

# PASSOVER

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# THE TAB

## CONTENTS

Vol. 2 Issue 13

- 1 A Guide to Understanding the Hoax of the Century**  
Thirteen ways of looking at disinformation
- 17 The Russo-Ukrainian War Through a Historian's Eyes**  
With a new Cold War emerging, can Israel continue to sit on the fence?
- 19 The Inner Life of Gender**  
Can old, dead, gay, white French males save us from the West's latest moral crusade?
- 22 Shabbos by the Sea**  
A walk to shul in South Florida reminded me how my observance has—and hasn't—changed over the course of my life
- 25 America's Original Bestselling Haggadah**  
Before there was Maxwell House, there was Mrs. Philip Cowen's 'Seder Service'
- 26 Supersized Seders**  
Massive Passover gatherings in Nepal cater to backpackers—by the thousands
- 28 Passover**  
An anthology for the holiday

### T MORE TABLET



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## NEWS

# A Guide to Understanding the Hoax of the Century

Thirteen ways of looking at disinformation

BY JACOB SIEGEL

### Prologue: The Information War

In 1950, Sen. Joseph McCarthy claimed that he had proof of a communist spy ring operating inside the government. Overnight, the explosive accusations blew up in the national press, but the details kept changing. Initially, McCarthy said he had a list with the names of 205 communists in the State Department; the next day he revised it to 57. Since he kept the list a secret, the inconsistencies were beside the point. The point was the power of the accusation, which made McCarthy's name synonymous with the politics of the era.

For more than half a century, McCarthyism stood as a defining chapter in the worldview of American liberals: a warning about the dangerous

allure of blacklists, witch hunts, and demagogues.

Until 2017, that is, when another list of alleged Russian agents roiled the American press and political class. A new outfit called Hamilton 68 claimed to have discovered hundreds of Russian-affiliated accounts that had infiltrated Twitter to sow chaos and help Donald Trump win the election. Russia stood accused of hacking social media platforms, the new centers of power, and using them to covertly direct events inside the United States.

None of it was true. After reviewing Hamilton 68's secret list, Twitter's safety officer, Yoel Roth, privately admitted that his company was allowing "real people" to be "unilaterally labeled Russian stooges without evidence or recourse."

The Hamilton 68 episode played out

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BY ROKHL KAFRISSEN



as a nearly shot-for-shot remake of the McCarthy affair, with one important difference: McCarthy faced some resistance from leading journalists as well as from the U.S. intelligence agencies and his fellow members of Congress. In our time, those same groups lined up to support the new secret lists and attack anyone who questioned them.

When proof emerged earlier this year that Hamilton 68 was a high-level hoax perpetrated against the American people, it was met with a great wall of

silence in the national press. The disinterest was so profound, it suggested a matter of principle rather than convenience for the standard-bearers of American liberalism who had lost faith in the promise of freedom and embraced a new ideal.

In his last days in office, President Barack Obama made the decision to set the country on a new course. On Dec. 23, 2016, he signed into law the Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act, which used the language of defending the homeland to launch an open-ended, offensive information war.

Something in the looming specter of Donald Trump and the populist movements of 2016 reawakened sleeping monsters in the West. Disinformation, a half-forgotten relic of the Cold War, was newly spoken of as an urgent, existential threat. Russia was said to have exploited the vulnerabilities of the open internet to bypass U.S. strategic defenses by infiltrating private citizens' phones and laptops. The Kremlin's endgame was to colonize the minds of its targets, a tactic cyber warfare specialists call "cognitive hacking."

Defeating this specter was treated as a matter of national survival. "The U.S. Is Losing at Influence Warfare," warned a December 2016 article in the defense industry journal, *Defense One*. The article quoted two government insiders arguing that laws written to protect U.S. citizens from state spying were jeopardizing national security. According to Rand Waltzman, a former program manager at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, America's adversaries enjoyed a "significant advantage" as the result of "legal and organizational constraints that we are subject to and they are not."

The point was echoed by Michael Lumpkin, who headed the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), the agency Obama designated to run the U.S. counter-disinformation campaign. Lumpkin singled out the Privacy Act of 1974, a post-Watergate law protecting U.S. citizens from having their data collected by the government, as antiquated. "The 1974 act was created to make sure that we aren't collecting data on U.S. citizens. Well,

... by definition the World Wide Web is worldwide. There is no passport that goes with it. If it's a Tunisian citizen in the United States or a U.S. citizen in Tunisia, I don't have the ability to discern that ... If I had more ability to work with that [personally identifiable information] and had access ... I could do more targeting, more definitively, to make sure I could hit the right message to the right audience at the right time."

The message from the U.S. defense establishment was clear: To win the information war—an existential conflict taking place in the borderless dimensions of cyberspace—the government needed to dispense with outdated legal distinctions between foreign terrorists and American citizens.

Since 2016, the federal government has spent billions of dollars on turning the counter-disinformation complex into one of the most powerful forces in the modern world: a sprawling Leviathan with tentacles reaching into both the public and private sector, which the government uses to direct a "whole of society" effort that aims to seize total control over the internet and achieve nothing less than the eradication of human error.

Step one in the national mobilization to defeat disinfo fused the U.S. national security infrastructure with the social media platforms, where the war was being fought. The government's lead counter-disinformation agency, the GEC, declared that its mission entailed "seeking out and engaging the best talent within the technology sector." To that end, the government started deputizing tech executives as de facto wartime information commissars.

At companies like Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Amazon, the upper management levels had always included veterans of the national security establishment. But with the new alliance between U.S. national security and social media, the former spooks and intelligence agency officials grew into a dominant bloc inside those companies; what had been a career ladder by which people stepped up from their government experience to reach private tech-sector jobs turned into an ouroboros that molded the two together. With

the D.C.-Silicon Valley fusion, the federal bureaucracies could rely on informal social connections to push their agenda inside the tech companies.

In the fall of 2017, the FBI opened its Foreign Influence Task Force for the express purpose of monitoring social media to flag accounts trying to “discredit U.S. individuals and institutions.” The Department of Homeland Security took on a similar role.

At around the same time, Hamilton 68 blew up. Publicly, Twitter’s algorithms turned the Russian-influence-exposing “dashboard” into a major news story. Behind the scenes, Twitter executives quickly figured out that it was a scam. When Twitter reverse-engineered the secret list, it found, according to the journalist Matt Taibbi, that “instead of tracking how Russia influenced American attitudes, Hamilton 68 simply collected a handful of mostly real, mostly American accounts and described their organic conversations as Russian scheming.” The discovery prompted Twitter’s head of trust and safety, Yoel Roth, to suggest in an October 2017 email that the company take action to expose the hoax and “call this out on the bullshit it is.”

In the end, neither Roth nor anyone else said a word. Instead, they let a purveyor of industrial-grade bullshit—the

old-fashioned term for *disinformation*—continue dumping its contents directly into the news stream.

It was not enough for a few powerful agencies to combat disinformation. The strategy of national mobilization called for “not only the whole-of-government, but also whole-of-society” approach, according to a document released by the GEC in 2018. “To counter propaganda and disinformation,” the agency stated, “will require leveraging expertise from across government, tech and marketing sectors, academia, and NGOs.”

This is how the government-created “war against disinformation” became the great moral crusade of its time. CIA officers at Langley came to share a cause with hip young journalists in Brooklyn, progressive nonprofits in D.C., George Soros-funded think tanks in Prague, racial equity consultants, private equity consultants, tech company staffers in Silicon Valley, Ivy League researchers, and failed British royals. Never Trump Republicans joined forces with the Democratic National Committee, which declared online disinformation “a whole-of-society problem that requires a whole-of-society response.”

Even trenchant critics of the phenomenon—including Taibbi and the *Columbia Journalism Review*’s Jeff Gerth, who recently published a dissection of the press’s role in promoting false Trump-Russia collusion claims—have focused on the media’s failures, a framing largely shared by conservative publications, which treat disinformation as an issue of partisan censorship bias. But while there’s no question that the media has utterly disgraced itself, it’s also a convenient fall guy—by far the weakest player in the counter-disinformation complex. The American press, once the guardian of democracy, was hollowed out to the point that it could be worn like a hand puppet by the U.S. security agencies and party operatives.

It would be nice to call what has taken place a tragedy, but an audience is meant to learn something from a tragedy. As a nation, America not only has learned nothing, it has been deliberately prevented from learning anything while being made to chase after shadows. This is not because Americans are stupid; it’s

because what has taken place is not a tragedy but something closer to a crime. Disinformation is both the name of the crime and the means of covering it up; a weapon that doubles as a disguise.

The crime is the information war itself, which was launched under false pretenses and by its nature destroys the essential boundaries between the public and private and between the foreign and domestic, on which peace and democracy depend. By conflating the anti-establishment politics of domestic populists with acts of war by foreign enemies, it justified turning weapons of war against Americans citizens. It turned the public arenas where social and political life take place into surveillance traps and targets for mass psychological operations. The crime is the routine violation of Americans’ rights by unelected officials who secretly control what individuals can think and say.

What we are seeing now, in the revelations exposing the inner workings of the state-corporate censorship regime, is only the end of the beginning. The United States is still in the earliest stages of a mass mobilization that aims to harness every sector of society under a singular technocratic rule. The mobilization, which began as a response to the supposedly urgent menace of Russian interference, now evolves into a regime of total information control that has arrogated to itself the mission of eradicating abstract dangers such as error, injustice, and harm—a goal worthy only of leaders who believe themselves to be infallible, or comic-book supervillains.

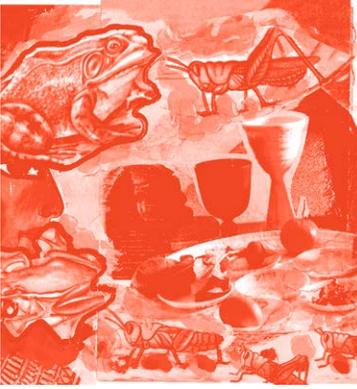
The first phase of the information war was marked by distinctively human displays of incompetence and brute-force intimidation. But the next stage, already underway, is being carried out through both scalable processes of artificial intelligence and algorithmic pre-censorship that are invisibly encoded into the infrastructure of the internet, where they can alter the perceptions of billions of people.

Something monstrous is taking shape in America. Formally, it exhibits the synergy of state and corporate power in service of a tribal zeal that is the hallmark of fascism. Yet anyone who spends time in America and is not a

 **UPCOMING HOLIDAY**

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**Passover**  
Remembering the Exodus



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brainwashed zealot can tell that it is not a fascist country. What is coming into being is a new form of government and social organization that is as different from mid-twentieth century liberal democracy as the early American republic was from the British monarchism that it grew out of and eventually supplanted. A state organized on the principle that it exists to protect the sovereign rights of individuals, is being replaced by a digital leviathan that wields power through opaque algorithms and the manipulation of digital swarms. It resembles the Chinese system of social credit and one-party state control, and yet that, too, misses the distinctively American and providential character of the control system. In the time we lose trying to name it, the thing itself may disappear back into the bureaucratic shadows, covering up any trace of it with automated deletions from the top-secret data centers of Amazon Web Services, “the trusted cloud for government.”

When the blackbird flew out  
of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.

In a technical or structural sense, the censorship regime’s aim is not to censor or to oppress, but to rule. That’s why the authorities can never be labeled as guilty of disinformation. Not when they lied about Hunter Biden’s laptops, not when they claimed that the lab leak was a racist conspiracy, not when they said that vaccines stopped transmission of the novel coronavirus. Disinformation, now and for all time, is whatever they say it is. That is not a sign that the concept is being misused or corrupted; it is the precise functioning of a totalitarian system.

If the underlying philosophy of the war against disinformation can be expressed in a single claim, it is this: You cannot be trusted with your own mind. What follows is an attempt to see how this philosophy has manifested in reality. It approaches the subject of disinformation from 13 angles—like the “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” Wallace Stevens’ 1917 poem—with the aim that the composite of these partial

views will provide a useful impression of disinformation’s true shape and ultimate design.

### **I. Russophobia Returns, Unexpectedly: The Origins of Contemporary “Disinformation”**

The foundations of the current information war were laid in response to a sequence of events that took place in 2014. First Russia tried to suppress the U.S.-backed Euromaidan movement in Ukraine; a few months later Russia invaded Crimea; and several months after that the Islamic State captured the city of Mosul in northern Iraq and declared it the capital of a new caliphate. In three separate conflicts, an enemy or rival power of the United States was seen to have successfully used not just military might but also social media messaging campaigns designed to confuse and demoralize its enemies—a combination known as “hybrid warfare.” These conflicts convinced U.S. and NATO security officials that the power of social media to shape public perceptions had evolved to the point where it could decide the outcome of modern wars—outcomes that might be counter to those the United States wanted. They concluded that the state had to acquire the means to take control over digital communications so that they could present reality as they wanted it to be, and prevent reality from becoming anything else.

Technically, *hybrid warfare* refers to an approach that combines military and non-military means—overt and covert operations mixed with cyberwarfare and influence operations—to both confuse and weaken a target while avoiding direct, full-scale conventional war. In practice, it is notoriously vague. “The term now covers every type of discernible Russian activity, from propaganda to conventional warfare, and most that exists in between,” wrote Russia analyst Michael Kofman in March 2016.

Over the past decade, Russia has indeed repeatedly employed tactics associated with hybrid warfare, including a push to target Western audiences with messaging on channels like RT and Sputnik News and with cyber

operations such as the use of “troll” accounts. But this was not new even in 2014, and it was something the United States, as well as every other major power, engaged in as well. As early as 2011, the United States was building its own “troll armies” online by developing software to “secretly manipulate social media sites by using fake online personas to influence internet conversations and spread pro-American propaganda.”

“If you torture hybrid warfare long enough, it will tell you anything,” Kofman had admonished, which is precisely what began happening a few months later when Trump critics popularized the idea that a hidden Russian hand was the puppeteer of political developments inside the United States.

The leading voice promoting that claim was a former FBI officer and counterterrorism analyst named Clint Watts. In an article from August 2016, “How Russia Dominates Your Twitter Feed to Promote Lies (And, Trump, Too),” Watts and his co-author, Andrew Weisburd, described how Russia had revived its Cold War-era “Active Measures” campaign, using propaganda and disinformation to influence foreign audiences. As a result, according to the article, Trump voters and Russian propagandists were promoting the same stories on social media that were intended to make America look weak and incompetent. The authors made the extraordinary claim that the “melding of Russian-friendly accounts and Trumpkins has been going on for some time.” If that was true, it meant that anyone expressing support for Donald Trump might be an agent of the Russian government, whether or not the person intended to play that role. It meant that the people they called “Trumpkins,” who made up half the country, were attacking America from within. It meant that politics was now war, as it is in many parts of the world, and tens of millions of Americans were the enemy.

Watts made his name as a counterterrorism analyst by studying the social media strategies used by ISIS, but with articles like this, he became the media’s go-to expert on Russian trolls and Kremlin disinformation campaigns. It seems he also had powerful backers.

In his book *The Assault on Intelligence*, retired CIA chief Michael Hayden called Watts “the one man, who more than any other was trying to ring the alarm more than two years before the 2016 elections.”

Hayden credited Watts in his book with teaching him the power of social media: “Watts pointed out to me that Twitter makes falsehoods seem more believable through sheer repetition and volume. He labeled it a kind of ‘computational propaganda.’ Twitter in turn drives mainstream media.”

A false story algorithmically amplified by Twitter and disseminated by the media—it’s no coincidence that this perfectly describes the “bullshit” spread on Twitter about Russian influence operations: In 2017, it was Watts who came up with the idea for the Hamilton 68 dashboard and helped spearhead the initiative.

## II. Trump’s Election: “It’s Facebook’s Fault”

No one thought Trump was a normal politician. Being an ogre, Trump horrified millions of Americans who felt a personal betrayal in the possibility that he would occupy the same office held by George Washington and Abe Lincoln. Trump also threatened the business interests of the most powerful sectors of society. It was the latter offense, rather than his putative racism or flagrant un-presidentialness, that sent the ruling class into a state of apoplexy.

Given his focus in office on lowering the corporate tax rate, it’s easy to forget that Republican officials and the party’s donor class saw Trump as a dangerous radical who threatened their business ties with China, their access to cheap imported labor, and the lucrative business of constant war. But, indeed, that is how they saw him, as reflected in the unprecedented response to Trump’s candidacy recorded by *The Wall Street Journal* in September 2016: “No chief executive at the nation’s 100 largest companies had donated to Republican Donald Trump’s presidential campaign through August, a sharp reversal from 2012, when nearly a third of the CEOs

of Fortune 100 companies supported GOP nominee Mitt Romney.”

The phenomenon was not unique to Trump. Bernie Sanders, the left-wing populist candidate in 2016, was also seen as a dangerous threat by the ruling class. But whereas the Democrats successfully sabotaged Sanders, Trump made it past his party’s gatekeepers, which meant that he had to be dealt with by other means.

Two days after Trump took office, a smirking Senator Chuck Schumer told MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow that it was “really dumb” of the new president to get on the bad side of the security agencies that were supposed to work for him: “Let me tell you, you take on the intelligence community, they have six ways from Sunday of getting back at you.”

Trump had used sites like Twitter to bypass his party’s elites and connect directly with his supporters. Therefore, to cripple the new president and ensure that no one like him could ever come to power again, the intel agencies had to break the independence of the social media platforms. Conveniently, it was the same lesson that many intelligence and defense officials had drawn from the ISIS and Russian campaigns of 2014—namely, that social media was too powerful to be left outside of state control—only applied to domestic politics, which meant the agencies would now have help from politicians who stood to benefit from the effort.

Immediately after the election, Hillary Clinton started blaming Facebook for her loss. Until this point, Facebook and Twitter had tried to remain above the political fray, fearful of jeopardizing potential profits by alienating either party. But now a profound change occurred, as the operation behind the Clinton campaign reoriented itself not simply to reform the social media platforms, but to conquer them. The lesson they took from Trump’s victory was that Facebook and Twitter—more than Michigan and Florida—were the critical battlegrounds where political contests were won or lost. “Many of us are beginning to talk about what a big problem this is,” Clinton’s chief digital strategist Teddy Goff told Politico the week after

the election, referring to Facebook’s alleged role in boosting Russian disinformation that helped Trump. “Both from the campaign and from the administration, and just sort of broader Obama orbit...this is one of the things we would like to take on post-election,” Goff said.

The press repeated that message so often that it gave the political strategy the appearance of objective validity:

“Donald Trump Won Because of Facebook”; *New York Magazine*, Nov. 9, 2016.

“Facebook, in Cross Hairs After Election, Is Said to Question Its Influence”; *The New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2016.

“Russian propaganda effort helped spread ‘fake news’ during election, experts say”; *The Washington Post*, Nov. 24, 2016.

“Disinformation, Not Fake News, Got Trump Elected, and It Is Not Stopping”; *The Intercept*, Dec. 6, 2016.

And on it went in countless articles that dominated the news cycle for the next two years.

At first, Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg dismissed the charge that fake news posted on his platform had influenced the outcome of the election as “pretty crazy.” But Zuckerberg faced an intense pressure campaign in which every sector of the American ruling class, including his own employees, blamed him for putting a Putin agent in the White House, effectively accusing him of high treason. The final straw came a few weeks after the election when Obama himself “publicly denounced the spread of fake news on Facebook.” Two days later, Zuckerberg folded: “Facebook announces new push against fake news after Obama comments.”

The false yet foundational claim that Russia hacked the 2016 election provided a justification—just like the claims about weapons of mass destruction that triggered the Iraq War—to plunge America into a wartime state of exception. With the normal rules of constitutional democracy suspended, a coterie of party operatives and security officials then installed a vast, largely invisible new architecture of social control on the backend of the internet’s biggest platforms.

Though there was never a public

order given, the U.S. government began enforcing martial law online.

### III. Why Do We Need All This Data About People?

The American doctrine of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare famously calls for “winning hearts and minds.” The idea is that victory against insurgent groups depends on gaining the support of the local population, which cannot be accomplished by brute force alone. In places like Vietnam and Iraq, support was secured through a combination of nation-building and appealing to locals by providing them with goods they were presumed to value: money and jobs, for instance, or stability.

Because cultural values vary and what is prized by an Afghan villager may appear worthless to a Swedish accountant, successful counterinsurgents must learn what makes the native population tick. To win over a mind, first you have to get inside it to understand its wants and fears. When that fails, there is another approach in the modern military arsenal to take its place: counterterrorism. Where counterinsurgency tries to win local support, counterterrorism tries to hunt down and kill designated enemies.

Despite the apparent tension in their contrasting approaches, the two strategies have often been used in tandem. Both rely on extensive surveillance networks to gather intelligence on their targets, whether that is figuring out where to dig wells or locating terrorists in order to kill them. But the counterinsurgent in particular imagines that if he can learn enough about a population, it will be possible to reengineer its society. Obtaining answers is just a matter of using the right resources: a combination of surveillance tools and social scientific methods, the joint output of which feeds into all-powerful centralized databases that are believed to contain the totality of the war.

I have observed, reflecting on my experiences as a U.S. Army intelligence officer in Afghanistan, how, “data analytics tools at the fingertips of anyone with access to an operations center or situation room seemed to promise the imminent convergence of map and

“The Pentagon built the proto-internet known as ARPANET in 1969 because it needed a decentralized communications infrastructure that could survive nuclear war—but that was not the only goal.”

territory,” but ended up becoming a trap as “U.S. forces could measure thousands of different things that we couldn’t understand.” We tried to cover for that deficit by acquiring even more data. If only we could gather enough information and harmonize it with the correct algorithms, we believed, the database would divine the future.

Not only is that framework foundational in modern American counterinsurgency doctrine, but also it was part of the original impetus for building the internet. The Pentagon built the proto-internet known as ARPANET in 1969 because it needed a decentralized communications infrastructure that could survive nuclear war—but that was not the only goal. The internet, writes Yasha Levine in his history of the subject, *Surveillance Valley*, was also “an attempt to build computer systems that could collect and share intelligence, watch the world in real time, and study and analyze people and political movements with the ultimate goal of predicting and preventing social upheaval. Some even dreamed of creating a sort of early warning radar for human societies: a networked computer system that watched for social and political threats and intercepted them in much the same

way that traditional radar did for hostile aircraft.”

In the days of the internet “freedom agenda,” the popular mythology of Silicon Valley depicted it as a laboratory of freaks, self-starters, free thinkers, and libertarian tinkerers who just wanted to make cool things without the government slowing them down. The alternative history, outlined in Levine’s book, highlights that the internet “always had a dual-use nature rooted in intelligence gathering and war.” There is truth in both versions, but after 2001 the distinction disappeared.

As Shoshana Zuboff writes in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, at the start of the war on terror “the elective affinity between public intelligence agencies and the fledgling surveillance capitalist Google blossomed in the heat of emergency to produce a unique historical deformity: surveillance exceptionalism.”

In Afghanistan, the military had to employ costly drones and “Human Terrain Teams” staffed with adventurous academics to survey the local population and extract their relevant sociological data. But with Americans spending hours a day voluntarily feeding their every thought directly into data monopolies connected to the defense sector, it must have seemed trivially easy for anyone with control of the databases to manipulate the sentiments of the population at home.

More than a decade ago, the Pentagon began funding the development of a host of tools for detecting and countering terrorist messaging on social media. Some were part of a broader “memetic warfare” initiative inside the military that included proposals to weaponize memes to “defeat an enemy ideology and win over the masses of undecided non-combatants.” But most of the programs, launched in response to the rise of ISIS and the jihadist group’s adept use of social media, focused on scaling up automated means of detecting and censoring terrorist messaging online. Those efforts culminated in January 2016 with the State Department’s announcement that it would be opening the aforementioned Global Engagement Center, headed by Michael Lumpkin. Just a few months later, President Obama put the

GEC in charge of the new war against disinformation. On the same day that the GEC was announced, Obama and “various high-ranking members of the national security establishment met with representatives from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other Internet powerhouses to discuss how the United States can fight ISIS messaging via social media.”

In the wake of the populist upheavals of 2016, leading figures in America’s ruling party seized upon the feedback loop of surveillance and control refined through the war on terror as a method for maintaining power inside the United States. Weapons created to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda were turned against Americans who entertained incorrect thoughts about the president or vaccine boosters or gender pronouns or the war in Ukraine.

Former State Department official Mike Benz, who now runs an organization called the Foundation for Freedom Online that bills itself as a digital free-speech watchdog, describes how a company called Graphika, which is “essentially a U.S. Department of Defense-funded censorship consortium” that was created to fight terrorists, was repurposed to censor political speech in America. The company, “initially funded to help do social media counter-insurgency work effectively in conflict zones for the U.S. military,” was then “redeployed domestically both on Covid censorship and political censorship,” Benz told an interviewer. “Graphika was deployed to monitor social media discourse about Covid and Covid origins, Covid conspiracies, or Covid sorts of issues.”

The fight against ISIS morphed into the fight against Trump and “Russian collusion,” which morphed into the fight against disinformation. But those were just branding changes; the underlying technological infrastructure and ruling-class philosophy, which claimed the right to remake the world based on a religious sense of expertise, remained unchanged. The human art of politics, which would have required real negotiation and compromise with Trump supporters, was abandoned in favor of a specious science of top-down social

engineering that aimed to produce a totally administered society.

For the American ruling class, COIN replaced politics as the proper means of dealing with the natives.

#### **IV. The Internet: From Darling to Demon**

Once upon a time, the internet was going to save the world. The first dot-com boom in the 1990s popularized the idea of the internet as a technology for maximizing human potential and spreading democracy. The Clinton administration’s 1997 “A Framework for Global Electronic Commerce” put forth the vision: “The Internet is a medium that has tremendous potential for promoting individual freedom and individual empowerment” and “[t]herefore, where possible, the individual should be left in control of the way in which he or she uses this medium.” The smart people in the West mocked the naive efforts in other parts of the world to control the flow of information. In 2000, President Clinton scoffed that China’s internet crackdown was “like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” The hype continued through the Bush administration, when internet companies were seen as crucial partners in the state’s mass surveillance program and its plan to bring democracy to the Middle East.

But the hype really went into overdrive when President Obama was elected through a “big data”-driven campaign that prioritized social media outreach. There appeared to be a genuine philosophical alignment between Obama’s political style as the “Hope” and “Change” president whose guiding principle in foreign policy was “Don’t do dumb shit” and the internet search company whose original motto was “Do no evil.” There were also deep personal ties connecting the two powers, with 252 cases over the course of Obama’s presidency of people moving between jobs at the White House and Google. From 2009 to 2015, White House and Google employees were meeting, on average, more than once a week.

As Obama’s secretary of state, Hillary Clinton led the government’s “Internet freedom” agenda, which aimed

to “promote online communications as a tool for opening up closed societies.” In a speech from 2010, Clinton issued a warning about the spread of digital censorship in authoritarian regimes: “A new information curtain is descending across much of the world,” she said. “And beyond this partition, viral videos and blog posts are becoming the samizdat of our day.”

It is a supreme irony that the very people who a decade ago led the freedom agenda for other countries have since pushed the United States to implement one of the largest and most powerful censorship machines in existence under the guise of fighting disinformation.

Or perhaps *irony* is not the right word to capture the difference between the freedom-loving Clinton of a decade ago and the pro-censorship activist of today, but it gets at what appears to be the about-face done by a class of people who were public standard-bearers for radically different ideas barely 10 years earlier. These people—politicians, first and foremost—saw (and presented) internet freedom as a positive force for humanity when it empowered them and served their interests, but as something demonic when it broke down those hierarchies of power and benefited their opponents. That’s how to bridge the gap between the Hillary Clinton of 2013 and the Clinton of 2023: Both see the internet as an immensely powerful tool for driving political processes and effecting regime change.

Which is why, in the Clinton and Obama worlds, the rise of Donald Trump looked like a profound betrayal—because, as they saw it, Silicon Valley could have stopped it but didn’t. As heads of the government’s internet policy, they had helped the tech companies build their fortunes on mass surveillance and evangelized the internet as a beacon of freedom and progress while turning a blind eye to their flagrant violations of antitrust statutes. In return, the tech companies had done the unthinkable—not because they had allowed Russia to “hack the election,” which was a desperate accusation thrown out to mask the stench of failure, but because they refused to intervene to prevent Donald Trump from winning.

In his book *Who Owns the Future?*, tech pioneer Jaron Lanier writes, “The primary business of digital networking has come to be the creation of ultra-secret mega-dossiers about what others are doing, and using this information to concentrate money and power.” Because digital economies produce ever-greater concentrations of data and power, the inevitable happened: The tech companies got too powerful.

What could the leaders of the ruling party do? They had two options. They could use the government’s regulatory power to counter-attack: Break up the data monopolies and restructure the social contract underwriting the internet so that individuals retained ownership of their data instead of having it ripped off every time they clicked into a public commons. Or, they could preserve the tech companies’ power while forcing them to drop the pretense of neutrality and instead line up behind the ruling party—a tempting prospect, given what they could do with all that power.

They chose option B.

Declaring the platforms guilty of electing Trump—a candidate every bit as loathsome to the highly educated elites in Silicon Valley as he was to the highly educated elites in New York and D.C.—provided the club that the media and the political class used to beat the tech companies into becoming more powerful and more obedient.

## **V. Russiagate! Russiagate! Russiagate!**

If one imagines that the American ruling class faced a problem—Donald Trump appeared to threaten their institutional survival—then the Russia investigation didn’t just provide the means to unite the various branches of that class, in and out of government, against a common foe. It also gave them the ultimate form of leverage over the most powerful non-aligned sector of society: the tech industry. The coordination necessary to carry out the Russian collusion frame-up was the vehicle, fusing (1) the political goals of the Democratic Party, (2) the institutional agenda of the intelligence and

security agencies, and (3) the narrative power and moral fervor of the media with (4) the tech companies’ surveillance architecture.

The secret FISA warrant that allowed U.S. security agencies to begin spying on the Trump campaign was based on the Steele dossier, a partisan hatchet job paid for by Hillary Clinton’s team that consisted of provably false reports alleging a working relationship between Donald Trump and the Russian government. While a powerful short-term weapon against Trump, the dossier was also obvious bullshit, which suggested it might eventually become a liability.

Disinformation solved that problem while placing a nuclear-grade weapon in the arsenal of the anti-Trump resistance. In the beginning, disinformation had been only one among a half-dozen talking points coming from the anti-Trump camp. It won out over the others because it was capable of explaining anything and everything yet simultaneously remained so ambiguous it could not be disproved. Defensively, it provided a means to attack and discredit anyone who questioned the dossier or the larger claim that Trump colluded with Russia.

All the old McCarthyite tricks were new again. *The Washington Post* aggressively trumpeted the claim that disinformation swung the 2016 election, a crusade that began within days of Trump’s victory, with the article “Russian propaganda effort helped spread ‘fake news’ during election, experts say.” (The lead expert quoted in the article: Clint Watts.)

A steady flow of leaks from intelligence officials to national security reporters had already established the false narrative that there was credible evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin. When Trump won in spite of those reports, the senior officials responsible for spreading them, most notably CIA chief John Brennan, doubled down on their claims. Two weeks before Trump took office, the Obama administration released a declassified version of an intelligence community assessment, known as an ICA, on “Russian Activities and

Intentions in Recent Elections,” which asserted that “Putin and the Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump.”

The ICA was presented as the objective, nonpolitical consensus reached by multiple intelligence agencies. In the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jeff Gerth writes that the assessment received “massive, and largely uncritical coverage” in the press. But, in fact, the ICA was just the opposite: a selectively curated political document that deliberately omitted contrary evidence to create the impression that the collusion narrative was not a widely disputed rumor, but an objective fact.

A classified report by the House Intelligence Committee on the creation of the ICA detailed just how unusual and nakedly political it was. “It wasn’t 17 agencies, and it wasn’t even a dozen analysts from the three agencies who wrote the assessment,” a senior intelligence official who read a draft version of the House report told the journalist Paul Sperry. “It was just five officers of the CIA who wrote it, and Brennan handpicked all five. And the lead writer was a good friend of Brennan’s.” An Obama appointee, Brennan had broken with precedent by weighing in on politics while serving as CIA director. That set the stage for his post-government career as an MSNBC analyst and “resistance” figure who made headlines by accusing Trump of treason.

Mike Pompeo, who succeeded Brennan at the CIA, said that as the agency’s director, he learned that “senior analysts who had been working on Russia for nearly their entire careers were made bystanders” when the ICA was being written. According to Sperry, Brennan “excluded conflicting evidence about Putin’s motives from the report, despite objections from some intelligence analysts who argued Putin counted on Clinton winning the election and viewed Trump as a ‘wild card.’” (Brennan was also the one who overrode the objections of other agencies to include the Steele dossier as part of the official assessment.)

Despite its irregularities, the ICA worked as intended: Trump began his presidency under a cloud of suspicion

that he was never able to dispel. Just as Schumer promised, the intelligence officials wasted no time in taking their revenge.

And not only revenge, but also forward-planning action. The claim that Russia hacked the 2016 vote allowed federal agencies to implement the new public-private censorship machinery under the pretext of ensuring “election integrity.” People who expressed true and constitutionally protected opinions about the 2016 election (and later about issues like COVID-19 and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan) were labeled un-American, racists, conspiracists, and stooges of Vladimir Putin and systematically removed from the digital public square to prevent their ideas from spreading disinformation. By an extremely conservative estimate based on public reporting, there have been tens of millions of such cases of censorship since Trump’s election.

And here’s the climax of this particular entry: On Jan. 6, 2017—the same day that Brennan’s ICA report lent institutional backing to the false claim that Putin helped Trump—Jeh Johnson, the outgoing Obama-appointed secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, announced that, in response to Russian electoral interference, he had designated U.S. election systems as “critical national infrastructure.” The move placed the property of 8,000 election jurisdictions across the country under the control of the DHS. It was a coup that Johnson had been attempting to pull off since the summer of 2016, but that, as he explained in a later speech, was blocked by local stakeholders who told him “that running elections in this country was the sovereign and exclusive responsibility of the states, and they did not want federal intrusion, a federal takeover, or federal regulation of that process.” So Johnson found a work-around by unilaterally rushing the measure through in his last days in office.

It’s clear now why Johnson was in such a rush: Within a few years, all of the claims used to justify the extraordinary federal seizure of the country’s electoral system would fall apart. In July 2019 the Mueller report concluded that Donald Trump did not collude

with the Russian government—the same conclusion reached by the inspector general’s report into the origins of the Trump-Russia probe, released later that year. Finally, on Jan. 9, 2023, *The Washington Post* quietly published an addendum in its cybersecurity newsletter about New York University’s Center for Social Media and Politics study. Its conclusion: “Russian trolls on Twitter had little influence on 2016 voters.”

But by then it didn’t matter. In the final two weeks of the Obama administration, the new counter-disinformation apparatus scored one of its most significant victories: the power to directly oversee federal elections that would have profound consequences for the 2020 contest between Trump and Joe Biden.

## VI. Why the Post-9/11 “War on Terror” Never Ended

Clint Watts, who headed up the Hamilton 68 initiative, and Michael Hayden, the former Air Force general, CIA chief, and NSA director who championed Watts, are both veterans of the U.S. counterterrorism establishment. Hayden ranks among the most senior intelligence officers the United States has ever produced and was a principal architect of the post-9/11 mass surveillance system. Indeed, an astounding percentage of the key figures in the counter-disinformation complex cut their teeth in the worlds of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency warfare.

Michael Lumpkin, who headed the GEC, the State Department agency that served as the first command center in the war against disinformation, is a former Navy SEAL with a counterterrorism background. The GEC itself grew out of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications before being repurposed to fight disinformation.

Twitter had the chance to stop the Hamilton 68 hoax before it got out of hand, yet chose not to. Why? The answer can be seen in the emails sent by a Twitter executive named Emily Horne, who advised against calling out the scam. Twitter had a smoking gun showing that the Alliance for Securing Democracy, the neoliberal think

tank behind the Hamilton 68 initiative, was guilty of exactly the charge it made against others: peddling disinformation that inflamed domestic political divisions and undermined the legitimacy of democratic institutions. But that had to be weighed against other factors, Horne suggested, such as the need to stay on the good side of a powerful organization. “We have to be careful in how much we push back on ASD publicly,” she wrote in February 2018.

The ASD was lucky to have someone like Horne on the inside of Twitter. Then again, maybe it wasn’t luck. Horne had previously worked at the State Department, handling the “digital media and think tank outreach” portfolio. According to her LinkedIn, she “worked closely with foreign policy reporters covering [ISIS] ... and executed communications plans relating to Counter-[ISIS] Coalition activities.” Put another way, she had a background in counterterrorism operations similar to Watts’ but with more of an emphasis on spinning the press and civil society groups. From there she became the director for strategic communications for Obama’s National Security Council, only leaving to join Twitter in June 2017. Sharpen the focus on that timeline, and here’s what it shows: Horne joined Twitter one month before the launch of ASD, just in time to advocate for protecting a group run by the kind of power brokers who held the keys to her professional future.

It is no coincidence that the war against disinformation began at the very moment the Global War on Terror (GWOT) finally appeared to be coming to an end. Over two decades, the GWOT fulfilled President Dwight Eisenhower’s warnings about the rise of a military-industrial complex with “unwarranted influence.” It evolved into a self-interested, self-justifying industry that employed thousands of people in and out of government who operated without clear oversight or strategic utility. It might have been possible for the U.S. security establishment to declare victory and move from a permanent war footing to a peacetime posture, but as one former White House national security official explained to me, that was unlikely. “If you work in counterterrorism,”

the former official said, “there’s no incentive to ever say that you’re winning, kicking their ass, and they’re a bunch of losers. It’s all about hyping a threat.” He described “huge incentives to inflate the threat” that have been internalized in the culture of the U.S. defense establishment and are “of a nature that they don’t require one to be particularly craven or intellectually dishonest.”

“This huge machinery was built around the war on terror,” the official said. “A massive infrastructure that includes the intelligence world, all the elements of DoD, including the combatant commands, CIA and FBI and all the other agencies. And then there are all the private contractors and the demand in think tanks. I mean, there are billions and billions of dollars at stake.”

The seamless transition from the war on terror to the war on disinformation was thus, in large measure, simply a matter of professional self-preservation. But it was not enough to sustain the previous system; to survive, it needed to continually raise the threat level.

In the months after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, George W. Bush promised to drain the swamps of radicalism in the Middle East. Only by making the region safe for democracy, Bush said, could he ensure that it would stop producing violent jihadists like Osama bin Laden.

Today, to keep America safe, it is no longer enough to invade the Middle East and bring its people democracy. According to the Biden White House and the army of disinformation experts, the threat is now coming from within. A network of right-wing domestic extremists, QAnon fanatics, and white nationalists is supported by a far larger population of some 70 million Trump voters whose political sympathies amount to a fifth column within the United States. But how did these people get radicalized into accepting the bitter and destructive white jihad of Trumpist ideology? Through the internet, of course, where the tech companies, by refusing to “do more” to combat the scourge of hate speech and fake news, allowed toxic disinformation to poison users’ minds.

After 9/11, the threat of terrorism was used to justify measures like the Patriot

Act that suspended constitutional rights and placed millions of Americans under a shadow of mass surveillance. Those policies were once controversial but have come to be accepted as the natural prerogatives of state power. As journalist Glenn Greenwald observed, George W. Bush’s “with-us-or-with-the-terrorists’ directive provoked a fair amount of outrage at the time but is now the prevailing mentality within U.S. liberalism and the broader Democratic Party.”

The war on terror was a dismal failure that ended with the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan. It also became deeply unpopular with the public. Why, then, would Americans choose to empower the leaders and sages of that war to be the stewards of an even more expansive war against disinformation? It is possible to venture a guess: Americans did not choose them. Americans are no longer presumed to have the right to choose their own leaders or to question decisions made in the name of national security. Anyone who says otherwise can be labeled a domestic extremist.

## VII. The Rise of “Domestic Extremists”

A few weeks after Trump supporters rioted in the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, former director of the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center Robert Grenier wrote an article for *The New York Times* advocating for the United States to wage a “comprehensive counterinsurgency program” against its own citizens.

Counterinsurgency, as Grenier would know, is not a limited, surgical operation but a broad effort conducted across an entire society that inevitably involves collateral destruction. Targeting only the most violent extremists who attacked law enforcement officers at the Capitol would not be enough to defeat the insurgency. Victory would require winning the hearts and minds of the natives—in this case, the Christian dead-enders and rural populists radicalized by their grievances into embracing the Bin Laden-like cult of MAGA. Lucky for the government, there is a cadre of experts who are available to deal with this difficult problem: people like Grenier, who now works as a consultant

in the private-sector counterterrorism industry, where he has been employed since leaving the CIA.

Of course there are violent extremists in America, as there have always been. However, if anything, the problem is less severe now than it was in the 1960s and 1970s, when political violence was more common. Exaggerated claims about a new breed of domestic extremism so dangerous it cannot be handled through existing laws, including domestic terrorism statutes, is itself a product of the U.S.-led information war, which has effaced the difference between speech and action.

“Civil wars don’t start with gunshots. They start with words,” Clint Watts proclaimed in 2017 when he testified before Congress. “America’s war with itself has already begun. We all must act now on the social media battlefield to quell information rebellions that can quickly lead to violent confrontations.” Watts is a career veteran of military and government service who seems to share the belief, common among his colleagues, that once the internet entered its populist stage and threatened entrenched hierarchies, it became a grave danger to civilization. But this was a fearful response, informed by beliefs widely, and no doubt sincerely, shared in the Beltway that mistook an equally sincere populist backlash termed “the revolt of the public” by former CIA analyst Martin Gurri for an act of war. The standard Watts and others introduced, which quickly became the elite consensus, treats tweets and memes—the primary weapons of disinformation—as acts of war.

Using the hazy category of disinformation allowed security experts to conflate racist memes with mass shootings in Pittsburgh and Buffalo and with violent protests like the one that took place at the Capitol. It was a rubric for catastrophizing speech and maintaining a permanent state of fear and emergency. And it received the full backing of the Pentagon, the intelligence community, and President Biden, all of whom, notes Glenn Greenwald, have declared that “the gravest menace to American national security” is not Russia, ISIS, China, Iran, or North Korea, but “domestic

extremists' in general—and far-right white supremacist groups in particular.”

The Biden administration has steadily expanded domestic terrorism and counter-extremism programs. In February 2021, DHS officials announced that they had received additional funding to boost department-wide efforts at “preventing domestic terrorism,” including an initiative to counter the spread of disinformation online, which uses an approach seemingly borrowed from the Soviet handbook, called “attitudinal inoculation.”

### VIII. The NGO Borg

In November 2018, Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media Politics and Public Policy published a study titled “The Fight Against Disinformation in the U.S.: A Landscape Analysis.” The scope of the paper is comprehensive, but its authors are especially focused on the centrality of philanthropically funded nonprofit organizations and their relationship to the media. The Shorenstein Center is a key node in the complex the paper describes, giving the authors' observations an insider's perspective.

“In this landscape analysis, it became apparent that a number of key advocates swooping in to save journalism are not corporations or platforms or the U.S. government, but rather foundations and philanthropists who fear the loss of a free press and the underpinning of a healthy society. ... With none of the authoritative players—the government and platforms who push the content—stepping up to solve the problem quickly enough, the onus has fallen on a collective effort by newsrooms, universities, and foundations to flag what is authentic and what is not.”

To save journalism, to save democracy itself, Americans should count on the foundations and philanthropists—people like eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, Open Society Foundations' George Soros, and internet entrepreneur and Democratic Party fundraiser Reid Hoffman. In other words, Americans were

being asked to rely on private billionaires who were pumping billions of dollars into civic organizations—through which they would influence the American political process.

There is no reason to question the motivations of the staffers at these NGOs, most of whom were no doubt perfectly sincere in the conviction that their work was restoring the “underpinning of a healthy society.” But certain observations can be made about the nature of that work. First, it placed them in a position below the billionaire philanthropists but above hundreds of millions of Americans whom they would guide and instruct as a new information clerisy by separating truth from falsehood, as wheat from chaff. Second, this mandate, and the enormous funding behind it, opened up thousands of new jobs for information regulators at a moment when traditional journalism was collapsing. Third, the first two points placed the immediate self-interest of the NGO staffers perfectly in line with the imperatives of the American ruling party and security state. In effect, a concept taken from the worlds of espionage and warfare—disinformation—was seeded into academic and nonprofit spaces, where it ballooned into a pseudoscience that was used as an instrument of partisan warfare.

Virtually overnight, the “whole of society” national mobilization to defeat disinformation that Obama initiated led to the creation and credentialing of a whole new class of experts and regulators.

The modern “fact-checking” industry, for instance, which impersonates a well-established scientific field, is in reality a nakedly partisan cadre of compliance officers for the Democratic Party. Its leading organization, the International Fact-Checking Network, was established in 2015 by the Poynter Institute, a central hub in the counter-disinformation complex.

Everywhere one looks now, there is a disinformation expert. They are found at every major media publication, in every branch of government, and in academic departments, crowding each other out on cable news programs, and of course staffing the NGOs. There is

enough money coming from the counter-disinformation mobilization to both fund new organizations and convince established ones like the Anti-Defamation League to parrot the new slogans and get in on the action.

How is it that so many people could suddenly become experts in a field—“disinformation”—that not 1 in 10,000 of them could have defined in 2014? Because expertise in disinformation involves ideological orientation, not technical knowledge. For proof, look no further than the arc traced by Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, who pivoted from being failed podcast hosts to joining the Aspen Institute's Commission on Information Disorder. Such initiatives flourished in the years after Trump and Brexit.

But it went beyond celebrities. According to former State Department official Mike Benz, “To create a ‘whole of society’ consensus on the censorship of political opinions online that were ‘casting doubt’ ahead of the 2020 election, DHS organized ‘disinformation’ conferences to bring together tech companies, civil society groups, and news media to all build consensus—with DHS prodding (which is meaningful: many partners receive government funds through grants or contracts, or fear government regulatory or retaliatory threats)—on expanding social media censorship policies.”

A DHS memo, first made public by journalist Lee Fang, describes a DHS official's comment “during an internal strategy discussion, that the agency should use third-party nonprofits as a “clearing house for information to avoid the appearance of government propaganda.”

It is not unusual that a government agency would want to work with private corporations and civil society groups, but in this case the result was to break



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the independence of organizations that should have been critically investigating the government's efforts. The institutions that claim to act as watchdogs on government power rented themselves out as vehicles for manufacturing consensus.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the fields that have been most aggressive in cheerleading the war against disinformation and calling for greater censorship—counterterrorism, journalism, epidemiology—share a public record of spectacular failure in recent years. The new information regulators failed to win over vaccine skeptics, convince MAGA diehards that the 2020 election was legitimate, or prevent the public from inquiring into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they tried desperately to do.

But they succeeded in galvanizing a wildly lucrative whole-of-society effort, providing thousands of new careers and a renewed mandate of heaven to the institutionalists who saw populism as the end of civilization.

## IX. COVID-19

By 2020, the counter-disinformation machine had grown into one of the most powerful forces in American society. Then the COVID-19 pandemic dumped jet fuel into its engine. In addition to fighting foreign threats and deterring domestic extremists, censoring “deadly disinformation” became an urgent need. To take just one example, Google’s censorship, which applied to its subsidiary sites like YouTube, called for “removing information that is problematic” and “anything that would go against World Health Organization recommendations”—a category that at different points in the constantly evolving narrative would have included wearing masks, implementing travel bans, saying that the virus is highly contagious, and suggesting it might have come from a laboratory.

President Biden publicly accused social media companies of “killing people” by not censoring enough vaccine disinformation. Using its new powers and direct channels inside the tech companies, the White House began sending

lists of people it wanted banned, such as journalist Alex Berenson. Berenson was kicked off Twitter after tweeting that mRNA vaccines don’t “stop infection. Or transmission.” As it turned out, that was a true statement. The health authorities at the time were either misinformed or lying about the vaccines’ ability to prevent the spread of the virus. In fact, despite claims from the health authorities and political officials, the people in charge of the vaccine knew this all along. In the record of a meeting in December 2020, Food and Drug Administration adviser Dr. Patrick Moore stated, “Pfizer has presented no evidence in its data today that the vaccine has any effect on virus carriage or shedding, which is the fundamental basis for herd immunity.”

Dystopian in principle, the response to the pandemic was also totalitarian in practice. In the United States, the DHS produced a video in 2021 encouraging “children to report their own family members to Facebook for ‘disinformation’ if they challenge US government narratives on Covid-19.”

“Due to both the pandemic and the disinformation about the election, there are increasing numbers of what extremism experts call ‘vulnerable individuals’ who could be radicalized,” warned Elizabeth Neumann, former assistant secretary of Homeland Security for Counterterrorism and Threat Reduction, on the one-year anniversary of the Capitol riots.

Klaus Schwab, head of the World Economic Forum and *capo di tutti capi* of the global expert class, saw the pandemic as an opportunity to implement a “Great Reset” that could advance the cause of planetary information control: “The containment of the coronavirus pandemic will necessitate a global surveillance network capable of identifying new outbreaks as soon as they arise.”

## X. Hunter’s Laptops: The Exception to the Rule

The laptops are real. The FBI has known this since 2019, when it first took possession of them. When the *New York Post* attempted to report on them, dozens of the most senior national security officials in the United States lied to the public, claiming the laptops were likely

part of a Russian “disinformation” plot. Twitter, Facebook, and Google, operating as fully integrated branches of the state security infrastructure, carried out the government’s censorship orders based on that lie. The press swallowed the lie and cheered on the censorship.

The story of the laptops has been framed as many things, but the most fundamental truth about it is that it was the successful culmination of the yearslong effort to create a shadow regulatory bureaucracy built specifically to prevent a repeat of Trump’s 2016 victory.

It may be impossible to know exactly what effect the ban on reporting about Hunter Biden’s laptops had on the 2020 vote, but the story was clearly seen as threatening enough to warrant an openly authoritarian attack on the independence of the press. The damage to the country’s underlying social fabric, in which paranoia and conspiracy have been normalized, is incalculable. As recently as February, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez referred to the scandal as the “half-fake laptop story” and as “an embarrassment,” months after even the Bidens had been forced to acknowledge that the story is authentic.

While the laptop is the best-known case of the ruling party’s intervention in the Trump-Biden race, its brazenness was an exception. The vast majority of the interference in the election was invisible to the public and took place through censorship mechanisms carried out under the auspices of “election integrity.” The legal framework for this had been put in place shortly after Trump took office, when the outgoing DHS chief Jeh Johnson passed an 11th-hour rule—over the vehement objections of local stakeholders—declaring election systems to be critical national infrastructure, thereby placing them under the supervision of the agency. Many observers had expected that the act would be repealed by Johnson’s successor, Trump-appointed John Kelly, but curiously it was left in place.

In 2018, Congress created a new agency inside of the DHS called the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) that was tasked with defending America’s infrastructure—now including its election systems—from foreign

attacks. In 2019, the DHS added another agency, the Foreign Influence and Interference Branch, which was focused on countering foreign disinformation. As if by design, the two roles merged. Russian hacking and other malign foreign-information attacks were said to threaten U.S. elections. But, of course, none of the officials in charge of these departments could say with certainty whether a particular claim was foreign disinformation, simply wrong, or merely inconvenient. Nina Jankowicz, the pick to lead the DHS's short-lived Disinformation Governance Board, lamented the problem in her book *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News and the Future of Conflict*. "What makes this information war so difficult to win," she wrote, "is not just the online tools that amplify and target its messages or the adversary that is sending them; it's the fact that those messages are often unwittingly delivered not by trolls or bots, but by authentic local voices."

The latitude inherent in the concept of disinformation enabled the claim that preventing electoral sabotage required censoring Americans' political views, lest an idea be shared in public that was originally planted by foreign agents.

In January 2021, CISA "transitioned its Countering Foreign Influence Task Force to promote more flexibility to focus on general MDM [ed. note: an acronym for *misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation*]," according to an August 2022 report from the DHS's Office of Inspector General. After the pretense of fighting a foreign threat fell away, what was left was the core mission to enforce a narrative monopoly over truth.

The new domestic-focused task force was staffed by 15 employees dedicated to finding "all types of disinformation"—but specifically that which related to "elections and critical infrastructure"—and being "responsive to current events," a euphemism for promoting the official line of divisive issues, as was the case with the "COVID-19 Disinformation Toolkit" released to "raise awareness related to the pandemic."

Kept a secret from the public, the switch was "plotted on DHS's own livestreams and internal documents,"

according to Mike Benz. "DHS insiders' collective justification, without uttering a peep about the switch's revolutionary implications, was that 'domestic disinformation' was now a greater 'cyber threat to elections' than falsehoods flowing from foreign interference."

Just like that, without any public announcements or black helicopters flying in formation to herald the change, America had its own ministry of truth.

Together they operated an industrial-scale censorship machine in which the government and NGOs sent tickets to the tech companies that flagged objectionable content they wanted scrubbed. That structure allowed the DHS to outsource its work to the Election Integrity Project (EIP), a consortium of four groups: the Stanford Internet Observatory; private anti-disinformation company Graphika (which had formerly been employed by the Defense Department against groups like ISIS in the war on terror); Washington University's Center for an Informed Public; and the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab. Founded in 2020 in partnership with the DHS, the EIP served as the government's "deputized domestic disinformation flagger," according to congressional testimony from journalist Michael Shellenberger, who notes that the EIP claims it classified more than 20 million unique "misinformation incidents" between Aug. 15 and Dec. 12, 2020. As EIP head Alex Stamos explained, this was a work-around for the problem that the government "lacked both kinda the funding and the legal authorizations."

Looking at the censorship figures that the DHS's own partners reported for the 2020 election cycle in their internal audits, the Foundation for Freedom Online summarized the scope of the censorship campaign in seven bullet points:

- 22 million tweets labeled "misinformation" on Twitter;
- 859 million tweets collected in databases for "misinformation" analysis;
- 120 analysts monitoring social media "misinformation" in up to 20-hour shifts;
- 15 tech platforms monitored for "misinformation," often in real-time;

- <1 hour average response time between government partners and tech platforms;
- Dozens of "misinformation narratives" targeted for platform-wide throttling; and
- Hundreds of millions of individual Facebook posts, YouTube videos, TikToks, and tweets impacted due to "misinformation" Terms of Service policy changes, an effort DHS partners openly plotted and bragged that tech companies would never have done without DHS partner insistence and "huge regulatory pressure" from government.

## XI. The New One-Party State

In February 2021, a long article in *Time* magazine by journalist Molly Ball celebrated the "Shadow Campaign That Saved the 2020 Election." Biden's victory, wrote Ball, was the result of a "conspiracy unfolding behind the scenes" that drew together "a vast, cross-partisan campaign to protect the election" in an "extraordinary shadow effort." Among the many accomplishments of the heroic conspirators, Ball notes, they "successfully pressured social media companies to take a harder line against disinformation and used data-driven strategies to fight viral smears." It is an incredible article, like an entry from the crime blotter that somehow got slipped into the society pages, a paean to the saviors of democracy that describes in detail how they dismembered it.

Not so long ago, talk of a "deep state" was enough to mark a person as a dangerous conspiracy theorist to be summarily flagged for monitoring and censorship. But language and attitudes evolve, and today the term has been cheekily reappropriated by supporters of the deep state. For instance, a new book, *American Resistance*, by neoliberal national

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security analyst David Rothkopf, is subtitled *The Inside Story of How the Deep State Saved the Nation*.

The deep state refers to the power wielded by unelected government functionaries and their paragovernmental adjuncts who have administrative power to override the official, legal procedures of a government. But a ruling class describes a social group whose members are bound together by something deeper than institutional position: their shared values and instincts. While the term is often used loosely and sometimes as a pejorative rather than a descriptive label, in fact the American ruling class can be simply and straightforwardly defined.

Two criteria define membership in the ruling class. First, as Michael Lind has written, it is made up of people who belong to a “homogeneous national oligarchy, with the same accent, manners, values, and educational backgrounds from Boston to Austin and San Francisco to New York and Atlanta.” America has always had regional elites; what is unique about the present is the consolidation of a single, national ruling class.

Second, to be a member of the ruling class is to believe that only other members of your class can be allowed to lead the country. That is to say, members of the ruling class refuse to submit to the authority of anyone outside the group, whom they disqualify from eligibility by casting them as in some way illegitimate.

Faced with an external threat in the form of Trumpism, the natural cohesion and self-organizing dynamics of the social class were fortified by new top-down structures of coordination that were the goal and the result of Obama’s national mobilization. In the run-up to the 2020 election, according to reporting by Lee Fang and Ken Klippenstein for *The Intercept*, “tech companies including Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Discord, Wikipedia, Microsoft, LinkedIn, and Verizon Media met on a monthly basis with the FBI, CISA, and other government representatives... to discuss how firms would handle misinformation during the election.”

Historian Angelo Codevilla, who popularized the concept of an American “ruling class” in a 2010 essay and then became its primary chronicler, saw

the new, national aristocracy as an outgrowth of the opaque power acquired by the U.S. security agencies. “The bipartisan ruling class that grew in the Cold War, who imagined themselves and who managed to be regarded as entitled by expertise to conduct America’s business of war and peace, protected its status against a public from which it continued to diverge by translating the commonsense business of war and peace into a private, pseudo-technical language impenetrable to the uninitiated,” he wrote in his 2014 book, *To Make and Keep Peace Among Ourselves and with All Nations*.

What do the members of the ruling class believe? They believe, I argue, “in informational and management solutions to existential problems” and in their “own providential destiny and that of people like them to rule, regardless of their failures.” As a class, their highest principle is that they alone can wield power. If any other group were to rule, all progress and hope would be lost, and the dark forces of fascism and barbarism would at once sweep back over the earth. While technically an opposition party is still permitted to exist in the United States, the last time it attempted to govern nationally, it was subjected to a yearslong coup. In effect, any challenge to the authority of the ruling party, which represents the interests of the ruling class, is depicted as an existential threat to civilization.

An admirably direct articulation of this outlook was provided recently by famous atheist Sam Harris. Throughout the 2010s, Harris’ higher-level rationalism made him a star on YouTube, where thousands of videos showcased him “owning” and “pwning” religious opponents in debates. Then Trump arrived. Harris, like so many others who saw in the former president a threat to all that was good in the world, abandoned his principled commitment to the truth and became a defender of propaganda.

In a podcast appearance last year, Harris acknowledged the politically motivated censorship of reporting related to Hunter Biden’s laptops and admitted “a left-wing conspiracy to deny the presidency to Donald Trump.” But, echoing Ball, he declared this a good thing.

“I don’t care what’s in the Hunter Biden laptop. ... Hunter Biden could have had corpses of children in his basement, and I would not have cared,” Harris told his interviewers. He could overlook the murdered children because an even greater danger lurked in the possibility of Trump’s reelection, which Harris compared to “an asteroid hurtling toward Earth.”

With an asteroid hurtling toward Earth, even the most principled rationalists might end up asking for safety over truth. But an asteroid has been falling toward Earth every week for years now. The pattern in these cases is that the ruling class justifies taking liberties with the law to save the planet but ends up violating the Constitution to hide the truth and protect itself.

## XII. The End of Censorship

The public’s glimpses into the early stages of the transformation of America from democracy to digital leviathan are the result of lawsuits and FOIAs—information that had to be pried from the security state—and one lucky fluke. If Elon Musk had not decided to purchase Twitter, many of the crucial details in the history of American politics in the Trump era would have remained secret, possibly forever.

But the system reflected in those disclosures may well be on its way out. It is already possible to see how the kind of mass censorship practiced by the EIP, which requires considerable human labor and leaves behind plenty of evidence, could be replaced by artificial intelligence programs that use the information about targets accumulated in behavioral surveillance dossiers to manage their perceptions. The ultimate goal would be to recalibrate people’s experiences online through subtle manipulations of what they see in their search results and on their feed. The aim of such a scenario might be to prevent censor-worthy material from being produced in the first place.

In fact, that sounds rather similar to what Google is already doing in Germany, where the company recently unveiled a new campaign to expand its “prebunking” initiative “that aims to make people

more resilient to the corrosive effects of online misinformation,” according to the Associated Press. The announcement closely followed Microsoft founder Bill Gates’ appearance on a German podcast, during which he called for using artificial intelligence to combat “conspiracy theories” and “political polarization.” Meta has its own prebunking program. In a statement to the website Just The News, Mike Benz called prebunking “a form of narrative censorship integrated into social media algorithms to stop citizens from forming specific social and political belief systems” and compared it to the “pre-crime” featured in dystopian science-fiction movie *Minority Report*.

Meanwhile, the military is developing weaponized AI technology to dominate the information space. According to USASpending.gov, an official government website, the two largest contracts related to disinformation came from the Department of Defense to fund technologies for automatically detecting and defending against large-scale disinformation attacks. The first, for \$11.9 million, was awarded in June 2020 to PAR Government Systems Corporation, a defense contractor in upstate New York. The second, issued in July 2020 for \$10.9 million, went to a company called SRI International.

SRI International was originally connected to Stanford University before splitting off in the 1970s, a relevant detail considering that the Stanford Internet Observatory, an institution still directly connected to the school, led 2020’s EIP, which might well have been the largest mass censorship event in world history—a capstone of sorts to the record of pre-AI censorship.

Then there is the work going on at the National Science Foundation, a government agency that funds research in universities and private institutions. The NSF has its own program called the Convergence Accelerator Track F, which is helping to incubate a dozen automated disinformation-detection technologies explicitly designed to monitor issues like “vaccine hesitancy and electoral skepticism.”

“One of the most disturbing aspects” of the program, according to Benz, “is how similar they are to military-grade

social media network censorship and monitoring tools developed by the Pentagon for the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism contexts abroad.”

In March, the NSF’s chief information officer, Dorothy Aronson, announced that the agency was “building a set of use cases” to explore how it could employ ChatGPT, the AI language model capable of a reasonable simulation of human speech, to further automate the production and dissemination of state propaganda.

The first great battles of the information war are over. They were waged by a class of journalists, retired generals, spies, Democratic Party bosses, party apparatchiks, and counterterrorism experts against the remnant of the American people who refused to submit to their authority.

Future battles fought through AI technologies will be harder to see.

### XIII. After Democracy

Less than three weeks before the 2020 presidential election, *The New York Times* published an important article titled “The First Amendment in the age of disinformation.” The essay’s author, *Times* staff writer and Yale Law School graduate Emily Bazelon, argued that the United States was “in the midst of an information crisis caused by the spread of viral disinformation” that she compares to the “catastrophic” health effects of the novel coronavirus. She quotes from a book by Yale philosopher Jason Stanley and linguist David Beaver: “Free speech threatens democracy as much as it also provides for its flourishing.”

So the problem of disinformation is also a problem of democracy itself—specifically, that there’s too much of it. To save liberal democracy, the experts prescribed two critical steps: America must become less free and less democratic. This necessary evolution will mean shutting out the voices of certain rabble-rousers in the online crowd who have forfeited the privilege of speaking freely. It will require following the wisdom of disinformation experts and outgrowing our parochial attachment to the Bill of Rights. This view may be jarring to people who are still attached

to the American heritage of liberty and self-government, but it has become the official policy of the country’s ruling party and much of the American intelligentsia.

Former Clinton Labor Secretary Robert Reich responded to the news that Elon Musk was purchasing Twitter by declaring that preserving free speech online was “Musk’s dream. And Trump’s. And Putin’s. And the dream of every dictator, strongman, demagogue, and modern-day robber baron on Earth. For the rest of us, it would be a brave new nightmare.” According to Reich, censorship is “necessary to protect American democracy.”

To a ruling class that had already grown tired of democracy’s demand that freedom be granted to its subjects, disinformation provided a regulatory framework to replace the U.S. Constitution. By aiming at the impossible, the elimination of all error and deviation from party orthodoxy, the ruling class ensures that it will always be able to point to a looming threat from extremists—a threat that justifies its own iron grip on power.

A siren song calls on those of us alive at the dawn of the digital age to submit to the authority of machines that promise to optimize our lives and make us safer. Faced with the apocalyptic threat of the “infodemic,” we are led to believe that only superintelligent algorithms can protect us from the crushingly inhuman scale of the digital information assault. The old human arts of conversation, disagreement, and irony, on which democracy and much else depend, are subjected to a withering machinery of military-grade surveillance—surveillance that nothing can withstand and that aims to make us fearful of our capacity for reason.

If you work in the “disinformation” or “misinformation” fields for the government or in the private sector, and are interested in discussing your experiences, you can contact me securely at [email protected] or on Twitter @jacob\_siegel. Source confidentiality is guaranteed. ■

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## THE REST

→ A Monday night **fire at a migration center in Mexico near the U.S. southern border has left at least 39 people dead.** Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said the fire was the result of a protest by migrants in the center after "they found out they'd be deported." Dozens of others were injured after what initial reports described as mattresses being set on fire near a door of the shelter. Near a major crossing point for migrants, across the border from El Paso, Texas, the shelter often houses migrants who are waiting on decisions about their asylum claims for entry.

→ **Northern Ireland's domestic-terrorism threat level was upgraded to "severe" by Britain's intelligence agency MI5,** the second-highest category, which indicates a forthcoming attack is highly likely. The upgrade comes after a wave of attacks against police offices, just a few weeks ahead of the **25th anniversary celebration of the 1998 peace deal** that had quelled decades of sectarian violence in the divided country. Last month, one police officer was badly injured in an attack by a new splinter cell of the IRA, the Irish Republican Army, that had agreed to lay down arms in the Good Friday peace agreement. Authorities say the terrorist warning isn't linked to the upcoming celebrations, only to the recent spate of attacks on police.

→ The so-called **einstein problem** has long stumped mathematicians attempting to discover a single shape that could tile a flat, two-dimensional surface indefinitely without creating any sort of repeat pattern. Unlike a typical tiled floor or wallpaper design that periodically uses repeat shapes, an "aperiodic monotile" eluded mathematicians, as no shape could go on infinitely without repeating itself. That is, until **David Smith, a 64-year-old self-described shape hobbyist who worked in fields outside of mathematics until retiring, cracked the code** by discovering what he and a team of mathematicians described in a new paper as "the hat," an einstein that resembles a fedora.

→ Continuing their campaign to alienate all other generations, **Baby Boomers account for 39% of all new homes being purchased**—a major jump from their 29% slice of the pie last year—surpassing millennials, who now account for just 28% of new home acquisitions. The 2023 Home Buyers and Sellers reports reflects Baby Boomers' growing buying power—only 26% of all buyers were first-time homeowners, the lowest ever, just as Boomers have seen repeat purchases made all the easier thanks to the strength of their home equity boosted by surging home prices during the pandemic. **Gen Z, meanwhile, only accounts for 4% of all home purchases,** with roughly 1 in every 3 Gen Zer moving on from living with their parents or family members into their new dwelling.

→ A little too much exposure to public attention has led to **the resignation of Ammar Alkhudairy, chair of the Saudi National Bank,** who stepped down from his post on Monday. Alkhudairy had made headlines earlier this month when he told an interviewer that the bank was not going to increase its 9.9% stake in Credit Suisse, just as the Swiss bank was teetering on the precipice. The comment almost immediately **sent Credit Suisse's stock plummeting,** until the controversial shotgun merger with Swiss rival UBS. Accounting for roughly 30% of the Saudi kingdom's banking market, SNB easily absorbed the roughly \$1 billion loss from the Credit Suisse deal with UBS, but the comments brought new attention to SNB and the oil-rich kingdom's broadening international investments.

## THE BIG STORY

A late-night report from NBC News cited an unnamed senior White House official who believed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will "most likely" abandon his controversial overhaul of the nation's judiciary. It's the latest instance of the Biden administration's ongoing pressure campaign to thwart Netanyahu's reforms. Referencing the details of a contentious March 19 phone call between Biden and Netanyahu, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Monday that Biden said his counterpart needed to "design a way forward that was based on compromise and that could result in ... consensus support."

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, meanwhile, on Monday night circulated to news outlets a letter signed by the PM that essentially documented the PM's vow to back the creation of a new national guard in return for Ben-Gvir's support for the temporary pause to the judicial reform process. Long sought by Ben-Gvir, the controversial volunteer reserves would be deployed during episodes of intense ethnic conflict, which former Israeli police chief Moshe Karadi described as "a private militia for [Ben-Gvir's] political needs." Tweeting about the deal, Ben-Gvir wrote that the judicial reform will pass and the national guard will be established. "Nobody will scare us. Nobody will succeed in changing the decision of the people."

—Sean Cooper

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# The Russo-Ukrainian War Through a Historian's Eyes

With a new Cold War emerging, can Israel continue to sit on the fence?

BY YEHUDA BAUER

There is a historical background to the Ukrainian crisis, and it is hotly disputed. Experts disagree on when Kyiv was founded, but in the ninth century, Varangians (Vikings) established a hold over the site, and the term *Rus'* may be a Scandinavian word. Russian nationalist historians dispute this notion, insisting that Slavic tribes controlled the area and possibly built a fortress there.

Mongol and Tatar tribes held sway in the area, and by 1240, the Mongol Empire, with Genghis Khan's cavalry at the fore, had conquered not just what is now Ukraine, but also the thickly forested areas to the north. Moscow fell in 1238. Tatar communities sprang up, then and later, and some still exist in northwestern Belarus and in Lithuania.

As Moscow eventually emerged from the Tatar-Mongol yoke, Slavic groups and individuals, many of whom were rebelling against Muscovite feudal lords, settled in the plains to the south and established what became Cossack communities. Along with them, Slavic-speaking peasants established farms and settlements. Before and especially after 1569, a united Polish-Lithuanian kingdom controlled a feudal society in which Polish landlords ruled over peasants who toiled in their service. Jews settled in the townships and villages and served the lords as collectors of the peasants' tribute while being exploited themselves. Ukrainian ethnoreligious consciousness evolved with the rebellion against the Polish

lords, while the Jews were attacked as the middlemen who oppressed the peasantry.

Many Jews were slaughtered in the Khmelnytsky (Chmielnicki) Uprising of 1648-49, which precipitated a mass Jewish flight westward. The Muscovite Tsars fought bitter battles against the Poles. In Ukraine, they inherited the Polish system of exploitation, and the peasantry was held in vassalage and bondage by the Russian aristocracy. The Slavic dialects coalesced into a more or less distinct Ukrainian language closely connected to Russian, but different from it. A modern Ukrainian literature began to appear by the end of the 18th century. To this day, the areas of northern Ukraine—Polesie, the central geographic feature of which is the Prypjat' River—are inhabited by people who, when asked before and after World War I whether they were Poles, Ukrainians, Belarussians, or Russians, used to answer that they were “local people” (*tunajše*).

During the Soviet period, Ukraine was constituted as one of the Soviet “Republics,” controlled, of course, by Moscow. However, Ukrainian national consciousness, in a Sovietized form, was allowed to exist and was manifested in a distinct cultural life. Between 1930 and 1933, in the course of the Soviet Five-Year Plan—according to which Soviet agricultural products were bartered for Western, mainly German, machinery and other industrial goods—vast amounts of grain were extorted from the peasants, mainly in Ukraine, precipitating a drastic food shortage. In the ensuing famine, some 3.4 million people died, although estimates

vary. This is what is called the Holodomor (Death by Hunger) in Ukraine, and as it was directed from Moscow (yet carried out by local Ukrainian Communists), enmity toward Russian rule was the result.

During World War II, many Ukrainians under German occupation preferred it to the return of the Soviets. To that end, Ukrainian nationalists actively collaborated with the Nazis, and large units of Ukrainian collaborators aided in their war effort. Some participated enthusiastically in the mass murder of Jews in Ukraine and in other places to which they were dispatched. On the other hand, millions of Ukrainian soldiers in the Red Army—the brothers, sons, and fathers of Ukrainians in German-occupied territory—fought against the Germans. Some of the most famous Soviet partisan commanders were ethnic Ukrainians, and while there was widespread antisemitism among them, there were those who actually sought to combat that tendency.

After the fall of Communism, Ukrainian nationalists chose to identify with the wartime legacy of the collaborators, and many of those figures became the object of glorification. Independent Ukraine was plagued by massive corruption and a struggle between pro-Western and pro-Russian politicians. But what seems to have happened was the rise of a young generation that sought to establish a liberal government that would struggle against corruption. It was then that the Jewish-born actor Volodymyr Zelenskyy appeared on the scene. As is well known, Zelenskyy comes from a Russian-speaking family of Soviet-Jewish intellectuals in Kryvyi Rih, and he learned Ukrainian as time passed. He left a career in television and founded a political party with an anti-corruption platform committed to the spread of Western liberalism and to an alliance with the West. In free elections, he garnered more than 73 percent of the vote—truly an unprecedented achievement, and more impressive still as his Jewish origins and identity were no secret. However, I believe that his lack of political savvy caused a much-too-hurried attempt to join Western alliances.

There is a fairly obvious Russian side to all this. The Soviet Union controlled East

Central and Eastern Europe through the Warsaw Pact, and with the fall of Communism, Russia lost all of it, together with Georgia, Armenia, and the Central Asian republics. NATO could have only one potential adversary—Russia—and is therefore a hostile entity in Russian eyes, and I believe this is not just the stance of Vladimir Putin. With only brief interruptions, the lion's share of Ukraine has been allied to or controlled by Russia ever since the partitions of the Polish kingdom at the end of the 18th century, and its loss to the European Union and/or NATO would place the Western adversary directly into the heart of a Russia trying to regain its influence and/or rule in as much of the former Soviet-controlled areas as possible.

It is understandable that the Kremlin should see Ukraine's attempt to turn to the West as a *casus belli*. Perhaps a savvy Zelenskyy would have recognized this and would have tried to reassure Moscow by postponing attempts to join the European Union until a better opportunity arose at some point down the line. Entry into NATO was a dicier question still. Not pursuing those aspirations for the moment would not have meant abandoning the struggle for a democratic, open, and liberal Ukrainian society—but it would have meant not poking a finger in Russia's eye. What followed was the traditional Russian method of conflict resolution: the infliction of maximum and relentless brutality, without any moral considerations, and the perpetration of mass atrocities against a hapless civilian populace. We are also witnessing stiff Ukrainian resistance that has given the Russian forces a run for their money and exposed their weaknesses and even ineptitude.

Zelenskyy's fervent appeal to the Knesset on March 20, 2022, was quite an emotional affair. Unfortunately, he distorted the history of Ukraine in World War II when he claimed that the Ukrainians as a nation had behaved nobly in trying to protect Jews. Although there were certainly many noteworthy instances of selfless heroism, large numbers of Ukrainians in the territories occupied by the Wehrmacht either collaborated with the Germans—actively participating in the murder of Jews and the plunder of their property—or simply turned a blind eye

**“Like Joseph Stalin before him—but unlike the Tsars—Putin is unaffected by the weight of any moral considerations.”**

to their atrocities. The notion that rescue of Jews was a widespread phenomenon is simply false. Zelenskyy's pleas to various other Western parliaments were more persuasive.

The Israeli government has been trying to follow Washington, D.C.'s lead, accommodating Ukraine while maintaining a relationship with Russia that will enable it to continue attacks against Iranian targets in Syria. This fence-sitting is uncomfortable—even painful—and morally destructive. The result is that Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is being used by Putin as a tool with which to maintain some contact with the West and gain time.

The Russian leader's aim is quite clear: establish a puppet government in Kyiv that will be another version of Lukashenko's Belarus, and finalize the inclusion of the two eastern regions centered on the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Russia in much the way Crimea was devoured. The threat of Russia using tactical nuclear weapons is quite real, as it is unlikely that NATO would risk an all-out war by using its own nuclear arsenal against the country. However, the use of such weapons could endanger Putin's rule over Russia, and the effect of such a move on his country cannot be calculated. Like Joseph Stalin before him—but unlike the Tsars—Putin is unaffected by the weight of any

moral considerations; to him, only purely practical, military, economic, and political considerations, fortified by extreme nationalism and the support of the Russian Orthodox establishment, matter. It is too early to say whether Russian elites will necessarily follow his lead or whether he has jeopardized his political future by attempting to subdue an independent neighboring state.

Western responses, led by the Biden administration, appear to be quite effective—not perhaps in the short run, but more and more so as time passes. True, China supports Russia, though rather cautiously and perhaps not wholeheartedly. But a point may come, perhaps sooner than later, when Putin's administration realizes that the price it is paying outweighs any potential advantages, and it will be willing to stop the war, leaving Russia with Crimea and the “People's Republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as a pledge by Ukraine to desist, for now, from its attempts to join the European Union and NATO.

That would be a partial victory for the Ukrainians, but it would come at a heavy price. The question then might be whether the sanctions and the economic warfare against Russia will continue or be aborted. In any case, unless a new Trump administration, or something similar to it, succeeds the current one in Washington, D.C., the outlines of a global Cold War situation can be seen quite clearly: the West (North America and Europe) against China and Russia, with illiberal regimes such as that of India, and others in the Middle East and Africa and Latin America, and even a few in Europe, wavering, but not necessarily in any Western direction. At the moment, Israel can continue its fence-sitting, but it may ultimately have to choose a less-ambiguous course of action.

I do not know what the future holds. As a historian, I have great difficulties in predicting the past; regarding the future, sadly, I am totally at sea. ■

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# The Inner Life of Gender

Can old, dead, gay, white French males save us from the West's latest moral crusade?

BY BLAKE SMITH

Asking questions about gender reveals its status as ideology—as the transformation of a particular, contingent interpretation of the world into an ostensibly natural fact about the world.’ Eric Marty *Tablet Magazine*; original photos: Wikipedia; The Metropolitan Museum of Art

‘Asking questions about gender reveals its status as ideology—as the transformation of a particular, contingent interpretation of the world into an ostensibly natural fact about the world.’ Eric Marty *Tablet Magazine*; original photos: Wikipedia; The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A colleague and friend of mine, a Jewish lesbian who has found herself, mostly with pleasant bemusement, teaching at a small Christian university in the Midwest, recently shared with me, outraged, her employer’s new policy on “gender” and pronouns. In the solemn, moralizing tone of a land-acknowledgement—a register of piety that the school’s administrators no longer use to talk about their institution’s religious denomination—officials declared that they understood gender to be an essential component of students’ “identities.” Students have genders, and those genders must be recognized by faculty through the use of proper pronouns, on pain of administrative sanction. Gender is a vital psychic reality and a site of fraught self-investigation; it is, at the same time, a datum to be tracked and enforced by the university bureaucracy. It can, moreover, be changed at any moment, by a student’s declaration of a new gender, which will in turn be registered

by administrators and recognized by faculty who want to keep their jobs.

The meaning of the terms around which the above paragraph is organized—gender, identity, recognition—have in recent years become self-evident both in the operations of policy and in people’s everyday experience of themselves. Individuals who would be suspicious of the invisible forces around which vanished moral-political orders were built (soul, destiny, *telos*, Providence, etc.), and who would be baffled by the various concepts by which their ancestors made sense of their selves (chastity, honor, virtue, authenticity), seem to find in gender and its related keywords a means both of expressing their inner life and of remaking the world. The apparently irrefutable obviousness of these concepts conceals from us both their novelty and their strange, self-contradictory logic.

How is it that gender could be something I have, do, understand, declare, register, recognize, and change? Gender has the pathos of a struggle to access the hidden depths of inner life, a quest for the truth of the self that centuries of Christian confession and post-Christian therapy have taught Westerners to regard as sublimely difficult and noble. But gender is also as easy, as public, and as increasingly compulsory as “saying one’s pronouns.” In what may be the basic bait-and-switch of contemporary liberalism, gender promises us a domain of personal freedom in which we can create ourselves anew and then compels us to expose that intimate self, enrolling it in a public campaign of good against evil, future against past.

Asking questions about gender reveals

its status as ideology—as the transformation of a particular, contingent interpretation of the world into an ostensibly natural fact about the world. In critiquing “gender ideology,” however, one risks becoming the proponent of a counterideology no less shrilly political in its insistent defense of “common sense.” How can we resist an ideology, not least by exposing it as an ideology, without ourselves becoming ideological? How can we question “gender” without thereby becoming “fascists,” as gender theorists like Judith Butler insist we are? Is it possible to be neutral about gender—to elude the demands that its proponents place on us rather than silently accepting or screamingly refusing them?

Such a sweep of Butlerian rhetorical questions suggests that the answer is “no.” But in a difficult, frustrating, and important recent book, *Le sexe de Modernes: Pensée du Neutre et théorie du Genre* (*The Moderns’ Sex: Neutral Thought and Gender Theory*, 2021), the French literary theorist Eric Marty attempts to find his way to a “yes.” His method is to apply the ideas of his teacher, Roland Barthes, to a painstaking—and convoluted—critique of “gender ideology.”

Gender originally appeared, Marty notes, in the last decades of the 20th century, as a “conceptual and abstract ... epistemological tool” by which thinkers could distinguish between the supposedly natural and cultural dimensions of being a man, woman, or something other or in-between. Sex, in this original distinction, referred to the natural, physical features of our bodies; gender to the ever-shifting meanings we ascribe to sex. This very operation of distinguishing nature from culture, sex from gender, is itself, as Marty notes, one of those falsely binarizing exercises that characterize our culture—and indeed contemporary theorists of gender have abandoned the idea that there is such a thing as a “biological sex” to be held separate from our interpretations and categorizations. First distinguished from, and now superceding, the idea of sex, gender has become “a new universal evidence,” something that people experience about themselves—one of those phenomena like demonic possession or

ennui that, in a given historical moment, strike contemporaries as immediately present psychological realities.

Exploring how gender has become self-evident would require an ethnographic account of the many practices by which parents, schools, psychologists, media, etc., incite individuals to find and express “gender”—an effort beyond the scope of Marty’s book. What he attempts, rather, is to show how the concept of gender became available in our recent intellectual history, such that it could be incorporated into the psychic life of the multitude. This history, to his horror, is one in which a set of thinkers whose work is taken together to constitute “French theory” or “post-modernism”—Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, etc.—were so misread by their American disciples that their ideas, meant to set limits to Western civilization’s obsessive drive to posit binaries around which conflict could be stoked, have themselves become the message of a new moral-political crusade.

In what at times becomes a self-defeating irony, Marty hates America with all the obscene glee of an aging French academic. Toward the end of his book, for example, he describes the ideal society of Butler and other proponents of gender as the right of a transgender person “to freely enter a McDonald’s, which is to say, for an old-fashioned European intellectual, Hell.” He seems to take it for granted that Americans, being idiots, couldn’t possibly have understood what French thinkers were on about. Such anti-Americanism might be a useful populist bulwark against “*le wokisme*,” but it is not a platform for serious thinking. Worse, by enacting a polemical binary between Europe (the continent of ideas) and America (where ideas become university training modules and political bumper stickers), Marty performs the very maneuver that, following Barthes, he sees as the essence of our civilizational sickness. His division “America-Europe” is as wearisome as older binaries like “male-female” and newer ones like “cis-trans.”

We may bemoan the vicious intensity of our current culture wars, and yearn

either to return to a supposedly harmonious tradition or leap forward into a utopian future—but it is our very tradition that has taught us to think in fatal binarisms and persecute each other for the sake of a new world. At least since the beginning of Christianity, whose founder announced he had come to set “brother against brother” with a message of universal love, Western thinkers have envisioned human unity as an end to be achieved through division, violence, and the annihilation of enemies. Modern prophets like Karl Marx or Ibram X. Kendi offer a secular version of the story but retain the moral: “You are either with us or against us.” Culture war *is* our culture.

In the years before his death in 1980, this was how Marty’s mentor Roland Barthes, the French literary critic and—in a turn few have yet appreciated—political philosopher, saw our situation. Over the preceding three decades, Barthes had approached, then abandoned, the Marxist vision of an either-or struggle between the coming revolution and its reactionary foes. By the late 1970s, he had broken both with the French Communist Party and with younger far-left radicals like the circle around the avant-garde magazine *Tel Quel*, with whom he traveled to Mao’s China in the last days of the Cultural Revolution. The various lefts inspired by Marxism had all been failures, it appeared; and Barthes, whose homosexuality was an open secret in French intellectual circles, was equally skeptical about the emerging post-Marxist cultural left and its sexual revolution.

In late works such as his *Fragments of a Lover’s Discourse* (1976), Barthes worried that, with the horizon of social and economic transformation disappearing as the disaster of the Marxist experiment became undeniable to all but the most committed ideologues, “sex” and “sexuality” would become new sites of political struggle. “Sexual liberation” would mean, he feared, not the easing of restrictions and guilt around sex, but the creation of new, polemical intensities dividing those for and against another utopia. He shared this fear with his onetime friend Michel Foucault, whose *History of Sexuality, Part One*

critiques the new left’s struggle against “sexual repression” as just another manifestation of our centurieslong obsession with purifying ourselves and the world of invisible obstacles, without which we would, at last, be happy and good.

Marty argues that Barthes’ fears were prescient—and that his thinking offers resources for resisting what he calls, in the book’s opening line, “the latest great ideological message issued from the West,” our newest “good news” that sows division: the “gospel” of gender. While the moment of sexual liberation has passed—young people are in fact having unprecedentedly low amounts of sex—still newer frontiers of struggle have been opened. Now what is to be liberated from the supposedly repressive forces of convention and history is not a primal “sex” in all its polymorphous diversity, but the discernment, declaration, and documentation of something called “gender.”

In the years before his death (hit by a truck) in 1980, Barthes laid the groundwork for an alternative to such campaigns of liberation—a moral and political stance that he referred to in one interview as a “second liberalism.” Like conventional liberalism, his approach was meant to provide relief from otherwise insuperable conflicts over values, to solve the problem of how people who disagree about religion, the good life, sexual ethics, etc., can live together in relative peace. Liberalism as we know it frames these disagreements as less important than our common humanity, in light of which we each possess the same set of universal human rights, which are to be respected by public institutions we call “neutral” insofar as they take no notice of our religious, sexual, and other sorts of potentially divisive commitments.

Suspicious of the idea that rights and institutions could permanently stand outside of the arena of conflict over values, Barthes argued that tolerance would have to be based not on the neutralization of our common life, but on a suppler ethic he called “the neutral,” a repertoire of practices and attitudes for suspending conflict. From the beginning, as Marty elucidates, the idea of the neutral was connected to the possibility

of what we might call the “gender-neutral,” some position where sexual difference does not apply or can, at least, be deferred from its ordinary, automatic operations of making everyone we see appear as male or female. Marty, drawing on a range of thinkers with whom Barthes was in dialogue, constructs what he calls “neutral thought,” a way of understanding “French theory” in terms of its attempt to subvert what Barthes took to be the two intertwined logics that governed our culture: polemical conflict and sexual difference.

“Subvert” here does not mean to attack, undo, or replace with a new logic—to attempt to do so would be only another form of conflict, and a new kind of sexual difference (in which we replace, as we are increasingly doing, the male-female binary with multiplying binaries like cis-trans, queer-normative, or, simply, retrograde and progressive, hateful and decent). Rather it means to find ways of making binaries, and our resistance to them, a bit more capacious and livable. Marty tracks two different approaches to “neutral thought” that both appear in Barthes, and are embodied in starker clarity in the work of two of his interlocutors: Lacan and Foucault.

For Lacan, sexual difference is not, primarily, a bodily phenomenon. It is a fundamental, inalterable aspect of the structure of language that governs our unconscious. In that sense, it is futile to hope for the abolition of sexual difference, or a world without men and women. However, the psychic structure of sexual difference can be lived and played out in many ways; all sorts of fantastic identifications are possible precisely because none of us, in our own bodily and mental realities, ever quite coincides with the positions “male” and “female” that have been assigned to us. We are all a bit perverse, in some way verging away from the polarity of “our sex.” A Lacanian tradition in American queer theory that includes Joseph Litvak, Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani has drawn on these insights to create a quietist, apolitical approach to sexual difference—one that more radical thinkers and activists have consistently opposed as a reactionary “white male” (read: Jewish) stance.

In contrast to Lacan’s vision, founded

on a “law” of sexual difference that can be ludically perverted but not overturned, Foucault, a generation younger, insisted that our psyches are dominated not by transcendental and unchanging structures but by historically variable “norms.” This shift from “law” to “norm,” Marty argues, prepared the ground for today’s gender ideology. Once it could be imagined that what held in place the social and cognitive division of humanity into men and women was not a timeless principle inherent to the psyche, but a set of contingent rules (like, Foucault argued in his early work, those dividing the sane and mad), it could seem possible that those rules might be rewritten through political action.

By invoking “law,” Lacan was able to distinguish, on theoretical grounds, between, on the one hand, his shocking ideas and apparent licensing of all manner of perversity, and, on the other, an almost reactionary respect for the traditional patriarchal order. Foucault’s critique of the very idea of law, however, would seem to eliminate the possibility for such a pragmatic reconciliation between personal antinomianism and social authority. If everything about ourselves has been determined by contingent social norms that are themselves the effect of unequal power relations, it could seem that all these norms must go, that we should wage unlimited struggle against every identity that has been imposed upon us.

This is, Marty laments, where gender ideology—and specifically Judith Butler—has taken us, following a misguided appropriation of Foucault’s critique. Marty insists that Foucault, in his later writings in the 1970s and early ’80s, echoed Barthes, arguing that the point of exposing the contingency of norms was not to open them all up as sites of resistance in a global campaign of liberation, but rather to inhabit them open in order to try out, in specific, private domains, new ways of being oneself. In his readings of Foucault’s writings on gay male identity, like “Friendship as a Way of Life” (1981), Marty shows how Foucault, like Barthes, came to conceive of male homosexuality—but also, by extension, any identity—as a

kind of “similarness” in which individuals playfully create shifting senses of sameness and difference that defy any understanding of self-identification as a straightforward, uncomplicated fitting of oneself into the “right” category.

Thus for example, among gay men, even two members of a couple who look so similar they appear as “boyfriend twins” will try out, and eroticize, interpretations of difference (you’re the top, I’m the bottom; you’re the funny one, I’m the smart one; you make dinner, I do the dishes). In what Barthes called “idiorhythm,” a way of being in sync with the other person apart from the world, couples and communities live out fantasies of sameness while constantly enriching and reworking them with what we need a nicer term for than “the narcissism of minor differences.” Indeed, although charges of “narcissism” and “ethnonarcissism” attend overt displays of enjoyment of belonging to a group, such pleasure is not the ecstatic recognition of one’s own self in others, but a constantly shifting process of finding likenesses and differences among one’s own group.

Think for example of the classic Jewish joke about the man who is rescued after being stranded for years on a deserted island. His rescuers find two structures and ask him what they are. “That one is my synagogue,” he answers, “and the other one, I never go to!” We could read the joke as a lesson about how all identities are based on polemical exclusions and enmities, aimed even at imaginary foes. But crucially, the man builds not a church or antisemitic league meeting hall, but rather a synagogue—he is not so much keeping the imaginary other out as beseeching his witness. He cannot be the right kind of Jew without the presence of another, different but essentially similar Jew. An identity, a community, is not the site where distinctions melt away in solidarity but the arena in which they appear—one in which we struggle to convince our peers that we individually are doing the better version of whatever it is we are all doing together.

In this perspective, homosexuality, Jewishness, etc., appear in much the same way that Lacan, in Marty’s telling,

conceived of sexual difference: as crucial elements of a life, and as elements not easily dislodged from a broader culture, but also as sufficiently indeterminate or flexible to permit all sorts of enthusiastically perverse “bad Jews” and “bad gays” to make their particular ways in the world. Foucault’s shift from “law” to “norms” allows for the possibility of historical novelties, like the distinctly modern form of romantic love between adult men, but, like Lacan’s formulation, it is tempered by a kind of conservatism, an attachment, neither ironic nor skeptical, to the contingent identity, neither freely chosen nor arbitrarily assigned, but arising out of longings and resemblances linking one to parents, teachers, lovers, and friends.

But for this sort of different-sameness to have any appeal, one must, Marty might have noted, enjoy being oneself and among one’s own! While he devotes many passages of the book to lamenting that today’s gender activists have lost the moderating element found in Foucault, turning his tactical critique of Lacanian law into a crusading mission to rewrite our norms of gender, Marty has little explanation for why people in both the

U.S. and Europe find themselves unable to experience their identities playfully and privately. If we have become so earnest and indeed militant about identity, it is, as his own explanation of postmodernism shows, a problem not so much of intellectual as of social history, of the application rather than the genesis of ideas. Or, perhaps, a problem for the history of emotions, to explain the patterns of our everyday life that make contemporary subjects so insecure that they must see their particular ways of being themselves not as enjoyable private variations on public standards, or as bravura performances for a select audience, but as a demand for attention and validation from the public at large. What is it about our material conditions and emotional circuitry that is so precarious that we can no longer build the synagogue we never go to?

Marty concludes his book, despairingly, with a sweeping condemnation of gender ideology and transgenerism as the first step in a post-human apocalypse—a perspective that appeals equally to conservative TERFS and academic trans theorists. Here, as with his inveterate anti-Americanism, he seems unable to find within the resources of

“neutral thought”—the “second liberalism” of Barthes; the privately radical and publicly conservative structuralism of Lacan; the semi-ironic celebration of communitarian “sameness” of Foucault—a means to suspend his anger at the state of the world.

The task for liberals—however many remain—facing the demands of gender ideology is to discover whether these resources, or any others, can help us do otherwise. The task, no less, is to elucidate how gender, as ideology, responds to and disguises the effective sources of a legitimate and widespread suffering in our society. The happy perversity postmodern liberals celebrate can exist only in a set of relatively comfortable and equitable economic and cultural conditions that, half a century ago, may have seemed to have become part of the enduring patrimony of Western democracies, but which have in the meantime been hollowed out. Resistance to gender ideology can avoid being ideological—as Marty in his fulminating anti-Americanism at times becomes—by remembering what ideology hides. ■

*This article was originally published on March 26, 2023.*

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## COMMUNITY

# Shabbos by the Sea

A walk to shul in South Florida reminded me how my observance has—and hasn’t—changed over the course of my life

BY ALTER YISRAEL SHIMON FEUERMAN

**M**y wife, Ruchama, picked an Airbnb off the beaten track in Florida, north of Fort Lauderdale. It was economical, and it had a beautiful swimming pool in the backyard. She showed me the photos—a pool surrounded by palm trees and wild begonias. The only catch, she

said, is that the nearest shul is about 3 miles away—a very long walk on Shabbos. If you include Friday night, that could mean 12 miles of walking.

“I’m OK with the walk,” I told her. “Take the place.”

I mapped out my trek, first through a busy commercial area but then through a beautiful residential neighborhood called Lauderdale-by-the-Sea. South

Florida is a massive civilization. U.S. 1 is a main artery among an endless blur of wide boulevards, dotted with shiny red and yellow Chevy Corvettes, and blondes in Bentleys. Near the shoreline, there were tanned men 20 years my senior on bicycles, an endless array of drawbridges and on the side streets, flat-roofed stucco houses, manicured lawns, and garbage cans out front, military-ready for pickup.

Truthfully, though I was concerned about the distance, I was looking forward to the walk. It was a chance to be with myself for an hour or more, to reflect on and perhaps silently bond with my very personal America—an America that I love even as I am so different than the mainstream culture around me.

Growing up as a rabbi’s son in the 1960s, I remember walking with my father to shul at the age of 3 in Atlanta.

Even then, I was aware that we looked very different from the people around us. We were dressed in Shabbos finery—my father in his rabbinical suit and black fedora and me in white shirt and blue pants. Here, a man down the street changed the oil on his VW Bug and said, “howdy.” There, men with Southern drawls bade my father *good morning, rabbi*, as they waxed their Buicks and Pontiacs.

Yet what began as a source of pride as a little boy grew into resentment and deprivation by the time I became a teenager—not uncommon among preachers’ kids who may have felt as I did, “pressed” into the family ministry. I was stricken with envy. America, and by that I meant a youthful America, got to have a good time on Friday night in places like Harvard Square and Coolidge Corner and do “American” things like go to the movies and smoke weed and study at fancy colleges. I was stuck somewhere eating a noodle kugel and listening to my father expound on the *malbim* or some other sacred text.

Now, in Florida on Saturday morning, I paddled along in the sun with my dark suit and Kenneth Cole dress shoes and customary black hat, even though I am no rabbi. As I walked past trendy bars and clubs, memories stirred of gargantuan cravings for “American culture.” When I was young, I fantasized about being a jock and how I would “get” a girlfriend the likes of Ali MacGraw in *Love Story*. I yearned to be part of a people who I imagined to be at once blessed by God yet unrestrained by Moses and his laws.

I turned the corner to Ocean Drive. Surf-boarders—young men and women who, in their physical perfection, seemed to represent a third species of human—glided toward the ocean in flip-flops. They greeted me politely as though I were a constable or a

“God and the Jewish people have a tendency to disappear on each other.”

magistrate—someone they hallucinate might be in charge of the world—in- stead of a garden-variety man in late middle age. This was an America of good looks and seemingly super good times, one giant beach party that in my youthful unripe mind I had felt uninvited to.

Yet that was all a myth. I *had* been invited to it. In fact, I had “challenged” myself in those years to “break” the Sabbath. When I was in my 20s, I asked myself, why not go bike riding on a sunny Saturday in Central Park, or sit at an outdoor Broadway cafe and order lunch? But I would not do it. “Go ahead, grab the America that awaits you,” I’d taunt myself. “Who needs all the ancient burdens and arrangements? Seize your own life. Seize the day.” Yet for reasons deep and shallow, I remained loyal to my Shabbos heritage. Why?

The Chabad shul was a storefront in a strip mall. The sun was already high in the sky when they began *shacharis*, morning services. Not too late for the God of Israel, but it was after 10. There was more than a minyan. The rabbi was tall, young, and handsome. He was at the prayer stand, moving through prayers at a healthy trot. The shul was getting fuller. People—men and women, Jewish Americans—walked in. They stuffed

their key fobs and cellphones into pockets and the men wrapped themselves in *talises*. The rabbi had a pleasant singing voice, too. I became happily lost in the davening.

After the *laining*, the rabbi delivered a sermon. It was Parshas Bo; the ancient Israelites were commanded by God through Moses to sacrifice a lamb as a condition of their liberation. He told a story of a man whose daughter had been gravely injured and he begged the rebbe for heavenly intervention. The rebbe told him he could do nothing for him until he was willing to sacrifice, to give up something. When the man said he would give up his business activities on the Sabbath, the rebbe promised his daughter a full recovery. And so it was.

What are you willing to give up, the rabbi asked the congregation. Everyone must yield a sacrificial lamb. For one it is this, for another it is that.

Naturally, being a Chabad house, following services, there was a robust Kiddush. Men and women in what seemed young retirement age traded *l’chaims* and talked about the weather and Gov. DeSantis. They were snowbirds from Michigan and other Northern states. They seemed prosperous and with a glow of life-gladness, happy to make a blessing on the Torah or the challah. Clearly, they had not grown up with much knowledge or tradition—when a few took out their smartphones, it was a shock to me—yet they clung to this minyan next to the Dollar Tree and their handsome rabbi. I drank a *l’chaim* and ate well. We said Grace together.

I was ready for the walk home now, past Publix and Olive Garden, the Lexus dealer, Target, and Whole Foods. I had to admit I was pretty content. What brings such contentedness, I wondered? Was it the services? Was it the Sabbath itself? Why, I had spent the morning only doing what I have done all my life: going to shul, praying in a group, reading the Torah, studying Torah, making Kiddush, eating good food. I was 60 now and yet Shabbos had not grown old. These simple acts made Shabbos beautiful in my eyes and on the faces of those people; beauty makes demands.

## HOLIDAYS



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

Even still, I wondered, what kept me loyal to such a restrictive creed? No phones, no cars, no turning on lights, no sports, no cooking. After all, there were all kinds of versions of Shabbos that people observed. What was it that kept me in this particular brand of faith? Was it the stern upbringing that I received from my rabbinical father? The imprecations of Moses and the rabbis? Or my mother's devotional love to the Sabbath and to her inheritance from the rebbes of Novominsk and Trisk-Chernobyl?

The very first time I saw desecration of the Sabbath up close, I fainted. I was 10 or 11 and at the house of an acquaintance who I thought was observant, when smack in the middle of Shabbos afternoon, he answered the phone. On seeing such a sight, the blood flow in me stopped. I felt faint and fell backward. When the fellows at Chabad whipped out their cellphones 50 years later, I didn't faint, but it still gave me a start. Yet when they made their blessings on the Torah, it was with such gladness and sincerity that I felt a holiness with these people even as their Shabbos was not the same as mine.

What is Shabbos, then, and how does one grow with it over the course of a lifetime?

It would be easy to say that one should simply follow the rules. The reality is, however, that we often must do things to find out how we feel. We also must feel sometimes in order to find out what we should do.

One Friday night when I was in my 20s, I was with a friend whom I loved who broke the Sabbath and was quite smug about it. We were going to a get-together on the ninth floor in a sleek Upper West Side building. I was about to dutifully climb the stairs when the elevator door opened in the lobby. He playfully "pushed" me into the elevator and I did not resist. We rode fast up to the ninth floor.

I felt intoxicated as the elevator shot up. My face was flushed as though I had just drunk wine or kissed somebody else's girlfriend, even as a ride on the elevator may have been technically somewhat permissible. (A resident had pressed the button.) Yet I felt as

**"The very first time I saw desecration of the Sabbath up close, I fainted."**

though I had played fast and loose with a delicate feeling—a feeling of Sabbath. I had trifled with the Sabbath Queen and I didn't do anything like that again.

As my years on this Earth dwindle, my Shabbos observance has become more cultivated, more elaborate. I have become influenced by my surroundings. Here in my home base of Passaic, New Jersey, davening begins at 7 a.m. and we spend much of the day afterward immersed in the word of God, His Mishnah, and Talmud. What should a Jewish man my age do? Make a killing in the stock market? Make believe he is young again, only this time with a little more money?

When I walked with my father to shul as a child, he would teach me the Mishnah by heart. There was so much urgency: I had to get it right. How does one make a blessing on fruit? On the fruit of the tree one says, "Blessed are you God who created the fruits of the tree!"

The previous evening in Florida, Friday night, my wife had joined me for shul. On the long walk back, I shared with her a complication in the Talmud our group was studying back home in Passaic. What if you had an orange and a grape in front of you? Which one gets the blessing first, the grapes or the

oranges? The one you like (oranges) or the more important (grape) since grapes are mentioned in Scripture? Ruchama pointed out that in Judaism there is a hierarchy even among fruits and vegetables. The Talmud records two versions of a rabbinic dispute that would pertain to: olives and grapes, oranges and blueberries, or grapes and crackers? Which one trumps which? It is left for the medieval giants to settle.

It was warm and Florida beautiful as we strolled back to the Airbnb. Old men on bicycles pedaled past. Cars whizzed by. Purple neon lights of clubs and bars flickered and reflected on my wife's face. A man came out of the Walgreens and asked us what time it was. We didn't know.

God and the Jewish people have a tendency to disappear on each other. We leave Him, He leaves us and yet neither has disappeared yet. We seem to meet each other not always in shul and not always over a page of Talmud but in moments of wonder: How did we survive? How come we haven't yet died off? Can we still be here studying your laws and the laws of Moses, in the fluorescent glow of the Walgreens or at a Chabad house?

The Talmud says that to keep the Sabbath is to testify that God created the world in six days. Nice words, but in practice not so simple. Love, belief, and religion are survivors. They must endure intermittent hate and doubt. On my walk, the appetites of my youth rose up to bear witness that I could have had a different life—that I could yet still have a different life.

I came home on Saturday afternoon at 3 p.m. and made a beeline for the fridge for a cold drink of orange juice. Ruchama and our daughters had retired to the living room to read or for a Sabbath nap, yet remains of the Sabbath meal were out: a cup of wine, scraps of challah, chulent-stew, and chicken. The family had expected me home much earlier and had eaten without me. My youngest daughter though, still a teenager, was at the table, singing an old man's Sabbath song. ■

*This article was originally published on March 24, 2023.*

# America's Original Bestselling Haggadah

Before there was Maxwell House, there was Mrs. Philip Cowen's 'Seder Service'

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

**M**ove over, *Maxwell House Haggadah*. It's time to share the limelight with one of your kin: Mrs. Philip Cowen's *The Seder Service for Passover Eve in the Home*.

First published in New York in 1904, this equally American, homegrown version of the traditional ritual text went on to sell nearly a quarter of a million copies before being dislodged from its perch three decades later by the Maxwell House product, whose corporate pedigree and price tag—there wasn't any—rendered it particularly attractive. In its heyday, though, Mrs. Cowen's text reigned supreme: the prima donna of *haggadot*.

Nothing else was quite like it. Or, as one well-disposed New York observer put it at the time, speaking for others as well as for himself, "We have no hesitation in stating that it is just what English-speaking Jews have long wanted." A smooth amalgam of Hebrew and English text; scholarship, music, and visual detail; typographical ingenuity, helpful "instructions," and "limp leather" binding, Mrs. Cowen's *Seder Service* shone brightly: the "haggadah in a new dress."

Easy to read and handle, this version was used by schoolchildren and their families; by patrons of the State Bank of New York, among whom it was distributed as a gift; and by American Jewish servicemen during WWI, who received a free copy along with a ration of matzo, courtesy of the Jewish Welfare Board.

*Seder Service* also found favor among both Orthodox and Reform Jews at the grass roots, bridging what many

believed to be an uncomfortable divide between the two. Giving new meaning to the old adage about reading the fine print, *Seder Service* made it possible for an Orthodox Jew and a Reform Jew to sit side by side at the same Seder table by signaling through means of typeface and layout which aspects of the Seder were not to be skipped (see: large type, full lines) and which could be passed over (see: small print, indented lines). In that way, Mrs. Cowen acknowledged, "no fault should be found with the suggestion it conveys, as he who wishes may read every line of the older service, for not a word has been here omitted."

How sensible, even artful, it was for Mrs. Cowen to mitigate the perils of omission—and the ensuing family drama—through the use of space and ink. Her text did double duty: It came in handy for those in pursuit of flexibility and a speedy Seder (away with all those "rabbinic dissertations") and met the needs of those in pursuit of the tried and true, who were given to lingering over every word.

Both innovation and tradition found a place for themselves in Mrs. Cowen's pages, prompting one of the publication's many full-page advertisements to crow that it would appeal simultaneously to the Orthodox and "commend itself to people who prefer a modernized version." Another advertisement said it would even "defy the scoffer."

Inclusive long before that word and practice became *de rigueur*, *Seder Service* also made room for a handful of Sephardic customs, among them its distinctive Grace After Meals. Those who were "accustomed to the Portuguese

ritual" were duly informed that they would find this haggadah a real boon.

Despite its best efforts to please, not everyone was happy with Cowen's holiday offering, the prices of which ranged from 30 cents for an ordinary paper copy to a deluxe edition, with the owner's name imprinted on the cover, for \$2.50. Some Passover celebrants preferred the familiarity of an old, wine-speckled haggadah from the Old World to one that was bright and shiny and made in the New.

Still others questioned altogether the need for an updated version, asking rhetorically, in the spirit of the day, "Shall we or shall we not cast aside the old haggadahs that have become endeared to us with all their typographic frailties and artistic incongruities?" Perhaps something could be said for holding on to them?

And still other critics found fault with Mrs. Cowen's translation skills, unaware that in quibbling over this word and that, they were taking on the King James Bible from which Mrs. Cowen had drawn.

Near as I can tell, no one took exception to and grumbled publicly about this particular haggadah having been "arranged" by a woman—and a real woman at that, not a corporate invention à la Betty Crocker.

The Mrs. of the book's title—a.k.a. Lillie Goldsmith Cowen—was the wife of Philip Cowen, the longtime publisher of *The American Hebrew*, and the mother of Elfrida, who married M. Leon Solis-Cohen. A skilled typesetter in her own right as well as a deft editor who wielded a "relentless pencil," or so boasted her proud husband, Mrs. Cowen turned her talents to modernizing the haggadah.

Nor did anyone even hint, at least not overtly, that by compiling this text and putting her (married) name on its cover, Mrs. Philip Cowen had crossed a line.

She hadn't. At no time did Mrs. Cowen put on airs or sail under false colors by assuming the mantle of a rabbi or a scholar. On the contrary. She made a point of emphasizing that her role throughout had been a "humble one"—she was acting only in her capacity as a "daughter of Israel"—and that all of

the important tasks, including supplying the scholarly, explanatory material and arranging the musical selections, had been fielded by others far more eminent, most notably Professor Solomon Schechter, president of the Faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, who was responsible for that first task, and Rev. S. Rappaport, cantor of New York's West End Synagogue, who was accountable for the second.

Whatever cultural authority Mrs. Cowen wore—and lightly so—was of an experiential nature: the “result,” as she put it, writing in the third person, “of considerable experience in celebrating the Passover in her home by the author.” The credentials she subtly brandished were those earned through familiarity with domestic Jewish ritual practice and won thanks to sure-footedness in the kitchen and at the dining-room table.

Admittedly, there's not a recipe to be had, not even one for *haroset*. But in its sensibility—its marriage of tone and practice—Mrs. Cowen's *Seder Service* was as much a modern expression of Jewish housewifery as it was an age-old vehicle for the transmission of Jewish history.

At this point, you may well ask: How did all this come to pass?

According to the origin story that appeared in *Memories of an American*

*Jew*, Mr. Cowen's 1932 memoir, the Cowens once hosted a Passover Seder at which their guests' children characterized the illustrations in the haggadah set before them as “curious.” To make matters worse, the youngsters also had a good laugh at the English translation and “gave vent to their surprise that the Lord couched his instructions to Moses in such awful English.”

A toned-down version of the same story had also appeared years earlier in the preface to the third edition (1906) of Mrs. Cowen's *Seder Service*. In it, she told in her own voice and words of having hosted a Passover Seder one year that was “marred because of typographical blunders, bad grammar and mis-translations which abounded in the books used.”

In both iterations of the tale, Mrs. Cowen had an aha moment that culminated in her “determination” to remedy matters by coming up with a haggadah that “would not cause derision among the younger generation.” As her husband would later recount, “My wife kept her word and a few years later published *The Seder Service*, which, because of its fine English and musical arrangements, was instrumental in bringing about a revival of the Passover celebration in the United States.”

This was no spouse's idle boast—well,

not entirely. If contemporaneous accounts are to be believed, the celebration of Passover received quite a boost from the release of Mrs. Cowen's haggadah, experiencing a momentary surge in popularity. “There can be no doubt that by this new publication of yours, you have on your part done very much towards re-awakening an interest in and love for the beautiful Seder service which had fallen into neglect in so many Jewish families,” acknowledged a fan in 1905. Another, writing from the Midwest three years later, pointed out that thanks to the modern haggadah, “it is becoming customary again to usher in the Passover with a service in the home, with the family table laid for the evening meal, as an altar.”

I suspect there was a bit more to the Seder's flurry of popularity than that. No matter how avidly anticipated or quickly seized upon, Mrs. Cowen's *The Seder Service for Passover Eve in the Home* could not have single-handedly turned the tide of desuetude. Other factors—immigration comes readily to mind—were no doubt at play.

All the same, it made for a good story. Almost as good a story as the one nestled in its pages. ■

*This article was originally published on March 28, 2023.*

## HOLIDAYS

# Supersized Seders

Massive Passover gatherings in Thailand and Nepal cater to backpackers—by the thousands

BY NOMI KALTMANN

**Y**ou think you're making a lot of food for Passover? Here's Rabbi Yosef Chaim Kantor's food order this year: 3,000 bottles of kosher-for-Passover wine, 4,000 pounds

of matzo, 10,000 pieces of salmon, and 30,000 whole chickens.

Kantor, Thailand's chief rabbi and the country's head Chabad-Lubavitch emissary, knows how to supersize a Seder. Even though Thailand is home to just slightly more than 1,000 Jews, an

estimated 150,000 Israeli tourists pass through the country each year—and those who are in Thailand during Passover often find a Chabad Seder to mark the holiday.

This year in Thailand, Seders will be hosted in Bangkok, Phuket, Koh Samui, Chiang Mai, Ko Pha-ngan and, for the first time, Pai. Kantor is expecting at least 10,000 attendees across all of these Passover events. The country's largest Seder, slated for 3,000 guests, will be in the tropical beachside town of Phuket, where the weather is usually tropical and balmy; the Seder there will take place in six outdoor tents, with space for 500 guests in each. In other Thai locations, the Seders are held in ballrooms

at local hotels or in outdoor tents, depending on the numbers expected.

The logistics required to organize communal Seders on such a scale requires much coordination. Preparations begin six months in advance. “One day after Simchat Torah, we begin organizing the supplies,” said Kantor. “We begin shipping things in. And we need to organize staff, generators, warming ovens, and facilities like toilets.”

The cost of hosting Seders for so many people is steep, with Kantor estimating it to be just under \$1 million USD. “People think that when things are to scale it becomes cheaper,” he said. “But for a public event, the moment you outgrow a hotel ballroom, you now have to re-create a space in a tent that has all kinds of overheads that escalate dramatically. It’s the infrastructure that costs. Freezers. Waiters. Cooking for such large amounts of people. Having a banquet manager for each 500 people. There are myriad details.”

Huge tents, arranged to echo the layout of the Seder plate, are erected to accommodate the giant Seder hosted by a Chabad house in Thailand. Courtesy Esther Felder

Chabad in New York usually helps facilitate the Seders in Thailand by sending *bochurim*—young men who are studying in yeshiva and are on break from their studies over Passover—to assist in running these communal events. This year at least 70 *bochurim* are slated to fly to Thailand, where they will undergo two days of training on how to engage the massive crowds that attend these Seders.

Haggadahs and instruction are provided in both Hebrew and English to all Seder guests, who are usually seated around tables of 10 or, depending on space, at long communal tables. The crowd is a mix of ages, nationalities, singles, and families. Due to Thailand’s popularity among Israeli travelers and backpackers, thousands of the guests are Israelis. The Seders in Thailand are lively affairs, with thousands of people singing Passover songs and *Ma Nishtana* in a variety of languages. Seders are hosted on both the first and second night of Passover, though the crowd is usually smaller on the second.

“Nepal hosts one of the world’s largest communal Passover Seders, with some estimates that, on average, 2,000 people attend the Seders in Kathmandu.”

The Seders hosted by Chabad in Thailand are free for anyone to attend, but RSVPs are encouraged so that Chabad knows how many people to prepare food for. However, on the night, with or without an RSVP, anyone is welcome to join. Optional donations to help cover costs are appreciated.

“We spend a lot of thought on how to make a public Seder be a family Seder—although it sounds impossible,” said Kantor. “We want there to be the beauty and excitement of super communal, really large Seders, but at the same time, we try to drill down the details of each family having the experience of a family Seder. To appoint a head of the table for their group. To work out which elements will be done communally. It’s trying to harness the energy of the huge crowd.”

The attention to detail and crafting a communal experience is not lost on the guests who attend Seder in Thailand. Aviya Weiner, an Australian who has been to several communal Seders hosted in Koh Samui, said, “There were so many people from so many different places and walks of life. It was incredible to see everyone coming together and take part in the Seder. My family has even stayed in touch with other families we met there!”

Chabad of Thailand hosted its largest number of Seder guests in 2019 and originally expected 2020 to have an even bigger number. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, just weeks before Passover.

“In March 2020, we canceled all public events,” Kantor recalled. “For the locals, we packed full Seder dinners to go. The next year [2021] we did have some small public Seders because Pesach came at a period between lockdowns. But the tourists couldn’t get in because you needed two weeks of quarantine, so it was much smaller.”

In 2022 the numbers started to climb again; hundreds of people showed up. But 2023 is expected to be Chabad of Thailand’s largest-ever Passover.

The concept of large, communal public Seders that are free of charge and open to any Jewish person began in 1986 when the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, met with the Ashkenazi and Sephardic chief rabbis of Israel and encouraged them to establish free public Seders across Israel.

A few years after that, Chabad began to host large communal Seders in Asia, with Nepal being the first country to host free Seders for Jewish backpackers and travelers.

Australian Joe Slater remembers helping to organize and coordinate some of these Seders in the 1990s in both Pokhara and Kathmandu, Nepal. “It was mostly Israeli guests. We had a very interesting crowd,” he said, recalling one specific guest, a Buddhist Monk who was born Jewish; he attended the Seders while wearing his red monk robe. “At the time we held these Seders, there was no established Chabad house in Nepal. One year we held it at the Israeli Embassy, but the year after that the crowd had grown too large, and it was held at a hotel. People knew about these Seders largely by word of mouth.” Slater estimates that about 1,000 people came to the ones he helped to organize.

Tables set for a Seder hosted by Chabad in Thailand. Courtesy Esther Felder

In 2000, Chabad of Nepal opened

under the leadership of Rabbi Chefzi Lifshitz and his wife, Chani, and today Nepal hosts one of the world's largest communal Passover Seders, with some estimates that, on average, 2,000 people attend the Seders in Kathmandu.

"It all started in Kathmandu 35 years ago," said Lifshitz. "There was no Chabad house then. It was just travelers. The Seder was something new. It was something special and it became very famous."

In addition to the communal Seders in Kathmandu, Seders are held across Nepal—including in Pokhara, Annapurna and, for the first time ever in 2023, at either Namche or Dingboche, one of the Sherpa villages leading up to Mount Everest.

"At Annapurna [a famous mountain

range in Nepal], we do a Seder at 3,500-meter altitude, and we usually get about 100 people," said Lifshitz. "Doing a Seder in the mountains, it's the most interesting experience. It's the one people talk about. And this year, for the first time, we will do a Seder on the way to Mount Everest. We are expecting tens of people!"

But it's not just Chabad that will be hosting Seders in Asia.

The Jewish Community of Japan, led by Rabbi Andrew Scheer, is excited to welcome a mix of locals and tourists to its community Seders in Tokyo and is expecting about 100 guests per Seder night.

"We start planning at least six months in advance. We import supplies from the U.S. We make our own horseradish (wasabi)," said Scheer.

"Last year we asked the *Ma Nishtana* questions in Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, English, Japanese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Dutch, French, Spanish, and German."

Like most Jewish communities in Asia, Japan endured lockdowns, with community Seders canceled in 2020 and 2021, with individual Seder-to-go kits provided to community members instead. Public Seders ran in 2022, but the crowd was smaller than usual.

However, in 2023, Tokyo's community Seders will operate as normal. "We've been waiting four years to welcome visitors from all over the world to our Seder in Tokyo," said Scheer. "It will be two nights to remember." ■

*This article was originally published on March 28, 2023.*

## HOLIDAYS

# Proof of Purchase

My grandfather's been buying 'shmurah' matzo for more than six decades. He's got the receipts to prove it—somewhere.

BY GABI WEINBERG

**A**s we delicately slipped sets of three matzos into the hodgepodge of matzo covers for the Passover Seder, Zayda bellowed from across the table: "Gabi, you remember I've been buying these matzos for over 60 years—and I've got all of the receipts!"

My grandfather's penchant for saving bits of history started when he was 16 years old. His new stepmother offered him his mother's four remaining boxes of possessions, threatening to put them in the garbage bin if he declined. While he could not resurrect his mother, whom he lost at age 10, he could hold on to her stuff—and so he did. This began Zayda's love affair with historical items, the day he became a self-identified archivist.

Zayda takes his archivist work with a marketing flare. He presents his third-grade report card where he received a C in penmanship to anyone willing to look at it; he learned his lesson and now writes like a practiced scribe. Stay at his home for a half hour and you'll be shown digitized and reprinted photos of his stepsister on the stoop of their Crown Heights home in her blue dress or a poignant group shot in the same spot taken with the camera he received for his bar mitzvah. At any family event, he gleefully shares old images that he pulls from a jacket pocket, or displays on the yellowed pages of his photo album. The most striking folio contains three shots of his parents, both deceased before he graduated college. As a child and teen,

I always treated these encounters with Zayda's archive with equal parts bemusement, befuddlement, and admiration. I understood the preservation of his past through family photos, but I wondered: What about the more mundane items?

Zayda's collection of 63 years of Shatzer Matzo receipts remains the most surprising set in the archive.

These receipts represent the annual purchase of *shmurah* matzo, literally "watched matzo," that many opt to eat on the first night of Passover to fulfill the highest matzo-eating obligation.

After hearing about these receipts and getting glimpses of them for almost 30 years, I wanted to actually see the legendary stack. First, the original receipt from Zayda's initial purchase, and then of course the 62 other receipts. I imagined holding each receipt and asking the four questions: Why was this year different than any

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other year? Who came to this Seder? What celebration was shared? Who was absent?

The absurdity of the collection also piqued my interest to gain insight into my own archivist tendencies. I've still got a project box that holds my 1998 World Series Yankees team poster and my Roger Federer autograph circa 2008 caught in the stands of the U.S. Open. And I can't forget my treasured cigar box, gifted to me by my grandmother, filled with rare pennies. However, nothing I have comes close to Zayda's receipts. I didn't know what I'd do with the receipts once I tracked them down, but I had to find them.

Finding these receipts required a trip down to Zayda and Baba's basement. Most trips down those five short steps are to go "shopping," since Baba runs a Costco retail store from the unfinished basement, but today we had a different mission. The smell of a 70-year-old boiler combined with chipping lead paint never gets old. "Watch your head, Gabi," he reminded me as we made the turn off the stairs into the lair. I've lost track of the number of times since my bar mitzvah that I've hit my head on the hot water pipe that crosses the ceiling. These cranial encounters likely explain my poor short-term memory.

We pushed forward into the first room of Zayda's archive. It was dimly lit by a pull-string incandescent bulb and contained two generations of folding chairs that we'd bring up twice a year for Sukkot and Passover. In the back of this 4-by-8 room is a 6-foot freezer; it looked like someone might be kept in there, but it hadn't been turned on in a generation. Behind the chairs stacked in no apparent order, lay the storied shelves of the archive. On the first shelf were disintegrating copies of *The New York Times*. The archive had expanded to include moments beyond family celebrations. You've got the 20th-century's greatest hits: the moon landing, JFK's assassination, and the founding of the State of Israel. But no stack of receipts. On another shelf I saw a 1940 issue of *Time* magazine, but still no receipts. Each historic broadside dustier than the next, yellowing

**"Zayda passed me an unopened 1970s Shlomo Carlebach LP from another shelf: 'It's probably worth something, no?' It's not."**

and decomposing like memories. As we shuffled to the next area of this tiny room, Zayda passed me an unopened 1970s Shlomo Carlebach LP from another shelf: "It's probably worth something, no?" It's not. I've looked it up, and if you "buy now" on eBay it goes for \$17.99. Again, we'd come up with nothing to show for our search. Maybe those receipts were merely legend.

We returned to Zayda's office. Perhaps these receipts were resting in one of his drawers or standing upright next to a copy of my mother's report card. No luck.

Disappointment doesn't describe my feelings. I brag about this set of receipts. It must exist; how could it not? It's too good to not be true.

I departed from Zayda's feeling cheated of this family heirloom. The receipts would be proof that we gathered, proof of those rides from his Long Island home to the matzo factory at the midpoint between Borough Park and Flatbush that morphed into shorter jaunts around the corner to Gourmet Glatt.

The next week a letter arrived with Zayda's scribal cursive: "Mr. Gabi Weinberg" and my address on the front along with three American flag stickers that said "Proud to be American" and "A Year to Remember" on the back to

keep it sealed. It wasn't college-acceptance-letter size, but it did have a little bulge. I was hopeful. I had gotten a tip that something would arrive, but I didn't know what the envelope would contain. I carefully opened the letter and shook out its contents: a 2017 receipt from Gourmet Glatt, which included matzo and chocolate pudding; three handwritten receipts from 2016, 2015, and 2014 directly from the matzo mecca, the Shatzer Factory itself; and a 2013 receipt for matzo from Brach's, another local kosher supermarket. Additionally, there was a nice form letter from the folks at Shatzer encouraging the recipient to order early so as not to miss out on getting enough matzo that year.

Sixty-three years of receipts and only five remained. What would I tell my grandchildren about this tradition? "Pics or it didn't happen," feels like the response I'd get when retelling this *Zayda-meisa*. I counted my memories of the matzos. Sitting alongside family, digesting, ever so slowly, and waiting for the next box to be opened and passed between the generations. Better yet, crunching with every bite, making crumbs, lathering the slices with butter, adding a pinch of salt, and washing it down with cold seltzer as the true lifetime value of these matzo investments, even if their price is not memorialized in saved copies of the receipts. ■

*This article was originally published on March 24, 2021.*

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# 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

**P**assover 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 *ma lecha 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 militant 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, Bubbe 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 Gaudí 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 hard-house DJs: My non-Jewish guests knew about the meal from their years studying the Last Supper. I eventually married another child of a hoarder, 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 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 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

“Environmental psychologists agreed that it was important for us to have identity-marking objects clearly visible around us for a coherent self-concept.”

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. ■

*This article was originally published on April 20, 2016.*

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# Every Generation

Memories of an incomplete Seder

BY ETGAR KERET

I remember the day they came to tell my mom that Dad was dead. I was 7. Someone who was in Dad's unit came alone, wearing dirty fatigues with bulging pockets. I was sure he was hiding lots of presents in them. Soldiers always have lots of surprises in their pockets. He didn't prepare my mom at all, didn't even ask to send me out of the room. He just sat down on the couch sheepishly and started to talk. He didn't look at my mom while he talked and his voice was barely audible. He looked like a kid apologizing for doing something wrong. "We were in the jeep together, and Michael asked if we could pull over because he had to urinate." He actually whispered the word "urinate." "I pulled over and Michael walked off the road. He took four steps, I counted. One, two, three, boom. He stepped on a mine." He stood up from the couch and looked at Mom's face for a minute. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, and the door closed quietly behind him. He didn't hug Mom, didn't say, "It'll be all right," he didn't even look at her, nothing. I was very disappointed that he didn't give me a present. The ones in his pockets were probably for another kid. Mom was looking at the mud stains on the living room rug. "He brought all that dirt into the house," she said angrily. "Is it really so hard to wipe your feet outside?"

A few hours later, the officer arrived, with a doctor and a woman soldier to give us the news. Mom poured everyone coffee with a steady hand and asked the officer all kinds of technical questions about how Dad died. The woman soldier said I was a cute little boy and ruffled my hair. I liked that. Even today, I miss the touch of a hand on my hair, but people don't ruffle a grown-up's hair. The soldier said

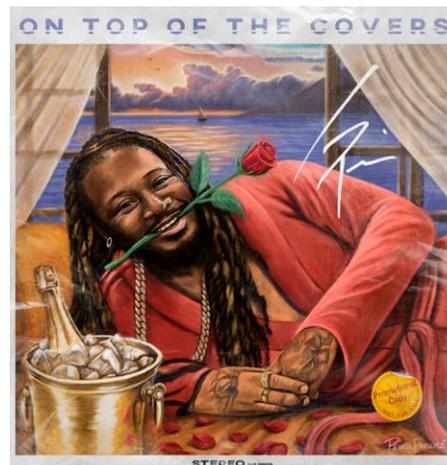
her name was Yael. She asked Mom if she could take me to a movie. Mom, who was busy talking to the officer, was glad to get rid of me.

We went to a matinee. There was an airplane in the movie, and a pilot. My father was up in the sky now, and I wondered whether they let him fly a plane, too. When we got home, the officer was still there and Mom was still asking him questions. The doctor had already gone home. Yael said goodbye to everyone, and before she went, she bent down and kissed me. A soft kiss, not the kind your aunts give you. I wasn't even sure that her lips touched me.

Mom woke me the next morning and took me out to the closed-in balcony. She'd turned it into a memorial room. There were pictures of Dad, his report cards, diplomas he'd gotten, everything. "This is Dad's room," she said firmly. "You're not allowed to touch anything here."

The next week passed very quickly. During the day, people came to see us, and at night, Yair cried. Mom said it was because he was teething. Grandpa Gershon didn't sit shiva with us. He said he didn't believe in rituals. That really bothered Mom, but she didn't say anything. After Dad died, Grandpa started doing all kinds of weird things. Mom never said anything to him about it, except at the Passover Seder 11 years ago, when he really did go too far.

We started the evening by reading the Haggadah. Grandpa only read the nice-sounding words out loud. "Rabban Gamliel ... cleft the sea ... the brick and the mortar." Yair and I listened quietly because Mom promised us that if we acted nice to Grandpa, she'd let us go to summer camp. We sang the songs and found the hidden



## Album of the Week

T-Pain, *On Top of the Covers*

An early mention of T-Pain in *The New York Times* has critic Kelefa Sanneh refer to him as an "R&B cyborg," a nod to his frequent use of Auto-Tune. Everyone from Usher to Jay-Z hated on T-Pain, whose songs were pretty wholesome ones about falling in love (with a stripper). The iPhone's release in 2007, along with Jay-Z's "D.O.A (Death of Auto-Tune)" in 2009, helped bring an end to the cyborg era. But T-Pain's latest album, *On Top of the Covers*, shows what we were missing the whole time.

T-Pain emerged from the Auto-Tune era relatively unscathed. He moved on to become a streamer on Twitch, where he trades stories about meeting Prince with viewers who watch him play video games. But *On Top*, an album of covers, gives the impression that he has some unfinished business.

Every song on the album is a show stopper, starting with the Civil Rights era anthem, Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come." T-Pain isn't as smooth as Cooke—nobody is—but as those heavenly strings start off the track, he first lets the Auto-Tune form a warm hum of a background and then lets the emphasis hit on Cooke's plaintive, "Brother, help me please." Turns out the man who helped make Auto-Tune happen had pipes all along.

—David Meir Grossman

matzo and Yair asked the Four Questions. After that, Yair asked Grandpa Gershon why we can't see Dad when he comes to drink from Elijah's cup. Grandpa looked surprised and his eyes glistened. "You're a very funny grandchild, Yair. You say sad things, but you never cry, just like your mother. Oh well, my tears instead of yours." He put his fingers into his mouth, placed a saliva-soaked finger under each of Yair's eyes and drew two wet lines down his cheekbones. Scared, Yair jumped up and shouted, "Grandpa's crazy!" and ran out of the apartment.

Mom gave Grandpa a murderous look. "Gershon, I'm absolutely shocked. If Michael had seen that ..." She got up and went to look for Yair, slamming the door behind her with muted rage. Only Grandpa and I were left.

Grandpa wiped his eyes with a napkin, then his nose. "Your mother would like your father's memory to remain in our minds as if it were carved in stone. Stable, unchanged, unaffected by the vicissitudes of time. If it were up to me, I'd sculpt Michael in butter, and together, we'd watch your father melt. Michael didn't see things the way your mother does. He preferred to write his life on water and create whirlpools of emotion and not to carve mundane facts on tree stumps."

I didn't understand a word of what Grandpa was saying, but I knew that the door was closed now, and that when the prophet Elijah arrived, he wouldn't be able to get in.

Yair wasn't at the following year's Seder. He decided to stay in his room until Grandpa left. Before going to sleep that night, I went into the

Memorial Room. I looked at pictures of Dad, but didn't touch anything. Mom came in quietly and hugged me from behind. "I'm very happy you took part in the Seder, if you can even call that joke a Seder. I know it wasn't easy. Grandpa Gershon is an annoying man, I don't like him either. But it's important, for Dad." She kissed my head. "Thank you, Yoav," she whispered. Actually, I had a great time at the Seder. It wasn't long and boring like in other people's houses, because Grandpa only read the beautiful words in the Haggadah. And because Yair wasn't there, I got to read the questions, all four of them. One, two, three, boom. ■

*Translated by Miriam Shlesinger*

*This article was originally published on April 14, 2022.*

## COMMUNITY

# A Friend in Prison

A holiday celebrating freedom is a good time to remember those who aren't free

BY ANNETTE GENDLER

**S**o we have friends in prison now?" my daughter, home from college, said as she studied the address on the powder-blue envelope on top of our outgoing mail pile.

"We do," I responded, slightly embarrassed. That powder-blue envelope contained my Passover card to—yes, a friend in prison. It was a fairly new thing for me, too. This friend had been convicted of money laundering, mainly by virtue of having the wrong boyfriend.

When my husband and I first heard that she had landed in prison, we had brushed it off as nasty gossip. In prison? Couldn't be true! In our circle nobody landed in prison. I even checked her Facebook account and found her

last post had been fairly recent. We had known this friend quite well many years ago when we lived in the same city. Now we live in different countries but we had been loosely in touch via Rosh Hashanah and birthday wishes, and Facebook likes and comments.

Sometime later, while sitting shiva for his brother, my husband reconnected with people from the old days and found the rumor confirmed. This particular friend was indeed in prison and was having a hard time of it. Who wouldn't? A mutual friend told us that she was desperate for news from the outside world, so I sent her a Hanukkah card. We have been pen pals ever since.

I discovered that corresponding with a prisoner entails all kinds of hurdles, particularly if you send anything other

than a piece of paper and an envelope. For example, when I sent her printouts of my blog posts, they were held up because they looked like magazine articles, which are restricted. I sent her books, only to find out that she was allowed only a certain number of books in her cell. One book-mailing sent straight from Amazon reached her, the other didn't. She didn't always have the funds to buy stamps or paper and envelopes to write back. There's an "emailprisoner" system where I pay to have an email delivered to her. For an extra fee, she receives a sheet of paper to write her response on, which is scanned and emailed to me. In two instances, however, the messages I paid for never reached her. In the meantime I have settled on a mix of emailing and sending physical cards, postcards and letters. Even if an email is faster and cheaper, I feel snail

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mail, with its handwriting, images and stamps, has more soul. It is a more tangible token of the outside world.

Two years into supporting my friend in prison, I have learned a lot more about prison life, something I had until then only known from clichés in movies. I have also visited her twice on my travels, an experience less unpleasant than I thought it would be. On my most recent visit, she arrived in tears. She was upset because the guard had come late to pick her up from her cell, and she thus missed out on 10 precious minutes of our visit.

After we hugged each other she said: “Sit on the blue chair.”

I looked at her puzzled.

“It’s one of the rules. Prisoners sit on the red chairs, visitors on the blue ones.”

I hadn’t noticed that on my first visit, when my friend already awaited me, seated on the proper red chair.

While her prison seems pretty amiable, it is a place full of such restrictions and rules. The women running the little kiosk where I bought a muffin for my friend and coffee for myself were downright chatty and fun. They are volunteers, my friend explained. I could buy stuff at the kiosk, but prisoners can’t. Visits take place in what feels like the multipurpose hall of a day care center, with groupings of blue and red upholstered chairs and a play area for prisoners with children. My friend showed up in leggings, sneakers and a loose plaid shirt—no orange is the new black here. Visitors are not permitted to bring anything along, aside from some money: no purse, no gift for my friend, not even the scarf around my neck. And yet, the people at the reception are friendly and helpful. My friend had even been able to arrange for me to leave my luggage at the front desk, given that I was coming straight from the airport.

I knew the routine from my first visit:

Show up at least 15 minutes before visitation time. Those hours are strict and cannot be changed. Put everything into a locker, including the 21st-century human’s most prized possession, the smartphone. Check in with your fingerprints, which in my case were already in the system from my previous visit. Then go through a metal detector and a body search with a wand wielded by another friendly clerk. Wait with other visitors by a heavy glass door, which eventually slides open to a loud buzz. Proceed into a compartment where you wait until the first door closes and a second door opens to another loud buzz. Enter what looks like a high school gym waiting area with cinder block walls painted a shiny pale yellow. Plastic bowl seats are screwed into the floor, and restrooms have to be unlocked by a guard. Visitors waiting with you keep checking their watches as time has ticked by 2 p.m. when visitation officially begins. Soon enough you line up to go through another door and another supervised fingerprint that opens a turnstile and ushers you into the large multipurpose hall with its blue and red seats, and the kiosk in the corner.

Hearing about and witnessing some of my friend’s life in prison has given me an appreciation for my personal freedom which I took for granted, even more so than good health, safety, and shelter. I’m often confronted with health challenges, either my own or those of others. Safety is on my mind every time I walk home in the dark in Chicago, or when I use my pass card to buzz myself into the Jewish school where I work. I encounter enough homeless people in Chicago to be aware of the gift of shelter. But personal freedom? I just never thought about what it would be like not to be able to get up when I want, eat what I want, wear what I want, talk to whom I want, read what I want, say what I want, and walk out the door when I want. My friend has none of that.

Which is, of course, the point of prison.

Passover is a celebration of freedom, which until now I always associated with freedom from political oppression and slavery, not with prison. How do we

as Jews deal with prison? In a prison of about 600 female inmates, my friend is currently the only Jew. A rabbi visits her regularly, and she is thankful to study Torah with him. My friend always had a good heart, and despite her stunning beauty, she was always nice to everyone. Nevertheless, before prison, she was preoccupied with the “in” stuff: the hottest nightclubs, the latest fashion, the best restaurants. All that means nothing in the world behind bars. It is her good heart and the Judaism she grew up with that sustain her now.

“I believe,” she told me, “that God put me here for a reason. Maybe life would have gotten a lot worse for me on the outside given that my boyfriend was a criminal. Or maybe God put me here to help others.”

And that she does, volunteering as a listener, i.e., someone who gets woken up in the middle of the night to listen to another inmate who is having a hard time, often on the verge of suicide. She also works with the imprisoned mothers with babies. In addition, she takes every possible class she can, trying to make the best of what could end up being five years in jail.

Fellow inmates often ask her why so few Jews land in prison, so being incarcerated as a Jew feels particularly shameful. Even knowing someone in prison felt shameful to me. When I first began writing to my friend, I found myself shielding the envelope from view when I walked to the mailbox, lest one of my neighbors see it. Once I ran into one of them at the mailbox and got all flustered, trying to make sure he wouldn’t see the address on my envelope.

If I felt this way about merely popping an envelope into the mail, how must my friend’s son feel? What does he say when he has to explain to what his mother is up to? In our social circles knowing a prisoner just isn’t a thing. People suffer plenty of troubles and tragedies, but prison? And how much worse must it be if you are that person? What shame must my friend be dealing with? While I was grappling with this, I happened upon a passage in Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis’ book *Life Is a Test* that addressed the issue of Jews in prison. For all our troubles, writes

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Jungreis, there is an example in the Torah that we can learn from. She shared an anecdote of providing hope to parents whose son had landed in prison for drug possession. She told them the story of Joseph, who had spent many hopeless years in an Egyptian dungeon without ever giving up his humanity and his belief in God. In the end, he made a connection there that would help him be freed later. The Chamberlain of the Cupbearers remembered that Joseph had correctly interpreted

a dream for him when they were imprisoned together and recommended him to Pharaoh (Genesis 39-41). I copied those passages and sent them to my friend.

In prison, my friend says she has learned to appreciate the smallest things: Making a few pennies to buy nail polish. A kosher meal that isn't the same as all the others. A postcard from a friend.

These days, I am not timid anymore when I carry my letters to her to the

mailbox. Rather, I am glad I can support her in some small way. Mainly, however, I relish the very fact that I can step out of my house and walk down the street to mail a letter. Because that already is a freedom to celebrate.

"I miss my garden the most," my friend told me on my recent visit. "To be able to sit outside again, with a cup of coffee—that is all I want." ■

*This article was originally published on April 2, 2020.*

## HOLIDAYS

# I Believe in Broken Matzo

What shards of unleavened bread can teach us about the nature of faith

BY YEHUDA FOGEL

These fragments I have shored  
against my ruins.  
—T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Eating matzo is an exceedingly fragile endeavor.

The matzo that my family eats during Passover comes in two varieties: machine-made and handmade. Machine-made matzo—you can find boxes of it in the kosher aisle of many supermarkets, even when it is not Passover—is mass produced. As such, it raises some halachic questions, which leads some of the more legislatively rigorous to exclusively eat handmade

matzo. Machine-made matzo is square, dependable, and reliable. Handmade matzo has a more textured personality, more misshapen, uneven, interesting. Like a snowflake, each handmade matzo is a rough approximation of a circle, unique, ugly, beautiful, and special in its own way, with lumps, nooks, and cranies. It is also shockingly vulnerable, fragile, breakable.

Over Passover, my family ingests many boxes of handmade matzo, but in all of those boxes we tend to find very few complete matzot. We eat many matzo fragments, many half-matzot and broken-matzot and almost-matzot, but very few complete matzot. What is it about the bread of faith that makes the complete ones so hard to find? (Many people have a softer matzo, particularly in the Mizrahi community; although my mother's family is Sephardic, we did not have the custom to eat these matzot, so I will focus on the fragile matzot of my own childhood for now.) Perhaps by

considering the thin matzo, we might learn something about the fragility of our own faiths, and the fragments left when these fragile faiths crack.

Matzo has many names, reflecting its many contradictions. The Torah refers to matzo as *lechem oni*, the bread of suffering. The Zohar (2:41a) has its own timeless formulation that it uses when referring to matzo: *michla d'meihehnutta*, the "bread of faith." This, of course, has a Pauline feel to it, although it is often read less as a trans-substantive teaching than as one about historical fealty; as the biblical Jews had faith in God, to leave the comfortable discomfort from their lives of servitude in Egypt to depart into the unknown of the desert, hastily baked bread on their backs, so, too, we have faith in our savior, in our tomorrows, in what is yet to come. The bread of faith is thus symbolic of the faith to *leave*, to get out of a toxic situation with anything we have, with a faith that the hastily baked bread of departure will not just be the bread of suffering but also the bread of freedom.

In this key, the fragility of matzo speaks to the strength of faith, a faith that always believes that there will be a tomorrow, that there will be yet another day after this exile, even if the Messiah will come a day too late.

I believe that there is another angle to the fragility of matzo. If matzo is faith, and matzo is fragile, then it is no far jump to say that our faiths too are fragile. Perhaps matzo suggests to us that faith can be, and has always been,

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a vulnerable endeavor. We speak of the doctrines of faith, of the 13 *ikkarim*, as having a sort of durability that disallows fragility, but perhaps these grand faiths are as vulnerable as we are on the long road of life, and they too can break in the many matzo boxes in the back of Mother Courage's wagon.

We live in fear of broken faiths, nervous of what might take their place. What the broken matzo teaches us is that when faiths break, they do not dissipate or disintegrate, they fragment. What remains are the smaller pieces of faith, the humble hopes and dreams of our lives, as we attempt to live our way through the questions that pierced our illusions. These are the small faiths, murmurs of a smile on our lips, that let us fall asleep at night thinking *just maybe* we'll end up going to that therapist again, and something will yet pick up.

Over the long days and nights of COVID-19, I found myself drawn to one style of books more than any other: fragmentary books. My scattered attention and complete inability to focus on words on a page—or any YouTube video longer than 2 minutes and 40 seconds—collectively put a damper on any fiction reading, and completely killed any nonfiction reading, leaving only the fragments for me. What counts as a fragmentary read? This definition is a sort of retrospective one for me, as this is something I realized late in the game.

It started with Camus' notebooks, which felt right in the early days of the plague. That was followed by Kafka's notebooks and then later Sontag's notebooks, with stops on the way for the aphorisms of Rouchefold, and the deeply redemptive despair of Cioran and Weil. The poetic fragments of Roethke and Sappho, Pascal's *Pensees*, and the books of Annie Dillard and Mary Ruefle, along with an assortment of other

masters of the disjointed consciousness. How else could I rectify the thousand broken moments of awareness of each day, the mental servitude of my neck, bowed to my phone?

In one note I found in my computer from this time, I read words from Thomas Ligotti: "he had discovered that paradise of exhaustion where reality ends and where one may dwell among its ruins." Where reality ends, we dwell among its ruins. Where reality ends, we dwell among its ruins. I hope to attend better to the ruins, to the fragments all around me.

There is a peculiar Halacha about matzo: For matzo to be kosher, it cannot leaven, but it must be *capable* of leavening—its components must be leavenable.

This is interesting, as the halachic literature most commonly places matzo and *chametz*, leavened bread, as far apart as possible. If matzo is faith, in the symbolic family structure of Pesach, *chametz*, or leavened bread, is its antithesis. Where matzo is humble, unassuming, crunchy, *chametz* is puffed up, supercilious, tasty.

Why then must faith be capable of becoming its antithesis? (What, in fact, is its antithesis, what is the opposite of faith? Is it doubt? For many commentaries it appears so, doubt being synonymous with darker forces in parts of the rabbinic canon. Is it apathy, as the eternal words as Elie Wiesel tell us?) Perhaps faith must be capable of degenerating into its opposite conclusion to ensure its validity, its capability at attending to life itself. If there are "no ideas but in things," as the great Imagist creed goes, then perhaps we can have no faiths but in broken things, or at least in faiths that are breakable. If poems must be "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," then maybe faith must also have "real toads in it," so to speak. Matzo made without the capability of becoming *chametz* is a garden without real toads in it, it is a faith incomplete, an answer without a question.

Perhaps it is the very constitution of our faith that demands vulnerability, necessitates risk. Matzo can only be matzo if it is capable of becoming *chametz*. Faith can only be faith if it is capable of

## Passover

### Remembering the Exodus

Passover marks the liberation of the Children of Israel, who were slaves in ancient Egypt, and recounts the story of their exodus to the Promised Land. Key things to remember: Moses, Ten Plagues, matzo, the parting of the Red Sea.

The first mention of the holiday that kicks off with a Seder appears in the book of Leviticus, where it is referred to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, owing to the fact that when the ancient Israelites left Egypt they hadn't enough time to let their dough rise before fleeing. Indeed, the holiday commemorates and celebrates the flight of the Israelites, led by Moses, from Pharaoh's tyranny to freedom. Its Hebrew name is Pesach, which comes from the word pasach, commonly translated as "passed over"—a reference to the Exodus passage that tells of God passing over the blood-marked door of Jewish homes while he undertook to kill the first born sons of the Egyptians. Some scholars, however, suggest that a more accurate translation of the passage is that God "hovered over" the homes in question, signifying the Lord's eternal protection of his chosen people.

With Shavuot and Sukkot, Passover is also one of the three harvest festivals in which the Jews of Ancient Israel historically trekked to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices and first fruits. Since the Temple's destruction in 70 CE, we are no longer obliged to make the journey, but we still honor its memory by including a recitation of the Hallel prayer during the seder.

In the Diaspora, Passover is observed for eight days with two Seders, while in Israel it lasts for seven with a single Seder.

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becoming heresy. Faith with vulnerability, faith in vulnerability.

It makes a funny Jewish kind of sense that it is easy to find *shleimim*—complete, unbroken matzot—in the machine-made matzo boxes; in mass-produced faith it is easy to be whole, for all faiths are the same, with none of the risky vulnerability of the hand-produced. It is the homespun faiths, the hopes that we build with our hands and hearts that have the risk and reward of the fragile faith of matzo.

Viktor Frankl says:

There is always an element of risk involved in faith. One may spend one's entire life believing, yet God may remain silent and the loneliness of the soul may never be healed on this earth. Then to affirm that God is "silent in His love" is the highest creative commitment of which a man may be capable. The element of risk is the source of tension that keeps the act of faith forever young. Because of the risk one has to believe every day anew, one has to affirm again and again. Therein lies the essential significance of faith.

Or Merton, in his *Seeds of Contemplation*:

You cannot be a man of faith unless you know how to doubt. You cannot believe in God unless you are capable of questioning the authority of prejudice, even though that prejudice may seem to be religious. Faith is not a blind conformity to a prejudice—a "pre-judgment." It is a decision, a judgment that is fully and deliberately taken in the light of a truth that cannot be proven. It is not merely the acceptance of a decision that has been made by somebody else. Best yet, Rav Kook's sparse formulation:

Faith in its purity, through the possibility of heresy.

The traditional formula for the statement of belief begins "I believe with a full faith," *ani ma'amin b'emunah shleimah*. These words echo throughout the

"We forget that the presence of absence need not bespeak the absence of presence, but rather the presence of something other, something changed, transmuted and repurposed, more often than not."

Jewish temple of time, words that have died on lips and lived past their sayers. In saying this statement, the sayer aligns himself with generations of believers who have lived in the shade of these great hopes. But what would it mean to believe with a faith that is less than full, an *un-full* faith?

There's a lot of talk these days about the so-called people of no faith, the nones, those who are perceived to have absconded from religious faith communities, either by conscious effort or the slow passing of time. In the popular imagination, the nones are a stand-in for a broader set of questions about religion, community, and tradition in the postmodern era, for the challenges of meaning-seeking in contemporary life, and we often forget to consider the remnant faiths left in the wake of religious identity, the stained glass from the dregs after all the wine is gone, elsewhere, moved on. We forget that the presence of absence need not bespeak the absence of presence, but rather the presence of something other, something changed, transmuted and repurposed, more often than not.

Some beliefs do shatter, break, and yet so many others remain, lurking in a fragmented form in the corner of the

heart. But people bear the echoes, scars, and lines of what was. I make no judgment about these marks, and I stand with all those whose footprints are the only road, but I reflect on these traces, the fragments of faith, that which remains when one's belief in the Belief is broken, when one's faith in Faith is no longer feasible.

The prefix of the letter *bet* before the word *emunah*, faith or belief, means either in or with. *Emunah* means faith/belief; *b'emunah* means in or with faith/belief. Thus, although we traditionally think of the aforementioned line as "I believe with a full faith," we may also read it as "I believe *in* a full faith," in the possibility of a full faith. Might we also believe with a fragmented faith, and moreover, in a fragmented faith?

אני  
אני מאמין  
אני מאמין באמונה  
אני מאמין באמונה שלמה  
ואני  
ואני מאמין  
ואני מאמין באמונה  
ואני מאמין באמונה שבורה

I believe  
I believe in faith  
I believe in complete faith  
And I  
And I believe  
And I believe in faith  
And I believe in broken faith

An enigmatic dream:

The Skolya Rebbe, in the middle of the 20th century, once dreamed that he stood on the edge of a great cliff, in a valley, with the Baal Shem Tov, the Besht. The Besht turned to him and asked: "Do you want to know how to be a true *eved hashem*, a servant of God?" "Of course," the rebbe responded. The Besht jumped from the edge, landing and shattering in

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a million little pieces. The Skolya Rebbe ran down to collect all the fragments of the Besht, and when he arrived at the bottom, he was astounded to see that each fragment was a *kamah shleimah*, a full-bodied miniature of the Besht.

A comment:

According to contemporary psychologist James Hillman, we find in the mythical images of our cultures “archetypal containers for differentiating our fragmentation,” through which we might recognize some of our own self that exists through deconstruction.

This isn’t just about the fragility or fragments of faith, but also about the granular moments that constitute this faith: our attention. “Attention is the beginning of devotion,” Mary Oliver taught us, reminding us that our relationship with our spirit and our attention are closely linked. As we face the weapons of mass distraction that mine our attention, we do what we can, we simply must do what we can, to reclaim our souls. This starts with reclaiming the smallest moments of our lives. “Attention is the beginning of devotion,” yes, and we lose this devotion (I lose this devotion) every time we switch tabs for the 19th time this minute, as if waiting for some magic djinn to appear from within the latticework of our unread tabs.

The Zohar (2:183b) has another striking term for matzo: מִכְלֵא דְאִסּוּחָא, the bread of healing. The bread of faith, easily broken, beloved in its

“As we face the weapons of mass distraction that mine our attention, we do what we can, we simply must do what we can, to reclaim our souls.”

parts, is also a salve. A paradoxical bread, matzo represents slavery and freedom alike, as the food of the enslaved and of the emerging freed slaves. Matzo is a transitional object of sorts, allowing us to experience both the pain that we have experienced, that we still do experience, and to our budding freedom from the suffering that weighs us down. (Might matzo break so easily from the tension of its inner contradictions?)

Mary Oliver has a delightful phrase, “the intimate interrupter,” which refers to that wormlike little sense inside that drags our eyes and attention away

from the thing we intend to attend to at each moment. The intimate interrupter can be friend or foe: Toggling between YouTube clips and Twitter rabbit holes, I rarely love my own intimate interrupter. But when I am struck and interrupted by a turn of phrase, a literary fragment, a word, an expression in a beloved book or on a loved one’s face, then I cherish my intimate interrupter.

There’s too much to say about matzo. Shmuel intuits this with his creative reading of the Torah’s term for matzo, *lechem oni*, as “bread over which one answers [*onim*] many matters.” I hope that these fragments join the many that have been said over this humble bread of faith. Aware of the vulnerability of faith, let us eat, and nourish, our broken faiths, our hurt faiths, our half-faiths. We need not fear our vulnerability, our pockmarks, our fragments. Let us have faith with toads in it, matzo real enough, substantive enough, to exist with the possibility of cracking. Even a broken matzo is a matzo. Even in our fragments, we can recognize ourselves.

If it is through the endless fragmentation of our attentional lives that we lose ourselves, then it might be through reclaiming the fragments that we might begin to redeem ourselves. So together, as Mary Oliver suggests, let us: “*pay attention/be astonished/tell about it.*” ■

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## STONE COLD TRUTH

## Tablet

lite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one’s having babies a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning 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 not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today is between left and right. It’s the elite against everyone else.... **College is poi**

# Chosen Matzo Ball Soup

BY JOAN NATHAN

## INGREDIENTS

FOR THE SOUP:

- 1 large chicken (about 4 pounds)**
- 2 large onions, unpeeled**
- 4 parsnips**
- 2 stalks celery and their leaves**
- 6 carrots**
- 6 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley**
- 6 tablespoons snipped dill**
- 1 tablespoon salt**
- ¼ teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper**

MATZO BALLS:

- 4 large eggs**
- 4 tablespoons schmaltz (rendered chicken fat) or vegetable oil**
- 4 tablespoons chicken stock**
- 1 cup matzo meal**
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg**
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger**
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley, dill, or cilantro**
- 1 teaspoon salt, more for cooking**
- ¼ teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper**

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Put the chicken and enough water to cover by two inches, about 4 quarts, in a large pot and bring the water to a boil. Skim off the froth as it rises to the top.

### Step 2

Add the onions, parsnips, celery, carrots, parsley, 4 tablespoons of the dill, and the salt and pepper. Half-cover and simmer for at least an hour and up to 2 hours, adjusting the seasoning to taste.

### Step 3

Refrigerate for 2 to 3 hours or overnight so the liquid solidifies. When the fat rises to the top, skim it off and reserve for the matzo balls.

### Step 4

To make the matzo balls, using a spoon, gently mix the eggs, schmaltz, stock, matzo meal, nutmeg, ginger, and parsley, dill, or cilantro in a large bowl. Season with salt and 2-3 grinds of the pepper. Cover and refrigerate until chilled, at least an hour or overnight.

### Step 5

To shape and cook the matzo balls, bring a wide, deep pot of lightly salted water to a boil. With wet hands, take some of the mix and mold it into the size and shape of a golf ball. Gently drop it into the boiling water, repeating until all the mix is used.

### Step 6

Cover the pan, reduce heat to a lively simmer and cook for about 20 minutes for al dente matzo balls, closer to 45 for lighter matzo balls. To test their readiness, remove one with a slotted spoon and cut in half. The matzo ball should be the same color and texture throughout.

### Step 7

Just before serving, strain the soup, setting aside the chicken for chicken salad and discarding the vegetables, and reheat the broth. Spoon a matzo ball into each bowl, pour soup over matzo ball, and sprinkle with the remaining snipped dill.

**Yield:** 10 to 12 matzo balls

# Matzo Brei

From 'The World Famous Ratner's Meatless Cookbook'

BY PETER GETHERS

## INGREDIENTS

- 3 matzos**
- ½ teaspoon salt**
- ¼ teaspoon pepper**
- 2 eggs, well beaten**
- 2 tablespoons butter**
- Jam, applesauce, or sour cream (optional)**

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Soak the matzos in lukewarm water until soft. Drain thoroughly. The matzos will be crumbly.

### Step 2

Season with salt and pepper. Stir in the eggs.

### Step 3

Heat the butter in an 8-inch skillet. Add the matzo mixture and cook without stirring. Brown on one side, turn carefully with two pancake turners, and brown on the other side.

### Step 4

Serve hot with jam, applesauce, or sour cream.

**Yield:** Serves 2

# Braised Short Ribs

BY JOAN NATHAN

## INGREDIENTS

- 7 pounds beef short ribs cut in 4-inch portions**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste**
- 3 large Spanish onions, peeled and roughly chopped**
- 3 large carrots, peeled and roughly chopped**
- 2 stalks celery, roughly chopped**
- ¼ cup vegetable oil**
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled and smashed**
- 1 inch piece ginger, peeled and smashed**
- ¼ cup tomato paste**
- 4 cups red wine**
- 2 cups pitted prunes, divided**
- 2 cups slivered almonds, lightly toasted, divided**
- ½ bunch parsley, chopped and divided**
- ½ bunch cilantro, chopped and divided**
- 1 tablespoon thyme**
- 1 bay leaf**
- 1 stick cinnamon**
- 1 clove**
- 3 whole star anise**
- 2 cardamom pods**
- 1 teaspoon coriander seeds**
- Zest of 1 orange cut in strips**
- 4 cups beef broth**

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Season the short ribs generously with salt and pepper and refrigerate for 1 hour. Remove the ribs from the refrigerator and allow them to sit at room temperature for half an hour. Meanwhile, combine the onions, carrots, and celery in the bowl of a food processor fitted with the blade attachment, and pulse about 6 to 8 times until the pieces are chunky and relatively the same size, about 1 inch thick.

### Step 2

Set a heavy wide pan over medium-high heat and add the oil, heating until the oil shimmers. Add the beef and sear well, about 3 minutes per side. Transfer to a plate.

### Step 3

Add the onion mixture, garlic, and ginger to the pan and stir until the onions begin to brown, about 5 minutes. Add the tomato paste and broth and cook for 1 minute, until the color begins to turn brick red. Turn the heat to high, and add the wine, scraping the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon. Reduce the heat to medium, and simmer until reduced by half, about 10 minutes.

### Step 4

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Add 1 cup of the prunes and 1 cup of the toasted almonds. Tie up half of the parsley with the cilantro and bay leaf into an herb bouquet and put the thyme, cinnamon, clove, star anise, cardamom, coriander, and orange zest in a piece of cheesecloth or an herb infuser. Add them to the pot with the wine and vegetables and return the short ribs to the pot. Bring to a boil.

### Step 5

Cover the pot and transfer it to the oven. Cook for approximately 2 ½ hours, or until the meat is falling off the bones. Cool completely in the pan, then refrigerate overnight.

### Step 6

Skim the fat off the top of the mixture, then transfer the beef to a large bowl, discarding any loose bones, the herb bouquet, and the cheesecloth or herb infuser. Add the remaining cup of prunes. Heat, stirring occasionally, until gently reheated. Garnish with the remaining parsley, cilantro, and almonds and serve.

# Kid-Friendly Charoset

BY SALLY SAMPSON

## INGREDIENTS

- 2 large tart apples, diced or shredded**
- 1 cup toasted walnuts, almonds, pistachios, or pecans**
- ½ cup dried fruit, such as raisins, dates, apricots, or figs**
- 1 tbsp lemon juice, cider vinegar, brandy, or sweet wine**
- ½ tsp ground cinnamon (optional)**
- 1 tbsp honey (optional, depending on which dried fruit you use)**
- 1 pinch kosher salt**

## PREPARATION

Put all the ingredients in a bowl and mix well. If you would like a more spreadable consistency, put the mixture in a food processor fitted with a steel blade and pulse until it reaches the texture you like.

### Notes

This is a particularly good recipe to make with kids because there is no “right” way to do it. Although almost every tradition includes apples and nuts, each uses slightly different ingredients. Consider putting out a variety of ingredients in small bowls and letting each child make his or her own version.

Dried fruit can include raisins, dates, figs, and dried apricots; sweetener may not be necessary but could be honey, maple syrup, or sugar. Liquid can include lemon juice, apple cider vinegar, brandy, or sweet wine. Italian Jews often add chestnuts, while Spanish Jews add coconut.

# Breakfast Berry Crumble

BY JOAN NATHAN

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 pint strawberries
  - 1 pint blueberries
  - 1 pint raspberries or blackberries, or a combination
  - 2 Tbsp sugar
  - 2 tsp fresh lemon juice
  - 1 tsp lemon zest
  - ½ tsp cinnamon
  - 1 cup almond flour
  - ¼ tsp sea salt
  - ⅔ cup brown sugar
  - ½ cup sliced almonds
  - ½ cup cashew pieces
  - 4 Tbsp butter or margarine, melted
- Greek yogurt or vanilla ice cream (optional)

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

### Step 2

Combine berries with sugar, lemon juice, lemon zest and cinnamon in a bowl and toss gently. Place into a greased 11×9 baking dish. Set aside.

### Step 3

Combine almond flour, salt, brown sugar, almonds, cashews, and melted butter or margarine in a large bowl and mix gently until just combined. Sprinkle mixture over berries until coated with even layer of the topping.

### Step 4

Bake for 40-50 minutes, or until browned on top and berries have released juices.

### Step 5

Serve warm with Greek yogurt or ice cream if desired.

**Yield:** 16 servings

**Time:** 1 hour

# Chocolate Mousse Pie

BY SHANNON SARNA

## INGREDIENTS

### FOR THE CRUST

- 1 ½ cups sliced almonds**
- ⅔ cup sweetened, shredded coconut**
- 6 Tbsp butter or margarine**
- ⅔ cup dark chocolate pieces**
- 1 tsp sea salt**

### FOR THE FILLING

- 8 large eggs, separated**
- 10 oz dark or bittersweet chocolate**
- ¾ cup sugar**
- ½ cup olive oil**
- 1 tsp orange zest**
- 2 Tbsp orange liqueur (optional)**

### FOR THE TOPPING

- Fresh raspberries**
- Orange zest**
- Whipped cream**
- Powdered sugar**

## 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.

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**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