggest that it is eternal. There is no limit to how much must be given up: Either Jews are no longer Jews, or they are no longer around. Almost all Jews have been subjected to these relentless demands at one point or another, and can recognize it viscerally. Those who see it most clearly are Jews who have faced down the insistence for additional pounds of flesh, and said no.

I confronted this demand myself 25 years ago, when I was a member of Israel’s Labor Party and a proud member of the country’s political left. I worked with left-wing leaders such as Yossi Beilin, an architect of the Oslo Accords, and Shimon Peres, engineer of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. I publicly supported a Palestinian state, vehemently opposed Israeli settlements, sought a rapid end to Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and was thrilled when Israel withdrew all settlements and soldiers from the Gaza Strip for good.

I also remained a committed Zionist, a set of values and principles that in no way contradicted any of my other political beliefs about a two-state solution. Yet several encounters with peers and colleagues abroad led to the eventual realization that, despite what I thought were my left-wing bona fides, the fact that I was an unapologetic Zionist banished me from what David Hirsh has

“The demand on young Jews to be less visibly and confidently Jewish as the price of toleration is an ancient one.”

called the “Community of the Good.” To remain in the good graces of the global left, I needed to hand over a pound of flesh: to renounce my Zionism. I realized that the demands to comply with the orthodoxies of the “Community of the Good” would never end—that no matter the compromises or sacrifices, there would always be a demand for more.

And so, I stepped back. I renounced not my Zionism, but my membership in the “Community of the Good.” I never changed my opinions about either Zionism or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; I simply gave up my status as a “good Jew” in the opinions of others.

Fresh from my experience as an Israeli, I was able to recognize the same dynamic starting to play out on American campuses. When I attended college in the United States in the mid-1990s, liberal, left-wing Jews could comfortably be pro-Israel and even active in AIPAC without any fear of repercussions or social pressure to hand over a pound of flesh. That changed with the emergence of J Street, IfNotNow, and Jewish Voice for Peace, until we arrived at the present condition, in which a Jewish student who does not show herself to be an ally of Students for Justice in Palestine, or does not agree that “Zionism equals racism,” or that Zionism is

a form of apartheid, and Nazism, and white supremacy, and whatever other supreme evil will be identified next, cannot be considered a good Jew. This escalation in anti-Israel activism among some young Jews no longer seemed like a natural and excusable choice shaped by different generational circumstances, but the result of a relentless campaign of bullying.

Over the last several months, as a visiting professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., I taught a course called “Zionism and Anti-Zionism.” In the many hours I spent discussing student life with students and faculty alike, it became apparent that the anti-Zionist activism on campus—the college version of the pound of flesh dynamic—was not primarily a form of social protest or political expression, but a form of bullying. The anti-Zionist activists, like classic bullies, deliberately targeted the real and perceived frailties of their Jewish peers—fear or shame in the expression of one’s Jewish identity, with its calls to Jewish solidarity and deep connection to a faraway foreign country.

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement has been one of the most effective expressions of the pound of flesh bullying tactic, inviting young Jews to participate in the cause of “social justice” only to ultimately demand the mutilation of their Jewish identity. BDS has demanded that diaspora Jews not only criticize Israeli government actions, but sever their connections with Israel completely.

The issue is not limited to campus or student life. Last fall, the D.C. chapter of the Sunrise Movement, an organization “mobilizing young people to make climate change an urgent priority across America,” pulled out of a rally to support voting rights because the Jewish organizations also participating supported Israel. The groups that Sunrise mentioned—National Council of Jewish Women, the Reform movement’s Religious Action Center, and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs—are some of the most progressive organizations in American Jewry, devoted to numerous left-wing causes. No matter. These organizations, by their mere presence at an environmental rally, were sully-

noble cause. Unless, that is, they were willing to give up a pound of flesh: their Zionism.

In January, Big Duck, a Brooklyn-based marketing firm with several nonprofit clients, declined to work with the Shalom Hartman Institute over its connection to Israel. This led Shalom Hartman to issue a statement identifying Big Duck's decision as "a moving of the goalposts on BDS from Israel to North American Jewish organizations," the never-ending pound of flesh demand in practice. The institute correctly noted that this "applies a standard on North American Jewish commitments

that would exclude the vast majority of the members of our community." In other words, the ancient goal of making it harder and harder for Jews to be fully Jewish, until it eventually becomes impossible.

My choice to step back from the pound of flesh dynamic was a personal one. But I have since met many Jews, older and younger, who shared with me their confrontation with the same challenge and sense that they need to make a similar decision. Extracting oneself from this toxic dynamic is not only the right thing to do, but also a key to mental health. Anti-Zionist bullying

takes an emotional toll, and it cuts to the deepest levels of our Jewish identities. Rather than try to find out how many pounds of flesh it would take to make the bullies go away, the only effective response is to resist them with confidence. It's hard to bully a proud people; it's impossible to bully a people who know they have nothing to be ashamed of, and who don't need or seek anyone else's approval in the first place. The only response to anti-Zionism, in other words, is Zionism. ■

This article was originally published on May 11, 2022.

COMMUNITY

Inside the Temple

For the first time in almost 50 years, the Beltway landmark opens its doors to those who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

The Washington D.C. Temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a familiar icon to Beltway drivers. Visible from the highway in suburban Maryland, this landmark stands seven stories tall, with pristine white spires jetting upward from the tree line. Due to the closed nature of LDS religious practices, the temple has remained a thing of mystery to most nonmembers since it opened in 1974. This year, however, the temple is opening its doors to the public—including the media—to mark its extensive renovation, with an emphasis on change, both architectural and spiritual, from the inside out.

It was a drizzly day when I arrived for a press tour in late April, but it was easy to forget the weather upon entering the brightly lit D.C. Temple visitors' center, where the last of the day's three groups of media were greeted with welcoming

smiles by temple staff and volunteers, and shown to a generous charcuterie spread. It included disposable wooden plates, water bottles emblazoned with a stylized image of the temple, and chocolate chip cookies that were just the right ratio of firm-to-chewy. This was far from the imposing projection the majestic white structure conveys to uninitiated D.C. commuters, evocative in enough people's imaginations of the *Wizard of Oz's* Emerald City that nearby overpass graffiti over the years has frequently, prominently, conveyed the message "SURRENDER DOROTHY."

"This is my third milking," explained the Rev. Dr. Amos C. Brown, as part of his opener. A Baptist minister from the Third Baptist Church of San Francisco and NAACP board member, Brown began with an anecdote he said Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. liked to share, about an inexperienced girl on a dairy farm who gave her cow its own milk to drink after a successful milking, so she

could milk it again with even better results. Brown was the only nonmember of the LDS Church on the multiracial panel of Church and temple officials who addressed the assembled media. In the spirit of his joke, his oratory did not betray any sense of fatigue with the remarks that he was delivering one last time that day. His voice grew louder and his speech more emphatic as he spoke about the LDS Church's founder, Joseph Smith, and his commitment to the abolitionist cause. "The man who founded this Church, Joseph Smith," said Brown, "was no bigot. He was no arch-racist." Smith, Brown said, was an abolitionist prior to his spiritual awakening and the founding of the Church in 1830 (Smith wrote against abolition on scriptural grounds later in the 1830s and seems to have evolved into a more abolitionist position by 1844, when he ran for president).

Brown said the temple was a testimony to the LDS Church's "romance" with learning, and said last year, LDS President Russell Nelson reached out to the NAACP. Brown said that Nelson had told the NAACP: "We want to talk. We want to have conversation. We want to be enlightened about each other's experiences."

"More than going into a refurbished, renovated, beautified temple," Brown said, once inside, LDS members would "give practical expression to the unfinished agenda of ridding these United

States of America from racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, and racial and religious bigotry. That's what will be happening from this beautiful place of learning, of fellowship, and love." More denominations following in the example of the LDS Church, Brown said, could "save the soul of America."

Brown hit on what was to be a recurring focus throughout the opening panel and the tour itself: the renovation of the temple as an opportunity to familiarize a curious public with an inclusive, diverse Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The temple during its construction DCTemple.org

According to the D.C. Temple fact sheet, the LDS Church first broke ground on the Beltway structure in late 1968, and was dedicated in November 1974. Measuring 156,558 square feet, it sits on 52 acres in Kensington, Maryland. At the time of the D.C. Temple's completed construction, it served as the temple for LDS Church members in the eastern U.S., eastern Canada, and the Caribbean, as well as those living in the capital region.

It was in 1974 that the temple last hosted an open house, and nearly 50 years later, the temple will once again roll out the immaculate custom carpets (shoe coverings were handed out to media upon entry) to the general public ahead of its August rededication. At its construction, the LDS Church had not built a temple east of the Mississippi River in over a century. The D.C. Temple is meant to be evocative of the Church's flagship temple in Salt Lake City. Where the Salt Lake Temple was a monument to the faith's founding, the Washington D.C. Temple was, in the words of Dan Holt, the project manager for the D.C. Temple renovation, a representation of "the international future of the Church."

After the press conference in the visitors' center, a brief video about the significance of temples to LDS Church members followed. In the video, a diverse group of people speaking in various accents and different languages talked about what their temple means to them. "All people are children of

"In what Gong called 'a great gift of love,' a living LDS Church member can be baptized for a deceased relative by proxy."

God," the video said, describing a God who loves humanity and "wants us to be happy." Two themes in the video were to emerge frequently during the D.C. Temple tour: the importance of family and its ability to be united forever through LDS temple ceremonies, and the ability to confront and live with suffering.

When the video was over, media guests walked from the visitors' center to a reception tent, shielded from the rain by a covered walkway. One of the temple's legions of volunteers rushed out to supply visitors with umbrellas for the roughly 10 or 20 uncovered yards between the walkway and the tent. Once inside the temple itself, my tour group gathered in the foyer, reminiscent of the lobby of an upscale hotel. Guides encouraged us to introduce ourselves, and we learned that our group included local media affiliates, high school and Brigham Young University newspaper reporters, and at least one social media influencer. Someone shouted that BYU student Batchlor Wise Johnson IV, sporting a wide cravat and double-breasted gold collarless blazer, was "TikTok famous." This TikTok where he describes how he makes his temple experience meaningful serves as a useful introduction to what a temple visit is all about for LDS Church members. He visits regularly, and "brings

names, to do family history work." Wise Johnson also said he reviews principles on the world's creation that he can use to "see how I can create the best life out of the one that I have." He uses his temple visits to "vent to God," he said, and to review the events of the week. Then, finally, in the celestial room, he expresses gratitude to God.

Prior to the D.C. Temple media tour, these idiomatic expressions would likely have been difficult for many in Wise Johnson's tour group to parse. Afterward, a linguistic veil would be lifted. Its 282 temples throughout the world are for what the LDS Church calls "ordinances": marriage, instruction, and baptism. Each room in an LDS temple is designed for a different ceremony. According to former D.C. Temple President Kent Colton, the temple differs from a typical LDS meeting house, the place where Church members gather on Sunday for services. Those services are open to anyone, are roughly two hours in length, and involve communion, shared testimonies, and small-group study and discussion.

Our tour was led by Elder Gerrit W. Gong, of the LDS Church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, its second-highest presiding body. Gong stressed the prevailing architectural motif of the D.C. Temple is "verticality," always moving up, with its inspiration coming from Gothic cathedrals, and a décor he described as "modest," but "intentional." Climbing the stairs to each subsequent story, he explained, was a symbolic ascent. Gong began in one of the lower floors at the baptistry, with a full-immersion pool atop the backs of 12 sculpted oxen, a reference to Solomon's Temple in 1 Kings. Gong compared it to a mikvah bath, and explained it was "a place where things happen that people can't do for themselves." The ordinance of baptism is one reason why LDS Church members like Wise Johnson bring names with them to the temple. In what Gong called "a great gift of love" in the interest of "fairness and equity," a living LDS Church member can be baptized for a deceased relative by proxy. Gong's wife shared a story about her ancestor, a man named James Cunningham, her great-grandmother's father. She spoke

movingly of Cunningham, taking time to sing songs and tell stories to his little daughter before he died of tuberculosis. Proxy baptism, she said, is a way to say thank you to someone like Cunningham, for the kindnesses they practiced while they were alive. Baptism of the dead, Gong said, is a practice described in 1 Corinthians 15:29 (a concept disputed by other Christian denominations).

Baptism is not the only ordinance that can be performed by proxy, however. The next stop on our ascent was an instruction room, a place the welcome video said that Church members “learn more how we all initially lived with God as his spirit children.” This particular instruction room had a tasteful beige-green palette, with theater-style fold-down seats with arm rests, all facing an altar in front of a curtain. Like Wise Johnson said in his TikTok, this room is where Church members acquaint themselves with LDS beliefs surrounding covenants with God and their ability to unleash a believer’s divine potential, and about creation itself. Instruction is about 90 minutes, and is delivered partly through a video, partly through an audio recording, and is facilitated by a temple member. The altar serves as a reminder of the sacrificial nature of Christ’s death and the sacrificial work to which believers are called.

Wise Johnson explained to his fellow tour members how the ordinance of instruction provided space for believers to bring their feelings, and to “wrestle with God.” It also serves as part of an initiation process. The LDS website explains how instruction is part of a Church member’s temple endowment, in which adults 18 years or older receive personal, individual blessings before being instructed about their Church’s understanding of creation and salvation history. Candidates then make a series of promises, called covenants, to submit to Church laws of obedience, sacrifice, and chastity, as well as to live lives worthy of the Gospel and to dedicate their resources to the Kingdom of God. Many young LDS Church members undergo endowment in preparation for missionary work, something in which all eligible young men are encouraged to participate.

After instruction is over, the curtain, also called a veil, is parted, and members proceed to the celestial room, a soaring space with Swarovski crystal chandeliers. As the name suggests, the celestial room is meant to evoke heaven itself, and the D.C. Temple’s celestial room boasts an elegance usually reserved for receptions for heads of state. Our tour was ushered in for a few minutes of reverent silence. LDS temple rites are “not secret, but sacred” we were told during the visitors’ center press conference, meaning they are not open to nonmembers. Unlike the sanctuary of a traditional Gothic cathedral, there are no windows or natural light in the celestial room, or any of the ordinance rooms.

From the celestial room, we ascended still further. To access the stairs, visitors walk along tastefully appointed hallways, with small side offices and what appear to be reception desks scattered throughout. At one point, our tour passed the locker room wherein Church members change into their simple white temple garments—meant to erase differences between believers, and bestowed on authorized members as part of their endowment.

At last, we arrived at the sealing room, wherein the LDS marriage ordinance occurs. According to Church belief, in this ceremony LDS couples are sealed for eternity, bound by covenant with both each other and with God. A bride and groom kneel across an altar in the center of the room, and make a lasting commitment. Gong said that LDS beliefs around marriage are that God has given them a gift that marriages and parent/child relationships don’t end with time. This belief, Gong said, is illustrated by the large facing mirrors on either side of the sealing room. One side shows a bride as a daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, extending backward through time. The other mirror shows her as a mother, grandmother, and so forth, on into eternity.

There is one more room at the of the D.C. Temple, on the seventh floor, a large ornate assembly room where the August rededication ceremony will happen. But whether intentional or not, the visit to the sealing room was the clear emotional and thematic climax of the tour. One

temple member shared a personal anecdote about the death of a child, and how because of his faith that he and his family are sealed together in eternity, he can move forward in hope that they will all be together again forever. It prompted a tour attendee to share their own personal, emotional family story, and the tour took on a different, more poignant dimension. It was in the sealing room that Gong said to attendees that a crucial LDS belief about marriage and family is that whatever came before, “the good things” can start with us.

Gong’s statement was a distillation of the tour’s overall messaging, in which Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon were scarcely mentioned, if at all. Transformational change was the leitmotif of this unique architectural tour. Speaking to the media visitors during the pre-tour press conference, Sister Sharon Eubank, president of the Church’s humanitarian organization, Latter-day Saint Charities, said that there was no better way to address the root causes of division and suffering, than “changing people from the inside.” While the newly renovated D.C. Temple “is a beautiful architectural structure,” she said, “it’s not about the architecture,” or about the exquisite craftsmanship. “It’s about the hearts that get changed and they walk out of that building, intent on doing something good,” Eubank said. While The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has come under scrutiny in recent years for its stances on LGBT issues and its complicated racial past, the LDS speakers at the D.C. Temple tour seemed eager to strike a forward-looking tone of inclusivity. And after more than two pandemic years, they coupled that tone with a message: In a world plagued by suffering and increasing atomization, faith, family, and connection offer a promise of hope. ■

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

This article was originally published on May 9, 2022.

The Certainty Trap

The solution to our broken political conversation won't be found in censoring 'misinformation' but in recognizing the profound limits of our own beliefs

BY ILANA REDSTONE

In 2005, the writer David Foster Wallace gave what *Time* magazine has called “the greatest commencement speech of all time.” Wallace’s address breathed new life into “the main requirement of [such] speeches,” which is “to talk about your liberal arts education’s meaning, to try to explain why the degree you are about to receive has actual human value instead of just a material payoff.” He explored how human beings create and sustain beliefs and addressed the often negative ways we view others who don’t share those beliefs. But perhaps most importantly, he offered a reason why this is the case.

Wallace tells a story of two men, drinking together at a bar in a remote corner of Alaska. He describes one of the men as religious, the other as an atheist. They are arguing over the existence of God. In Wallace’s story, the atheist says:

Look, it’s not like I don’t have actual reasons for not believing in God. It’s not like I haven’t ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard, and I was totally lost and I couldn’t see a thing, and it was 50 below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out “Oh, God, if there is a God, I’m lost in this blizzard, and I’m gonna die if you don’t help me.”

HISTORY

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The religious man looks at the atheist, and says, “Well, then you must believe now ... After all, here you are, alive.” The atheist responds with, “No, man, all that happened was a couple Eskimos happened to come wandering by and showed me the way back to camp.”

Wallace goes on to say that it’d be easy to take the “standard liberal arts” lesson from this imaginary exchange and simply conclude that the same experience can mean different things to different people. The lesson there would be one of tolerance, a reminder that we shouldn’t declare one man right and the other wrong. But Wallace goes further. He explains:

The nonreligious guy is so totally certain in his dismissal of the possibility that the passing Eskimos had anything to do with his prayer for help. True, there are plenty of religious people who seem arrogantly certain of their own interpretations, too. They’re probably even more repulsive than atheists, at least to most of us. But religious dogmatists’ problem is exactly the same as the story’s unbeliever: blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up.

In Wallace’s framing, the intolerance that we often witness (and participate in) is a symptom, not the actual problem. It’s an inevitable consequence of “blind certainty.” Each man in Wallace’s Alaskan story behaves as though his position deserves to be held with unshakable confidence. Of course, such certainty can be accurate neither for an atheist nor for a person of faith. Taking Wallace’s thinking one step further

quickly brings us to some of the biggest and most controversial challenges we face today.

In the case of thorny issues, certainty can be an invisible trap. And it turns out that by recognizing it the way Wallace suggests in his story, we can better understand and navigate disagreements far beyond those that concern the existence of God. Certainty often leads to a tendency to be dismissive or disdainful of ideas, positions, or even questions that one doesn’t agree with—particularly when those ideas, positions, or questions touch beliefs we hold dear. The most difficult problems set in when we hold them so closely that we cease to realize they’re personal beliefs at all.

One of those problems is political polarization. The term is vague, but here I’m using it to refer to multiple, interrelated factors. One factor is the way the primary political parties have adopted increasingly more extreme positions, especially in the United States. Another is the growing tendency to express disdain not just for the position one doesn’t agree with, but for the moral character of the person who holds it. Yet another is the exasperation many people feel with communicating across divides about difficult social problems. This is particularly true for problems that touch on topics related to identity, intent, fairness, equality, and various forms of bigotry—many of the most sensitive and controversial issues today. A final component in my umbrella use of the term “political polarization” is the pervasive lack of ideological diversity that has become the norm in many educational and cultural institutions. The negative consequences of these trends are difficult to overstate—and concerns about them come from all over the political spectrum (see here and here for examples). In other words, this problem is no one’s alone—it belongs to all of us.

The magnitude of the problem has motivated several people to try to come up with solutions. Some see the answer as a fight against mis- and dis-information and a reconnection with what some might call ground truth—what’s really real about the world. This has

led to a proliferation of books such as *Disinformation: The Nature of Facts and Lies in the Post-Truth Era*, *After the Fact?: The Truth about Fake News, Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation*, *Politics of Disinformation*, and *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*.

Others see the path forward in the establishment of norms of civil discourse. While this focus has also yielded books, its real impact has been in the development of programming devoted to this goal. Examples include the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona, the Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse at Grand Valley State University, and a \$150 million grant to Johns Hopkins University to “address the deterioration of civic engagement worldwide and facilitate the restoration of open and inclusive discourse that is the cornerstone of healthy democracies.”

Both approaches—combating dis- and mis-information and promoting civil discourse—have value, but neither goes deep enough to transform our conversations. That’s neither a prediction nor a judgment; it’s an observation. Those approaches won’t be able to enact significant change because they can’t, no matter how skilled a facilitator or mediator you have. They can’t because they don’t get to the root of the problem.

The fight against mis- and dis-information—a worthy goal—is often based on two flawed assumptions. The first is that definitive answers are known to the disputed points. The second, related to the first, is that the right people to provide those answers can be identified and agreed upon. Both assumptions are themselves often steeped in the Certainty Trap—a resolute unwillingness to recognize the possibility that we might not be right in our beliefs and claims.

To understand the implications of the mis- and dis-information labeling, we need only consider instances like the initial response to claims around Hunter Biden’s laptop or the source of COVID-19. In 2020, several major media outlets dismissed as mis- or dis-information (see here and here for

examples) the possibility that a laptop of incriminating emails belonged to Hunter Biden. The certainty with which this position was held led to the silencing of anyone who publicly questioned it—so much so that it has been called “the most severe case of pre-election censorship in modern American political history.” Recent evidence, however, has forced the same outlets who invoked those labels to acknowledge the laptop’s authenticity. Similarly, in early 2020, the suggestion that COVID-19 might have originated in a lab in China was dismissed as groundless fodder for racism and xenophobia. The certainty that led to this reflexive dismissal was walked back just over a year later, but the judgment of the once dissenting voices shouldn’t be forgotten.

Nothing about these reactions was inevitable. Rather than falsely demarcating lines between truth and fiction, a smarter and safer response would have been to say something like, “These claims require examination using normal evaluative criteria. We recognize that our knowledge and understanding will continue to evolve.”

For its part, civil discourse—also a worthy goal—can only succeed when there’s a willingness among the participants to recognize that there’s more than one reasoned way to see a given issue. (This limitation also explains why books that purport to teach how to tackle “difficult” conversations also can’t work.) The Certainty Trap makes this conversation impossible.

For example, some of the biggest controversies today occur over issues of racial and gender identity. On these topics, both approaches—combating mis- and dis-information and focusing on norms of civil discourse—fall short. Let’s say one person holds the following opinion: “I think that people overstate the importance of white privilege.” And another person sees that position as a denial of racism today. Will the promotion of civil discourse convince the person who sees the position as a denial of racism to engage as a moral equal with the one who holds it? Unlikely. And will battlers of mis- and dis-information be able to convince either person that focusing on white privilege is or isn’t the

right way forward? Unlikely and, for reasons we’ll go into later, one might even say, impossible.

Instead, breaking out of the Certainty Trap requires recognizing three common and interrelated barriers keeping us within it. These barriers pull us into The Trap and, once we’re in it, they make it hard to break out. The Certainty Trap tells us that there are two possibilities for an opinion we disagree with: ignorance and hateful motives.

However, outside of its walls, a third possibility emerges that can reshape how we engage: One might have principled reasons for the position they hold. And when we refuse to hear or recognize these reasons, we can’t communicate. Sometimes we will find those reasons compelling. Sometimes we won’t. And sometimes, when all we know is the person’s position, we still won’t be able to tell which of these three possibilities drives them. But remaining within the Certainty Trap will always constrain us to the shorter, two-item, list.

So what are the three barriers that tie us to this shorter list? The first is the Settled Question Fallacy—we fall into this when we behave as though certain questions have definitive and clear answers when they, in fact, do not.

If you’re unsure how frequently we treat open questions as though they have definitive answers, consider the example of our current discourse on gender, biology, and transgender rights. Insisting an open question is closed was the undertone in a January 2022 statement put out by the Ivy League in support of Lia Thomas, the record-breaking transgender swimmer at the University of Pennsylvania. The league wrote, “Over the past several years, Lia and the University of Pennsylvania have worked with the NCAA to follow all of the appropriate protocols in order to comply with

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the NCAA policy on transgender athlete participation and compete on the Penn women's swimming and diving team. The Ivy League has adopted and applies the same NCAA policy." The implication is that, because the NCAA (and, by extension, the Ivy League) has a policy, no reasonable questions around fairness remain. But a question isn't closed simply because someone asserts that it is.

The second barrier is the Fallacy of Known Intent—committed when we behave as though we know someone's motives. Consider, for instance, current debates over the application of critical race theory in schools. Those on the political left who insist that racism or a desire to conceal history are the only reasons someone would object to or have concerns about the use of these ideas in schools are pulling from that short, two-item list that exists within the Certainty Trap. The same is true for those on the right who advocate for legislative bans on this set of ideas, asserting that the goal is to indoctrinate students. The Certainty Trap knows no political boundaries.

The third barrier is the Fallacy of Equal Knowledge—this is our mistake when we believe that, if the other person knew what I know (or had my experiences), they would think what I think. This op-ed in the *LA Times*, written by a social psychologist, shows this well. The author writes, "Many Americans have a hard time recognizing the magnitude and persistence of racial inequality because, psychologically, we resist these truths." So far, so good, as he points out the importance of being informed. He then follows with, "Unless Americans understand and acknowledge inequality as a fact, we won't be able to build the political consensus needed for real change." Here, he's slipped into the third fallacy. Will getting everyone the same information about the magnitude of racial inequality build the consensus that he is referring to? I submit that it never has and it will not.

To be sure, none of this is to suggest that information has no value nor is it to paint a rosy picture of ignorance. It's simply to point out that, because we interpret evidence and experiences

differently, having the same information still won't get everyone on the same page.

Recognizing the phenomena I've introduced here—the Certainty Trap, the Settled Question Fallacy, the Fallacy of Known Intent, and the Fallacy of Equal Knowledge—can have significant implications. That recognition lets us label behavior and hold others and ourselves accountable for its consequences. For instance, you might imagine saying to someone (or to yourself), "This backlash is the result of the Settled Question Fallacy," and explaining why, or telling someone that "You don't get to complain about the culture war without acknowledging your role in it, via perpetuating these fallacies." Or, "By continuing in this vein, knowing that you're committing these fallacies and not changing your behavior, you are yourself fueling polarization."

Understanding these modes of discourse will help us address the many broad questions that swirl in our culture today. The debates over transgender issues are a resonant example, as debates rage about whether trans women should participate in women's sports, or whether it is right or wrong to give adolescent girls or boys puberty blockers based on what might sometimes be passing gender dysphoria? We don't know the answers to these questions. And to behave as though we do—to treat people as though the answers are known and obvious and, if they see things differently, they're denying reality or motivated by hatred and bigotry—is to remain within the Certainty Trap.

Breaking out of this trap provides a path forward based on curiosity and a more precise reflection of what we know about one another. It's a path that can nurture openness and build trust. And ultimately, it's a path that can transform how we communicate with one another in ways that absolutely do not end with political topics. Better solutions, better communication, and more open conversations are within reach, if only we're willing to take them. ■

This article was originally published on May 10, 2022.



Omer Counters

Omer counters have had a relatively small but distinctive presence on the Judaica landscape. The counting of the Omer is based on Leviticus 23:15, "And you shall count for yourselves from the morrow after the day of rest, from the day that you brought the omer of the wave offering; seven complete weeks shall there be." The Omer (originally, the sheaf of barley brought to the Temple) came to refer to the 49 days from the second day of Passover to the eve of Shavuot. And soon, the Omer gave rise to the Omer counter, posters and gadgets to do the counting of the Omer for us. Style and ingenuity followed.

Above, a Dutch-Portuguese-style 3-row Omer Counter. H is Portuguese for *homer* (omer); S for *semanas*, "weeks," and D for *dia*, "day."

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THE REST

→ An initial autopsy performed by Palestinian coroners confirms that **Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh was killed by a bullet** that struck her head from close range Wednesday morning while she was covering an Israeli counter-terrorism raid in the West Bank, but did not determine whether she was shot by Israeli or Palestinian forces. U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price tweeted on Wednesday that the United States is “heartbroken by and strongly condemns the killing of American journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh,” and adds that “those responsible must be held accountable.” The killing threatens to deepen the rift between the U.S. and Israel, which had already been growing **ahead of a planned trip by President Biden to Israel in June.**

→ Remote learning **hurt all K-12 students and had a devastating impact on students in high-poverty schools**, according to a new report by researchers from Harvard University and several nonprofit educational organizations. In “high-poverty schools that were remote for more than half of 2021, the loss was about half of a school year’s worth of typical achievement growth,” the report concluded. “Shifting to remote instruction was like turning a switch on a critical piece of our social infrastructure that we had taken for granted,” said Thomas Kane, one of the report’s authors. **The widening achievement gap between rich and poor students in 2021**—a development the report sees as entirely tied to remote learning—reverses the past 30 years of progress in closing the achievement gap between white students and their classmates of color, which had consistently been narrowing until last year.

→ As part of its massive “generational commitment” to racial equity, the **White House is embracing intersectionality**, a theory of systemic oppression that was developed by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, a pioneer in the field of critical race theory. The newfound focus on “intersections of marginalization” is one aspect of the “whole of government” project outlined in the Equity Action Plans that were made public last month. More than ninety federal agencies have each produced a plan describing the steps they will take to **combat “entrenched disparities”** among different identity groups, which includes taking resources away from groups thought to be privileged and reallocating them to groups designated as “marginalized” due to legacies of historical oppression.

→ Three **16th-century synagogues in Venice are set to undergo an \$11 million renovation** that will restore them to their Renaissance grandeur. The synagogues are crammed into the city’s Jewish ghetto, a 1.5-acre area where Jews had been forced to live for most of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Once home to 5,000 Jews, **Venice is now home to 450**, and the dwindling community is unable to sustain these historic temples. Plans for the rehabilitated synagogues include a new museum and gallery spaces.

→ More **young adults are living at home with their parents than at any time since World War II.** Long before the pandemic, the percentage of Americans aged 18 to 34 living with their folks began rising in the early 2000s in response to a number of factors including the rising cost of housing across the United States. The millennials who do manage to buy homes, meanwhile, often do so with a bit of help: According to a recent Apartment List study, **21% of millennials are getting money from their parents for their down payment**, helping them finally leave home.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

Follow the trail of **ShutDownDC**, the group leading the protests outside the homes of conservative Supreme Court justices, and you’ll tumble down the rabbit hole of professional progressive politics, where things keep getting curiously. The protests are not coming from a “grassroots” opposition to the court’s plans to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, they’re the work of a well-established activist group that was founded in 2019 on a “climate activism” platform but has since become a fixture of dozens of demonstrations. **ShutDownDC** is led by two professional activists, **Liz Butler and Patrick Young**, who are veterans of both the “direct action” tactics of Antifa anarchist groups and the larger world of movement politics subsidized by the hundreds of billions of dollars distributed annually through the complex of progressive NGOs. **ShutDownDC** grew out of a preexisting organization called **AlloutDC**, which, according to its Twitter profile, aimed to “Burn Down the American Plantation.” Aside from that, there is scant public information on the two groups. Neither lists a board of directors or reveals the sources of its funding, but one feature they clearly share is that both are essentially shell organizations. What they provide is an all-important resource in the age of spectacle-driven digital politics: a website and social media presence that offer a recognizable brand identity that can be used to promote the cause du jour.

—Jacob Siegel

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The Ghost Writer's Mistress

New York psychoanalyst and novelist Arlene Heyman recalls her youthful relationship with Bernard Malamud

BY DUSTY SKLAR

The subject of this interview, Arlene Heyman, is a New York-based psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and writer. She has published a short story collection, *Scary Old Sex*, and a novel, *Artifact*. In 1961, she began an affair with the noted writer Bernard Malamud, which turned into a rich friendship that lasted until he died. The interviewer, Dusty Sklar, is the author of *Gods and Beasts: Nazis and the Occult*, and numerous short stories and articles.

DUSTY SKLAR: When did you attend Bernard Malamud's class? Why did you choose his particular class?

ARLENE HEYMAN: In 1961 I was a sophomore at Bennington College, 19 years old, when I first heard that Bernard Malamud would be coming to Vermont to teach creative writing. He had already won the National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel* so he was known and respected in the literary world—which was the only world that mattered to many of us. As I remember it, there was at Bennington, simultaneous with respect for Malamud's accomplishment, a distrust of prizes. It was probably just envy, but the idea was that a Bennington faculty member after a full day's work could give as good a lecture as any visiting academic or artist, as any luminary. Yes, this guy Malamud is a fine writer, but how do we know what kind of teacher he will be? And so a friend of mine and I, toward the end of our sophomore year, asked Stanley Edgar Hyman if he would give the two of us a

fiction tutorial. Now Stanley Edgar Hyman was a heavyweight at Bennington—literally, he was over 250 pounds. He was a well-known critic and he was the husband of Shirley Jackson, though he was also known to have affairs with his students.

Although I had wanted to be a writer for as long as I could remember, I hadn't written anything I thought suitable for submission and so I had to figure what to write. But Stanley Edgar Hyman read my friend's submission and rejected both of us before I wrote anything at all. Months later, he apologized to me, but my heart had hardly been broken. It might even be said that I owe my subsequent affair and lifelong friendship with Bernard Malamud to that fortuitous rejection.

So I applied to enter Bernard Malamud's class. Many applied—I don't know how many—and 10 or 12 of us were accepted. He told us on the first day that one submission was the best he'd ever gotten from a college student and one was borderline. He asked if Arlene Heyman would stay after class; he wanted to talk to me. This Mr. Malamud evidently wanted to run a civilized class.

I can hardly remember what he looked like to me that first day; he was not a handsome man but he was pleasant-looking, studious-looking; 5-foot-8 or 9 or 10, with gentle brown eyes and dark brown hair that was already beginning to recede. He seemed slightly nervous and determined to run a good class. He was very intense, fervent about fiction and about teaching us. He probably read a published story aloud that first day. (Not one of his own. He was not

a narcissist.) He may have had students read from their submissions. I don't remember. I was in an alarmed state over my probably borderline manuscript and had spent the entire class worrying.

After class, he met with me, and he told me that my manuscript was the best writing he'd ever read by a student (It was a short story called "The Priest" about a Spanish Jesuit who gets defrocked and ends up in New York City in bed with a prostitute from whose breasts come blessed drops of milk.) I was relieved and exhilarated. I was excited by him and by myself and the future career I imagined lay ahead of me. I invested the two of us with honor and power. Every two weeks I wrote my heart out for him.

Before the Christmas break Bern said that he'd like to meet me in New York. I knew immediately that this meant more than lunch or dinner; he wanted to have an affair with me and I was frankly thrilled—with him, with myself, with the prospect that a man of his accomplishment could be interested in me. I was not sexually naive but I had no experience with a man 28 years older than I and none at all with a famous writer. I didn't even know any other famous writers. It was truly an adventure for me.

I don't fully remember the first date. It was a lunchtime date, I think, and I kept him waiting—in those days, I kept everyone waiting and I still have immense trouble being on time—and we ended up at a hotel and made love. I was ecstatic—he must have been 46 or 47 at the time and it seems to me now he was always teaching me about something or other and I was excited to learn about the wide world. And I was happy to make love with him. He found me beautiful, mind and body, and I basked in his admiration. The fact that he was married and this had to be an undercover affair, I didn't mind that, I may have even liked that. I was hardly looking to marry anyone, and while I had a pang or two about his wife and family (and I would say now that I was blind to myself, to what I might be doing to his family, to what was motivating me psychologically—I'm now a psychoanalyst) I was truly infatuated. I greatly respected

the man, I admired him for all he knew that I longed to know, and he was really taken with me. I learned about literature, which mattered more to me than anything else; we went to museums—he met me several more times in New York, I think, during that first nonresident term, and he wrote many letters to me which are in the literature collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin.

DS: Do you know whether he had previous affairs with students? Or subsequent ones?

AH: I didn't know whether he had had previous affairs with students and I really didn't think about it. He had been at Bennington for only a few months when we began our affair and he was really enamored of me. And I was in my confused 19-year-old fashion in love with him. He had a wife. He was always writing. You could hear him pounding away on his typewriter in his office in the Barn. It didn't cross my mind that he had time to be involved with anyone else. Also I never doubted that he truly loved me so why would he see anyone else?

After the sexual part of our relationship was over, I also never thought about did he have other lovers. I don't think I ever asked him during the many years of our friendship. He told me that since he'd met his wife, he'd never loved anyone as much as he loved me. And he continued to care about his wife. He wasn't a promiscuous man. I actually learned more about his love life from reading the wonderful biography *Bernard Malamud: A Writer's Life* by Philip Davis, which came out in 2007, 21 years after Bern died.

DS: Had you ever met any members of his family?

AH: Yes, certainly. His wife, Ann, was at Bennington and I once said to her, "Your husband is a great man." She said,

not unkindly, "Who? My Bern?" She was not aware of our affair until many years after it was over. I went to dinner parties at his apartment in New York City and I met both of his children. His son actually called me one evening to ask me a medical question. And his daughter and I corresponded after his death when she needed permission to quote from one of my letters to him (I was very honored that he saved all my letters) for a memoir of her father she published the year before Philip Davis' biography appeared.

Ann, who died in 2007, was always decent to me, although reserved. When I was a psychiatry resident at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx, Bern called me at work one day—Ann was out of town—to say that his brother had died of a heart attack, he was writing a eulogy, and when he paused to do some exercises, he started having pains in his chest. Wouldn't I agree that these were "sympathetic" pains, nothing to worry about, and he should go on exercising? I conferred with my fellow psychiatry residents and we told him to stop exercising immediately and get over to a cardiologist in Manhattan, whose name we provided. Bern was hospitalized that afternoon with a heart attack. Ann called to thank me.

Ann and Bern and my first husband, Shepard Kantor, and I went out together a few times, the four of us. I was now and then at their house taking his blood pressure or my husband was. On the day Ann found Bern dead in their New York apartment of a heart attack, years after that first hospitalization, she called to let me know. By then she was aware I'd had an affair with him. And when Philip Davis called to interview me for his biography (I keep wanting to write "marvelous biography" because it is; it's so intelligent and sensitive, he understands the life and the fiction in considerable depth and he got Bern's relationship with me exactly right), I called Ann to find out what she wanted me to do.

I didn't know if she wanted me to speak to a biographer and I was prepared not to answer Davis' phone calls if she didn't want me to. She told me that she had given Davis my name and that what had gone on between me and her

husband was so long ago after all (she asked me how old I was right then and I said I was 62 or 3 or 4, whatever I was, and she said she couldn't believe it) and I should tell it like it was and also that I should use my good judgment. To tell it like it was and also to use my good judgment—these two instructions were contradictory. But at least I knew she wanted me to cooperate with Philip Davis and I felt freed by her to do so with an open heart.

DS: Did you hope or expect that he might leave his wife for you?

AH: Oh, we occasionally talked about living together, marrying, having a child, but those were fantasies and neither one of us made a serious move in that direction. Bern once said that being married to me might destroy his writing life; I wasn't faithful to him nor could he expect me to be—he was married. And I honestly didn't think about marrying him or anyone else. I didn't marry until I was 37 years old. I am extremely lucky to have married and to have had my two sons and now three grandchildren.

DS: Were you concerned about your age differences?

AH: Not at all. I think I got a kick out of it. Bern was a father, teacher, lover, friend. Later when he had a minor stroke during bypass surgery, I suppose I might have wished he were younger, but I don't remember wishing that. I just wished he had not suffered the stroke. I remember my husband saying "They ruined a national treasure." Bern got past the stroke but it was hard work for him; he felt diminished as a writer; although many of his capacities came back. He worked as diligently at physical therapy as at his writing, but he felt he couldn't fully get the depth and richness of what he wanted to create, what he used to be able to create. And then he had a heart attack and died alone in his apartment. I cried a lot of the time after he died. I remember my 6-year-old son saying, "I think you loved Bern more than you love me."

In my opinion, what's behind the questions "Were you concerned about the age difference?" and "Did you expect him to leave his wife for you?" is the widespread, conventional idea that

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all erotic love has to be between two people roughly the same age, that older bodies can't be attractive and that one party or the other must expect or want the affair to end in marriage. Otherwise, it isn't love. Obviously, I don't agree.

DS: Your affair lasted a couple of years, but your friendship lasted until he died. How deep was your friendship?

AH: We spoke or exchanged letters weekly until his death. He was very interested that I became a physician; I half-asked his permission before applying to medical school and he gave it. I would be a writer, we had no doubt of that, but I had to earn a living. I saw him in New York but he came down to Philadelphia to visit me at least once when I was in medical school. The two of us got into a cab and the driver said, "You're Bernard Malamud, aren't you?" And Bern said, "Who, me? I'm an accountant. I'm so honored you thought I was a writer."

It was a little cruel of Bern but it was funny—Bern had a wonderful wit and I got some of my best jokes from him (and I use them in my fiction.) And truth was that although our sexual affair was long over, there was something illicit, some feeling that we were illicit, still going on between us, there was until his death, and he might not have wanted to be recognized. We spent many afternoons in New York going to museums; we would take walks in Central Park and Bern would identify different kinds of trees for me—"you're a real ghetto girl," he told me as if I'd grown up in an enclosed concrete area rather than the suburb of West Orange, New Jersey.

But he knew much more about nature than I did. He was deeply interested; I wasn't; he was interested in everything. We went to a lot of restaurants: "You can't order just steak or lobster. Come on!" he told me. He was teaching me in the best-humored way and I enjoyed being taught. He would often phone to read me a paragraph he'd written that day.

And he gave me manuscripts of his to criticize. And criticize them I did. Once, standing in front of me in his apartment, he tore up the page of criticism I'd written about one of the stories he was working on. Later he told me he'd picked up the pieces, taped

"Once, standing in front of me in his apartment, he tore up the page of criticism I'd written about one of the stories he was working on."

them together, and taken my advice. Of course, I gave him everything I wrote and took his criticism very seriously. And I saved it all. I found out from reading the Davis biography that when Bern died, he had on his desk a psychoanalytic article I'd sent him by Martha Wolfenstein, an analyst who had taught in my residency program at Einstein; the article was titled "Loss, Rage and Repetition" about the impact on a child of losing a parent early in life or as an adolescent, (and Bern's mother had died—she probably killed herself—when he was a teenager) and he had a draft of a note to me alongside the Wolfenstein paper: "Thank you for letting me read your paper. It was like being allowed to look into a forbidden room. I saw more than I had meant to."

DS: Did your husband get to know him? How did each regard the other?

AH: I'll tell you a funny story that I told Philip Davis but begged him not to use because I was worried how my sons would take it. But now my sons are almost 37 and 41 and married with children and might be able to see the humor in it. Or maybe it has nothing to do with my sons and I'm just more comfortable with what I've done in my life. I had never told anyone about my affair with Bern right up until I got married and beyond. (Well, maybe I told my sister. I'm

not sure now and she's dead.) When I married my first husband, Shepard, it was my first marriage, his second. We had our wedding in our apartment and Shepard didn't want anyone at the wedding whom I had slept with. If you don't get married until you're 37, there are quite a few men you've slept with and some of them became our friends. At any rate, I didn't invite anyone I'd slept with but I knew I couldn't get married without Bern being there. I didn't want to. My father was dead. Bern was as important to me as my father. So I didn't reveal to Shepard that I'd had an affair with Bern (it was 19 years earlier, after all) and we invited him and his wife. They came. Bern wrote me that he "felt he was giving me away without parting from me."

Months and months later, Shepard and I were in bed and Shepard was reading Bern's book *Dubin's Lives*, in which the main character, a middle-aged married biographer is having an adulterous affair with a very sensual, much younger woman named Fanny. Shepard turned to me and said, "I wish you were more like Fanny." I smiled. After he read a little further, he came upon a detail, an attribute Bern had given the character—I think Fanny kept a glass of ice water on the night table next to her when she made love—that was characteristic of me. My husband turned to me and said, "You *are* Fanny!" That was certainly a great oversimplification, but there was certainly enough truth in it that I had to explain everything to Shepard, how the affair had been over in 1963 and here we were in 1979 and I now had a long rich complicated friendship with Bern and I couldn't get married without him. We were up late but before we went to sleep, Shepard forgave me for not having told him and having invited Bern. I think early in our marriage Shepard wondered, like our 6-year-old son, whether I loved Bern more than I loved him but

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midway through the marriage, he had no doubt. He liked Bern, he respected his writing and he never got in the way of my outings with him.

DS: What did you learn from M about writing? About living?

AH: Bern worked very hard at writing and he told me you had to do it every day, if only for a little while, or you ended up at a distance from it. He did many drafts and he said that his agent practically had to pull whatever he was writing away from him or he'd just keep rewriting. He also did his own editing; "I think a writer has to work pretty much by himself, otherwise he may begin to depend on others for his ideas. The only way to strengthen your back or your book is to do your own exercises," he'd say.

A version of what Bern taught me about writing appears in a short story of mine "In Love With Murray," which appeared in my 2016 collection titled *Scary Old Sex*. In that story a very young female painter is in love with an older celebrated artist, and I lifted some of the advice he gives her about painting almost directly from letters I received from Bern:

"I know you're not seeking advice but the thing about painting is, you have to create a rhythm for it. It's rough if you work and quit, work and quit. You have to stay with it almost every day if only for a little while. The quitting seems to check the flow, and then you have to break through into the rhythm all over again. Having a bad time at the beginning is almost necessary. It's a struggle and a struggle and a struggle, but if you keep at it right, the struggle can become a dance."

Truth is, I'm nowhere near as disciplined as Bern but I'm always hoping to become more like him including right up to now, when I'm 79—seven years older than Bern was when he died, of course.

What did I learn from Bern about living? It's really difficult to summarize what one gets from a 21-year-long intense friendship. But here's something: although he suffered—read the Davis biography—Bern was against suffering. I'm against it, too.

DS: Who were the writers Malamud most admired?

AH: Chekhov. I remember his reading me "The Lady with the Pet Dog" and his eyes flooding. I think Chekhov was his favorite writer. He also loved Yeats' poetry and we got into a fight over letters about Yeats' lifelong unrequited love for Maud Gonne. I was, stupidly, putting down Yeats as a poet because of his lifelong love. He also had me read Bellow's *Seize the Day* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

DS: Did you decide to become a writer because of his influence?

AH: Nope. I always wanted to be a writer since I was 5 or 6 years old. The summer after I graduated from high school, I typed out in quadruplicate—with carbon copies—whole chapters of *Crime and Punishment* and *Look Homeward, Angel* and I mailed them to friends as if I'd discovered these writers. (I forgive my 17-year-old self for not realizing that Dostoevsky and Thomas Wolfe were not of the same ilk.) But meeting Bern, with whom I liked to think I had much in common, meant to me somehow that I could really do it. We were both Jews and atheists; his family was very poor, mine was sort of middle middle-class—my father was a salesman of men's clothing, my mother a grade school teacher and I was at Bennington on a full scholarship. There were a few books in my house although not very good ones. My father hadn't finished eighth grade and was very humble; my mother had a two-year college degree she wanted people to think was a four-year degree but she didn't lie about it. Bern's family was less educated and had less money and his mother and brother both suffered from schizophrenia. Anyway, somehow I felt (rather foolishly) that if he could become a writer, so could I. He always treated me as if I were on his level and I, with the arrogance of youth and Bennington, believed it.

DS: What are your most treasured memories of him?

AH: I've already said so much, haven't I? Here are some more memories, I can't tell you which are "my most treasured ones."

One memory I get a kick out of was that we would go into bookstores and when we'd find his books, we'd put them in more prominent positions.

In college, I was a heavy smoker—two packs of Pall Malls a day. He told me he'd been a heavy smoker, too, and he'd had a very hard time giving it up. I found out later he'd never smoked a cigarette in his life. He was trying to encourage me to give up smoking.

I remember how upset he was by a bad review by John Leonard in the *New York Review of Books*. I couldn't believe that Bern was upset. I said, "You're a wonderful writer. He's nobody." Somehow this showed me early on, I was still a Bennington student then, that he was human. Although he was so celebrated, bad reviews hurt him.

On campus one day he showed me a story that had been accepted by a magazine, maybe *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker*, but they wanted him to cut out some "dirty" words. What should he do? The story was "Black Is My Favorite Color." I told him to drop the words, they weren't that important. He said to me he wouldn't do that. Younger, less experienced writers wouldn't have a chance of publishing their work intact if he caved. Bern stood his ground—he was good at standing his ground—and the magazine published the story as it was.

He was truly interested in my life. He liked the man I married. When we married, Shepard started reading all the important Shakespearean plays. Bern wrote, "He reads Shakespeare to tell you he loves you. How wonderful!"

Bern wrote a letter of recommendation for my 4-year-old son Jacob to get him into a New York private school, I don't remember which school. They weren't impressed.

And he told me whenever in life I doubted myself to remember how much he loved me. ■

This article was originally published on May 9, 2022.

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My First Bible

Stories of life, death, and divided houses

BY VAL VINOKUR

1. MY FIRST BIBLE

The first time I learned of the Bible was when my grandmother physically attacked it. She had wrested it from my mother's hands, opened it, and started tearing handfuls of dense onionskin pages in two. I was almost 7 years old, and this happened in Ladispoli, a town outside Rome where Jews, formerly Soviet and suddenly stateless, would spend several months in an administrative purgatory, discarding their Israeli visas for visas that would allow them to enter less holy but more peaceable lands—America, Canada, Australia.

There were several parties that made—or else dropped—claims on our fate that winter of 1978-79. In exchange for my mother's Moscow apartment, bestowed upon her late father as an “invalid-of-war,” my own father set aside a wife and son and allowed us to emigrate. In exchange for permission to leave, the Soviet state demanded a fee for the renunciation of our citizenship and passports. The PLO asserted the right to impede our exodus by hijacking an Austrian train full of Jewish refugees in 1973, which is why soldiers with black automatic rifles guarded our train to Rome from Vienna five years later. In Rome, the Israeli Embassy organized a screening of *Exodus* to persuade us to keep our original visas and follow Sal Mineo and Paul Newman to Zion. Although the Russians packed the theater, the film was dubbed into Italian, and the embassy's claim was not sufficiently compelling. Next, Christian missionaries bid for our souls. And my mother, an atheist who could not pass up a freebie, accepted their generous offer of a Russian-language Bible. After all, this was not an easy book to find back home in Moscow at the time. When my

grandmother found the Christian Bible, it was immediately clear that she did not share my mother's disinterested curiosity. The enemy had been invited onto our shelf.

A few days after her altercation with the Bible, my grandmother was standing on a chair to change a lightbulb, fell, and broke her arm. Soon after that, her arm still in a cast and sling, she asked me to hold a loaf of bread so she could cut it. She sliced about a quarter of the way through my right index finger, leaving a neat curved scar in case I forgot.

In June of 1941, my grandmother decided to remain in Leningrad, where she was studying, while her older sister, a teacher named Dasha, returned to their native Usvyat in Belorussia to spend summer vacation with her mother. Not long after Einsatzgruppe B entered Usvyat, Dasha was shot dead with about 40 others in front of her mother—possibly on Nov. 8, 1941, on the ice of Lake Usvyat. (I say possibly, because there are two Usvyats—one near Vitebsk, the other near Pskov—and, thanks to the thoroughness of the Einsatzgruppen, nearly all the Jews were massacred in both. This reminds me of how my American relatives promulgated a wartime story about a certain Cousin Boris, a teenager who escaped the burning of the Vilno ghetto and joined the partisans, a story that turned out to be about another Cousin Boris altogether, the latter being the other's nephew.)

In the meantime, the German army encircled Leningrad and starved its inhabitants—my grandmother and her younger brother among them—for 872 days. I don't know if my grandmother associated this Bible with this particular enemy or with enemies of the Jews in general, or whether her dramatic

reaction was simply another item in her standing assessment that every decision my mother made, major or minor, was perilous—even as she unquestioningly followed her daughter and grandson through Vienna and Rome and into exile in Miami Beach.

The Bible is just a book. The Bible is not just another book. The Bible inscribes itself into the flesh. William Tyndale translated the Bible into English and was strangled and burned by the Church for his trouble. For the same offense, John Wycliffe's bones were exhumed, burned, and cast into the River Swift.

I always imagine that my grandmother tore only the New Testament part of the book. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are trying to push through the adoring crowd to see him. Jesus rejects them and explains: “My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (8:21). The word of God makes and unmakes everything, especially families. Abraham is told to get up and go from his father's house to a land that God will show him, told to circumcise himself, twice told to cast out his first son, told to sacrifice his second son and then told not to sacrifice him and slaughter a ram instead. In the Gospels God decides to sacrifice his own son for a change, upping the ante, going all in, as if the house can bet against itself.

2. EROS & THANATOS

They freeze and lock eyes. This happens every time my dog comes across a squirrel in the park, which is often. The leash becomes rigid and Max won't move forward, back, or sideways. The squirrel doesn't move either. For a full minute, they stare and perform the most (maybe the only) existential dialogue:

DOG: “O Life! My life!”

SQUIRREL: “O Death! My death!”

Life and Death look upon each other with thorough admiration and absolute repulsion—a geometry of awe. I am an intruder on the primal scene. I stamp my feet to remind the squirrel to scramble up a tree. I remind Max that we have to

move on and that a free lunch awaits him at home.

Men and women sometimes look at each other that way. The first time my father saw my mother—a Sophia Loren lookalike with a good job and a Moscow residence permit, a Jewish girl unlike the Russian one his older brother had eloped with—he thought: “Life!”

“Thought” is probably the wrong word. My father was a medical student from Kursk who desperately wanted to find a way to remain in Moscow after the completion of his training there. So he fell in love with my mother and quickly married her. I don’t mean to imply this was mercenary or somehow in bad faith. He was moving along the path afforded him, pulling at a leash held by invisible hands, accumulating impressions along the way, and all the sudden he saw her: “Life!”

I wasn’t there to see it, of course. But this is how I’ve come to imagine their meeting, upon examining Max and the squirrel. Nor was I there when Max finally caught and killed a young squirrel in a different park last year. My wife was there; she tied up the dog, dug a small hole, and buried his victim. I don’t know what I would have done—probably just run away very quickly. I am grateful it wasn’t me walking the dog that day.

As for my mother, from her one-dimensional point along the two-dimensional line, I am sure she saw it too: “Death!” Her own father—a meek soul beloved by all, a veteran with a bad heart and a lung lost to German shrapnel—would wince every time he saw her with a new suitor. One of them was a handsome young surgeon, who told my mother how badly he had wanted to kill a “disgusting yid” on his operating table earlier that afternoon. When she interjected that she happened to be a Jewess, it turned out he didn’t mean all Jews. Another one, an engineer, took her on a cruise down the Moscow River. There was a horrible commotion at the ferry terminal when a child’s errant fingers were crushed against the side of the boat as it docked. Serves them right, my mother’s date smirked, these kids not listening to their parents...

The other suitors were probably not monsters, but most of them were not

Jews and therefore, as far as my grandfather was concerned, could always molt into monsters. This feeling was just the accumulation of his 50-odd years of experience in the Russian imperium. To ease her father’s suffering and prepare for his death (which would come soon, only six months after my birth), my mother agreed to marry the medical student from Kursk. They had only dated a few months, but at least he was Jewish, sang and played a seven-string guitar, and was lovelier than the young Stalin in his 1911 mugshot. Incredibly, his name was also Iosif.

As I write this, my mother is still among the living. But as my father began to live, she began to die.

In her very womb I was formed by the waning tumescence of Soviet power. Engorged, a sleeper agent inserted in the field, leeching whatever I needed from her bones, muscles, glands. I was the reason she found herself in a special car and—like Red Riding Hood through a forest of wolves—being driven to a KGB Special Facility in Pereslavl-Zalesky (one of Moscow’s onion-domed “Golden Ring” towns), to visit her new husband, who was fulfilling his mandatory military service there as the physician-in-residence. I had been conceived during a brief furlough, in the two-room apartment my mother still shared with her parents in Moscow. She contracted gonorrhoea on that furlough. When she confronted my (eventual) father about this—perhaps he caught his social disease from one of the nurses—he told my mother he would give her a divorce and she could just abort the child. But somehow she just couldn’t. So she continued to die, and he continued to live and live and live.

I suppose my mother would tell me this story, many times, because she thought it proof of her heroism. I suppose it is proof of some kind, at least if one defines a hero the way Homer did: a warrior, someone who *acts*, without any moral claims. Or as Aristotle did: an intermediate kind of personage, not especially virtuous and just, whose misfortune arises not from vice or depravity, but from an error of judgment. So my mother is a hero. There isn’t a single person in the world—least of all

herself—who can judge her. She doesn’t exactly judge herself, but she exists in a counterfactual realm: She shouldn’t have married my father, she shouldn’t have left Russia, she shouldn’t have moved to Miami, she shouldn’t have let her son go to sleepaway camp, she shouldn’t have let her son go away to college, etc., etc.

My father never claimed to be a hero. That was reserved for his father, my other grandfather, who fought all the way to Berlin as a lieutenant colonel in a tank division. My first memories were of my father’s father, who died of a rare lung disease when I was 4 and who once told my uncle that if I pissed in his mouth he would drink it. I saw him on his deathbed, but I was not at his funeral, at which, I later learned, the citizens of Kursk organized an impromptu procession with his open casket through the heart of the town—a Russian Orthodox practice that had been banned for decades by the Soviet authorities. It turned out he had been everyone’s secret saint, not just mine.

My father never claimed to be a hero, and he never acted like one, even though, as one of Moscow’s best radiologists, he saved easily thousands of lives. He was—still is—a radiologist because he enjoyed being good at it. He lived, having remarried and fathered a daughter less than 10 years after my mother and I left Moscow. It’s true he wasn’t faithful when he was married to my mother. He once confided to my cousin, who confided to my wife, that he couldn’t stand my mother’s smell. What was he supposed to do? At first, she was life, and then she became death—and life was elsewhere.

The world wants to be seen. And sometimes I can pay attention. Like a Saul Bellow character: “I saw and saw and saw.” Dog sees squirrel, squirrel sees dog. Life and death can’t keep their eyes off each other.



HOLIDAYS



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3. TRANSPORTS

There are times when it is difficult to tell if you are treading water, floating, or swimming. I suppose this is a pretty good description of bewilderment—a feeling of having been thoroughly led astray or lured into the wilds, so thoroughly that you don't even know if you are just surviving, or floating on the lazy river of life, or even intentionally paddling to some destination.

One time, I was about 8, I suddenly realized I was floating away on an Atlantic riptide and had to swim to shore. At that moment a swell lifted and threw me onto the invisible pile of a ruined pier—a broken column of rust and splinters. It stuck to the soft flesh of my stomach as the waves kept lifting and dropping me back onto it. When my mother noticed me flailing and screaming, she swam over, shoved me off the pile and was herself impaled in my stead.

There we were, unmoored and moored, taking our turns atop this jagged ghost of what was probably once a fishing pier or maybe even an anchorage. Finally, my mother's date—some Russian man who had driven us out to this narrow, empty little beach on Collins Avenue and 30th Street on a late summer evening—paddled out to us on a pink inflatable raft and brought us back to shore, our palms and abdomens scratched and bleeding into his towels. It would take a year or two for the labyrinths of those scars to fade. This didn't seem like a metaphor back then, but after teaching literature for almost 30 years, it starts to look like one.

Before he died of bone cancer, a friend of mine described how he once rescued a drowning Japanese tourist in Vieques. He told him: "If you don't stop thrashing, I will let you go under, because otherwise both of us will drown."

For my first handful of birthdays in Miami Beach, my father would send

me a telegram from Moscow. "Dearest son!" he would begin and continue in the clipped effusion of formal Russian epistolary sentimentality: "I congratulate you on this birth day. Firmly kiss and embrace you. Wish you joy success health. Your father who misses you."

About a month after I turned 14, my mother and I visited New York over spring break. When we arrived at JFK, there were two men waiting to pick us up—a Russian man in a black leather jacket and his mentally impaired brother, like George and Lennie from *Of Mice and Men*, which I had just read in English class. I had never met them before, and it did not seem like my mother had ever met them either. They drove us through Brighton Beach, the brother sitting with me in the backseat amiably explaining how I might soon come to call him uncle. Finally, we arrived at the Coney Island Houses, where they lived together. It appeared that we were to spend the night. This is where we were staying. I plastered the headphones of my Sony Walkman (a bar mitzvah gift) to my ears, shut myself up in a bedroom and began to pace between the door and a window that looked out onto a desolate Housing Authority parking lot. When my mother came inside to check on me, I furiously whispered that we had to get the hell out of here. She immediately agreed. She seemed embarrassed. We looked in the white pages and found a number for a young American cousin, Lis Fiekowsky, who instantly told us to come crash at the house she shared in Queens with her Deadhead roommate and an Irish boyfriend who played bass in a blues band and had a braid that went down to his thighs.

Fleeing Brighton Beach for Queens felt like crossing an Iron Curtain. Lis worked as a taxi dispatcher—like a loudmouthed New Yorker from central casting. The Deadhead roommate had *Transformers* action figures and a vinyl collection I can still see when I close my eyes: The Clash, Jimi Hendrix, U2 bootlegs ... I made my own cassette recordings of all of them. I still have those dimly audible tapes. That same visit, my mother left me at the Plaza Hotel to visit a girl I had a minor crush on, a classmate who was also visiting New York

but who could stay at the Plaza and not in Queens or Brighton Beach. In the lobby we ran into Brooke Shields and her mother, and snapped furtive photos of them.

That spring in New York transported me to a new world, the world that had been hidden but now revealed, miraculously. The evening before we returned to Miami, we were watching the news with Lis and the Deadhead. It seemed to be a weather report. And it was, but not just that. The meteorologist was tracking the fallout from a nuclear disaster in Chernobyl. Prevailing winds would waft its brilliant plume across Scandinavia—where Swedes were obliged to pause their consumption of reindeer meat—and over Western Europe—where men working outside in the rain of Killearn for the Scottish Water Board would eventually all die of cancer—and then all the way to North America, where, two weeks later, spikes in radioactivity were detected in the milk of Duluth and the rainwater of Washington state.

I didn't know I was watching the overture to the implosion of an empire that evening in 1986. We flew back to Miami through a thunderstorm the next day. Three years later, my mother and I did something that would have been inconceivable when we left the fortress of the Soviet Union in 1978. Having exfiltrated, we returned to Moscow as American tourists. We would spend a month there and in Leningrad, as it would still be known for another two years. We traded two suitcases of used clothing for tins of caviar and Red Army surplus. Whenever friends or relatives would ask, I explained matter-of-factly that I had no wish to see my father. I was insistently indifferent.

But the day before we left Moscow, my mother called him without warning me. He showed up in a tracksuit, this doctor of radiology—full of cigarette baritone and bluster, telling me how much he regretted never having been able to teach me *mat*, the art of Russian obscenities. He left 20 minutes later. He had a newborn waiting for him at home. ■

This article was originally published on May 12, 2022.

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

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Pan-seared Mackerel

BY NINA LICHTENSTEIN

INGREDIENTS

- 4 medium sized mackerels, whole or in fillets (10"-12" long, without head and tail)**
- 1 stick salted butter; add more as needed**
- ½ to 1 cup white flour, for coating**
- Freshly ground black pepper**
- Kosher salt**
- Handful Italian/flat leaf parsley**
- 2 lemons**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Pour the flour into a shallow bowl or dish with edges, add generous amounts of freshly ground pepper and kosher salt. Rinse the fish in water, then coat it with the flour mixture, making sure all of it is covered white.

Step 2

Melt the butter on medium-high heat in a heavy skillet, preferably cast iron. Add fish and fry it until the skin looks brown and crispy, then turn it over, and do the same on the other side. You can check if the fish is done by sticking a knife into the thickest part; flesh should be white and not translucent and separate easily from the bone.

Step 3

Adjust heat as needed to prevent skin from burning. Since the fish should cook in generous amounts of butter (as this will also be used as sauce on top of both the fish and potatoes when served) make sure to add butter, if needed, while the fish is frying.

Step 4

When done, arrange fish on plates or a platter, sprinkle with liberal amounts of fresh parsley. Add lemons in halves around fish.

Step 5

Serve with cucumber-dill salad, boiled potatoes, and sour cream. It adds color and flavor when served with sweet pickled red beets, my favorite.

Yield: serves 4

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