

THE TAB

CONTENTS

Vol. 2 Issue 24

- 1 **'I Speak English, but I Don't Speak American'**
A roundtable discussion with Israeli expats living in the U.S.
- 9 **The Hunt for Judah P. Benjamin, the Spy Chief of the Confederacy**
How the U.S. government secretly tried to bring the South's most prominent Jew home from London to face justice
- 15 **'Why Do All Rabbis Hate Me?'**
How the Orthodox community can cultivate compassion and sensitivity toward LGBTQ Jews
- 17 **Dissent in the Reform Ranks**
Growing divisions around Israel, political alignment, Jewish peoplehood, and the very future of the movement
- 20 **The Dance of Time**
A dispatch from the Russia of the recent past
- 22 **Med Men**
On Big Pharma's investment in the advertising model
- 26 **About Those Amy Winehouse Paintings**
The mystery of Gerald Laing, the forgotten pioneer of pop art
- 34 **In the Swim**
Jewish visionaries helped create New York City's public pools
- 36 **When Shabbes Is the Longest Day**
If I wanted my daughter to learn to love the Sabbath, I had to bend my own rules just a little

COMMUNITY

'I Speak English, but I Don't Speak American'

A roundtable discussion with Israeli expats living in the U.S. about why they came to America, how they feel about leaving Israel, the differences in Jewish life between the two countries, and what Americans get wrong about Israelis

BY ABIGAIL POGREBIN

What is it like to be an Israeli living in America? Over 500,000 Israeli expats live in the U.S., with the largest enclaves in New York, California, Florida, and New Jersey. They often maintain the Hebrew language in their homes and gravitate toward fellow Israelis through social networks, synagogues, Jewish community centers, or more recently, the Israeli American Council, founded in 2007, which is the largest Israeli American organization in the U.S.

Many Israelis came to the U.S. for education or job opportunities; some came because of disappointment in Israel's schools, economy, or religious/sectarian pluralism. Some miss Israel's sunlight, its *shuk* (market), or the inef-fable power of living in a country that almost didn't come to be. Conversely, some prefer America's diversity, and its invitation to practice Judaism without Orthodoxy. As one participant who lives outside Uvalde, Texas, described it in our pre-interview: "My experience was that there's just a monopoly on Judaism in Israel. I always felt excluded.

When I moved to America and went to my first Yom Kippur service, I was crying, 'Oh my God, this is what I've been missing my whole life.'"

Another who lives in Palo Alto, California, said the countries' parallel origin stories made him feel instantly at home: "Founded by freedom fighters who fled tyranny, the U.S. and Israel are both immigrant countries."

What becomes clear, as one listens to Israelis who chose America—at least for now—is that they are at once viscerally connected to the place they left and at the same time immersed in America, acknowledging that maintaining a Jewish identity takes more conscious effort here.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Their ages, locations, where they lived in Israel, and the years they immigrated to the U.S.

Tzippi: 64, Palo Alto, California.

Moved from Tel Aviv/Herzliya area in 1985.

Adva: 33, Del Rio, Texas. *Moved from Beersheva in 2017.*

Miri: 80, Manhattan. *Moved from "the heart of Tel Aviv, in Dizengoff*

Circle” in 1973, “just before the Yom Kippur War.”

Yuval: 46, Philadelphia. Moved from Jerusalem in 2012.

Etai: 55, Redwood City, California. Moved from the Tel Aviv area/Givatayim in 2008.

Ayelet: 53, suburban Atlanta. Moved from Kiryat Gat and Modi’in in 2001.

Dina: 71, Catskills, New York. Moved from northern Tel Aviv in 1980.

Ben: 46, Miami and New York. Moved from Tel Aviv area/Herzliya in 2002.

Elan: 39, Brooklyn. Grew up in Netanya and lived in Tel Aviv before moving to the U.S. in 2014.

Karin: 45, Boston. Moved from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in 2004.

Yoav: 53, Atlanta. Raised in Rehovot, lived in Tel Aviv before moving in 2010.

Rabbi Y.: 37, New York City. Moved from Jerusalem in 2013.

Tablet: Very briefly, please explain why you came to America.

Dina: My husband and I came to do graduate work. But really, we left Israel because we both felt suffocated in some way. I was already a high school teacher and the whole education system drove me crazy, was so uncreative and suffocating.

Etai: For me, the trigger was a career move: relocation after acquisition of my previous company. I have a big family all around in the U.S. and in Argentina, so the U.S. was always something that I had orientation to. I’d been here many times before. Also, I felt a big disappointment and concern about Israeli politics. It was a long time ago, and mostly triggered by the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in ’95. That created a big wound that never healed.

Ayelet: My husband got a job opportunity, and so we moved. That’s it.

Rabbi Y.: It was work, in the first three years, at the Jewish Agency, and then afterward it was school. Today it’s mainly spiritual nourishment and a place of professional growth, while knowing and hoping that I will return to Israel, just not yet knowing what date.

Yuval: I was very involved in the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Jerusalem. And at one point, after also serving in the military in a very painful, complicated unit—identifying the dead bodies of the Second Intifada—and then dedicating 14 years for peace, I just felt the need to heal my trauma and try to find a way to leave.

Yoav: My story is a little bit different. I went on relocation to Africa, met an American woman there, and we ended up being together. And when it was time to wrap up our time in Africa, she wanted to move back here to the States. So I followed her. I never had any intentions to move to America before that.

Karin: My dad was dean of the dental school at Hebrew University, so I grew up in Israel as a sabbatical kid—going back and forth to North America. For two years, we were in D.C., then in Toronto, Canada, and my mom is from England, so for me, it was very natural to say to my husband, “I want to go and study in English in America.” He found a job here in Boston with his company—which was at the time in Tel Aviv. We relocated to Boston, and he opened his own company.

Tablet: Are you comfortable saying a little more about your family circumstance?

Karin: I’m what’s called in Israel *mechoseret dat*—“faithless,” not having any religion. My mom’s a Catholic. She never converted. I’ve never converted. I had the feeling, raising kids in America, that they would be allowed to be the Jews that they want to be—unlike what I was told when I was raised in Israel. I think staying in the U.S. was my way of exercising my religious and spiritual freedom, of being in a place where I can be whoever I want to be.

Tablet: Are your children being raised as Jews?

Karin: My kids just feel more connected to Israeli culture and being Jewish than any other culture that they’re part of. The younger two are going to a Conservative Jewish day school. My oldest is a product of the public school. Like most of you in this group probably, we are in a close-knit Israeli environment and most of our days are spent in Hebrew.

Elan: We came to the U.S. for practical reasons. It was weighing quality of life

ALSO IN TABLET THIS WEEK

The Prigozhin Putsch

The warlord’s abortive rebellion has exposed the hollowness of the Putin regime

BY VLADISLAV DAVIDZON

The New Abnormal

A critique of the COVID regime exposes the limits of conservative political theory

BY BLAKE SMITH

Two Sides of the Same Coin

LGBTQ Catholics consider different ways to fit into the Church

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

Unfuckable Hate Nerds

Yes, young men are losers. They deserve sympathy, not contempt.

BY WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

The Human Rights Campaign Invents an Emergency

And develops a new strategy for making minority groups permanent wards of the Democratic Party

BY JAMES KIRCHICK

The Right Way to Talk About Vaccines

Or we could just go on calling each other Hitler forever

BY BALAJI SRINIVASAN

The Jews of Deadwood

Digging up South Dakota’s surprising Jewish history on our trip ‘Across the JEW.S.A.’

BY TABLET PODCASTS

The Dekrepitzer Blues

Fiction: ‘Come on Rebbe, play one of them nigguns’

BY HOWARD LANGER



versus the lifestyle that I was used to, growing up in Israel. I finagled my way into getting relocated at my first job after business school, and I've been here ever since.

Miri: I came for a sabbatical and things didn't work out to go back to Israel, in terms of my husband's work. So we got stuck in America for many years—really stuck. It wasn't a choice.

Tablet: You would have gone back if you could?

Miri: Definitely. Definitely.

Zippi: I came here for graduate school.

Adva: It was me wanting to experience another way of life. I already knew what life is in Israel and what I expect it to be. Also my husband is a U.S. citizen and he grew up here in the States, so he wanted the career change and it would be making more sense for him to start the career change here.

Ben: I'm an artist and always knew that I wanted to play in a global pool, work with international organizations, museums, companies, and it just seems more logical to do that from a place like New York.

Tablet: Please raise your hands: How many would say that when you came to the U.S., you expected it to be permanent? I see just two of you—Elan and Ben.

Miri: Even now, after 50 years, I haven't decided if I moved permanently to the United States.

Tablet: What is one way that you would say it's different to be Jewish in Israel and Jewish in the U.S.?

Ayelet: In Israel, I lived in Kiryat Gat, which is very close-knit, a lot of Orthodox. But we ourselves were never Orthodox, even though my grandparents were. So we would go to synagogue on a holiday—usually Yom Kippur—but not more than that. Over here in the U.S., it was much more important for me to embrace Judaism, to actually go on the High Holidays to a synagogue, to show my kids the Jewish atmosphere, the traditions. Otherwise they were never going to get it. So we would light candles on Shabbat with the girls and even with my boy, just showed them that this is a beautiful religion. I actually host a weekly class in my home for Israeli ladies, and we have this great person who

“Even now, after 50 years, I haven't decided if I moved permanently to the United States.”

comes over and does either *parshat hashavua* [the Torah portion of the week] or something like that, which I would never even think about doing in Israel, because in Israel, it felt like it was coerced. Here I do it because I want to do it, because I want to show my kids how beautiful Judaism is.

Tablet: Ayelet, when you go back to visit Israel, are you transporting those American religious ways you've developed over time?

Ayelet: No, I just go back to being the regular Israeli I've always been. Even here in America, I take what I want from Judaism. I don't do everything. I'm not *shomeret shabbat* [Sabbath observant]. I drive on Shabbat, I work—I'm a Realtor there's no way not to work on Shabbat. And so, I take what I want and feel comfortable with.

Yuval: I grew up in a Hasidic community in Israel—B'nai Brak—and then I was in the yeshiva world in Jerusalem. When I left the ultra-Orthodox community, I was put under the box of “secular,” which definitely doesn't work for me. I'm neither, and I don't have energy to invest in explaining, because life is much too short for me personally. I think what I found in America is that my Jewishness is much more private. I'm living these days in an intentional community—with a big kibbutz

of seven adults, kids, cats, and a dog. I don't care who is Jewish there—from a DNA point of view. We are only two Jews by blood in the community, but *everyone* celebrates Shabbat, *everyone* celebrates Passover in the way that fits *us*. And I think this is such a celebration of Judaism—much outside of the categories of how it “should” be.

Miri: For my generation—the people who started the country, our religion was the nation. Jewishness was nationhood. So by saying, “I'm an Israeli,” it was very strong loyalty to say, “I'm Jewish.” It was like secular Judaism. Very, very powerful. So still, when I get up in the morning, the first thing I want to know when I open my eyes is if my children are OK, and the second—before I think about work or anything, I check the news to see if Israel is OK. It's amazing—how the country is like God. Everything that happens in the country is as painful and relevant for me as my children. There is such a degree of caring, understanding, and even forgiving things—like you forgive your children. I feel that people judge Israel. Not that the situation there is good; it's horrible what's going on now with the judicial revolution. But I think that anybody from outside cannot understand what's going on. It's like judging a marriage from the outside. So I think that it's very important to come back to nationhood. Nationhood is also a very powerful way of feeling Jewish.

Rabbi Y.: As a queer person growing up in Jerusalem in a very secular family, I did not have a sense of belonging—not with the default Jews, which is the Orthodox, or with those who are traditional or inclusive. I was only in a few spaces in Jerusalem that were progressive. Coming here to America, I really feel that there's something universal. There's something that taps into different identities that is not really felt in Israel, meaning that you could be Buddhist, Jewish, queer, nonbinary in America, and nobody would really care. Nobody would really ask me, why am I this or that? Whereas in Israel, with all my love and challenges of the country, it's very blunt, very upfront: “Why are you not raising up a family?” The ideal in the Jewish Israeli culture is raising

up a family. And I don't yet know if I want to raise a family. Here in the U.S., nobody dares to ask me what type of relationship I have. Whereas in Israel, they would ask me not only if I'm married—and why not, if I'm not yet married—but what I've done in the army and how much rent I pay. There is something very powerful in being able *not* to answer, or for me to say, "This is what I want to share about myself. You're not in a place of asking me." *I'm* in the place of power, of sharing what I want to share in America.

Yoav: For us Israelis, there's no difference between being Israeli and being Jewish. It blends together. Whereas here in America, you have to work at—or consider, or be aware of—the fact that you are also Jewish besides being American. I had this realization when I was 9 years old. A little bit like Karin, I was a sabbatical child, so we went to France for a year or two. And only then did I realize, "Hold on a second; there's a difference between me being Israeli and Jewish, because there are French people here who are Jewish as well but not Israeli!" So here in the U.S., it's a distinction that we have to make. In Israel, until you're in your teens, most kids don't really have this distinction. There's another aspect that I wanted to touch on: In Israel—and it has increased lately with the recent events and governments—religion has been highly politicized. It has created a kind of a countereffect for people who are not religious: the way they perceive Judaism. Only by taking a step back and coming to a foreign country, at least for me, it made it easier for me to reconcile myself with Judaism, getting away from this discourse that is highly politicized.

Etai: I can maybe offer a different perspective—a little bit less about the religious part of it. As we grew up in Israel, it comes with the territory: Being Jewish is being Israeli and vice versa. You tour the places that you read about in the Bible, you learn them in school; the Jewish holidays are national holidays; on Yom Kippur, it's empty in the streets. That's how you come to be raised in Israel. The other part is that you are on a mission. We came from grandparents,

parents, who came from Europe to revive the Jewish dream. They came after the horrible Holocaust sacrifice in all families. Then they made more sacrifices during Israel's wars. That's what being Jewish means to most of us. The religion part of it is very, very minimal to us people who are secular, but we're *not* secular; we are Jewish, just in a different way. Here in the U.S., it's far closer to religion on one end and to peoplehood on the other end, much less connected to the land and to that story of, "We went through the horrors of the Holocaust and we came back and said, 'We're saving the day.'" In America, it's a very different ethos and story.

Elan: I fully agree with what both Etai and Yoav just mentioned. I think the nationhood, statehood, and religion is intertwined in Israel. Growing up in Israel, you're Jewish just by *being* Jewish. You could even be a passive Jew and you'd be considered Jewish. Here in America, you have to be much more proactive to work on that side of your identity. For me, having a family with two little kids, we have to make plans of doing something for Shabbat. We have to be considerate about sending our kids to some form of Jewish schooling, beyond what my wife and I can provide to our family. You really have to work your identity here, while as in Israel, just by being you, you are Israeli and Jewish.

Dina: For me, it's never about religion at all. I don't come from a family that talked about religion because we are *masorti*—we are from the Spanish Inquisition and from Baghdad and Egypt; there we did not have the categories *hiloni* [secular] and *dati* [religious] at all. We were all Jewish. I come from a very high rabbinical lineage. And yet I do not care about any of the religious things, other than the spiritual depths of humanity. I myself am practicing Buddhist, but what I find in Kabbalah, which I've been studying for many years, is the depths of wisdom. That's what I care about: the wisdom, deep humanity, heart-centered human. But I don't have those names in my life—*dati*, *hiloni*, la-la-la. It's not where I live.

Tablet: Because Dina brought up these Jewish labels, can I ask each of you how

you identify your lineage in terms of Ashkenazi, Sephardi, or Mizrahi?

Tzippi: Ashkenazi.

Adva: Mizrahi.

Elan: Ashkenazi, secular. But there are so many fissures—how do you say in Hebrew *shesayim*, so many subcultures.

Ben: I'm Sephardi and spiritual.

Etai: Ashkenazi.

Dina: DNA: Jewish. My family is Sephardi and Mizrahi. And I'm spiritual.

Yuval: I am Jerusalemite. From Jerusalem.

Ayelet: I am Sephardi and definitely spiritual.

Miri: I am Ashkenazi. It's not what I feel; it's a fact.

Yoav: I consider myself Israeli. I am mainly Ashkenazi with a little bit of Sephardi, but I consider myself Israeli.

Karin: I'm a Yerushalmite, Jerusalemite, but I'm also a shiksa-Yerushalmite, which is a whole category of its own. My mom is not Jewish, so when I fill out the forms here in the U.S., I'm like, what am I, Middle Eastern? Am I "other"? It's an interesting question. But definitely I am from Jerusalem.

Rabbi Y.: I'm more and more just trying to say that I'm a human being lately, but I'm also a JewBu [Jewish Buddhist] and a believer. I really appreciate people in this roundtable saying "Jerusalemite" as opposed to "Israeli," because it entails, as Elan was saying, the diversity and the different voices. But I am first and foremost a believer in humanity.

Tablet: How many of you have kids? I see 10 hands raised: Elan, Etai, Ben, Dina, Tzippi, Miri, Yoav, Karin, Adva, and Ayelet. For those who do have children, how many speak Hebrew to them—it doesn't have to be exclusively, but regularly? I see all of you except Yoav and Elan.

Yuval: I don't have kids, but I'm raising a kid and I speak regularly with them Hebrew.

I apologize. I should have phrased the question, "If you are a parent at all." Thank you.

Tablet: Now, turning to a different question: Miri and Etai spoke earlier in this conversation about "the project" or "mission" of Israel that you were all part of, or were raised with: the idea of what it means to be part

of this nation and then to choose not to stay. I heard several Israeli Americans talk in my pre-interviews about the feeling of guilt at leaving Israel. Is there anyone comfortable talking about whether that was ever an emotion that you wrestled with, even if you no longer do?

Adva: I'm facing guilt every day when I'm talking with my mom or my grandma on the phone because they always give me the Jewish mother guilt of, "You took our granddaughters away," or, "We have granddaughters or great-granddaughters and we never see them." I think that's always permanent. The fact is that my family is in Israel and they just want to be present and they're not. So there's always that little pinch, thinking about my kids growing up and not being with my family, when all my family is in Israel. Also we're far from *any* other family because we live in the middle of nowhere in Texas. Other than that, I really don't have any other guilt about leaving and not living there right now.

Karin: I wouldn't call it guilt necessarily, or even regret. But there is this emotion that I can't really name—more of a pining, sadness, or sorrow—for my kids not experiencing that type of belonging to a home. I want my kids to grow up in the way I did; I thought Jerusalem was the best city to grow up in. Leaving it was very hard for me. I really wanted my kids to grow up in that same kind of carefree atmosphere. Especially with what's going on now in Israel, it feels very similar to how I felt when I first left: You're kind of dissociated from the place that you were born in. It's very difficult to reconcile that for me personally. So, it's like pining.

Tablet: Is there anyone who feels like they let down some idea of an important, historic project?

Miri: Totally. It's generational. I'm the oldest one in this group and when I left Israel, it was considered a betrayal, a terrible thing to leave. And I still feel this way—not only because of the family, but because of the country. It was so hard to build it. What was important at the beginning—the utopia—was the *collective* and not your personal career or interests. I feel very guilty, all my

“When I left Israel, it was considered a betrayal, a terrible thing to leave. And I still feel this way—not only because of the family, but because of the country.”

life, about the *country*, not only about the family.

Dina: I am in the generation in between the beginning of the country and the young professionals that came to America. I just want to say that when we left, we promised our parents—we were very young, going to the U.S. to do Ph.D.s—we promised our parents to come back. And some of my friends got very angry at us that we left. There was a guilt they put on us, but we didn't really take it on because we came to the U.S. to be educated, and we were thinking we would come back and give our gifts back to Israel. Because I'm here in America now for many years, since 1979, there has been very much a wave of the guilt.

Tablet: Please raise your hand if you went to synagogue while you were living in Israel. I see two: Dina and Rabbi Y. Please raise your hand if you go to a synagogue in the U.S. I'm seeing five: Ben, Ayelet, Yoav, Dina, Rabbi Y.

Rabbi Y.: I used to go—and still often go—to Nava Tehilla and Kehilat Zion in Jerusalem. Both are progressive, inclusive, and have very inspiring female role models. Unfortunately in Israel, there's not enough visibility to women rabbis in general, so that was also important for me. I must say that in neither community is there as much inclusivity to LGBTQ people or singles. This is not

to undermine those beautiful communities. It's just really to show, even in the progressive spaces, the lack of visibility and transparency toward the LGBTQ community of Israel.

Tablet: Generally, since you've been in America, has it been important to you to connect with other Israelis in America? Raise your hand. I see seven: Yoav, Ben, Etai, Tzippi, Elan, Ayelet, and Rabbi Y.

Adva, can I ask why you didn't raise your hand?

Adva: I never did look for Israeli friends or companionships or groups. They somehow were handed to me. And I can tell you that the only times that I had uncomfortable situations were with Israelis—I didn't enjoy the interactions. I didn't find myself there. I just don't choose them as friends to begin with.

Tablet: This is a question for any of you: What do American Jews get wrong about Israel?

Tzippi: The American Jews I know here go a lot to Israel back and forth. They visit. They are very involved. They know a lot. They have opinions. For me, what they get wrong is the old-fashioned idea that it's not for us to intervene in what's going on in Israel. "We will donate annually or monthly and maybe have an idea about where we want our money to go, but when it comes to real decisions about what the country is—about the heart and soul of the country—it's not for us to intervene because we don't send our kids to die in their army, because we don't live the daily hardships." And especially today, I feel that this is really wrong. It's very important for Jewish Americans to get involved, to voice their opinions and to fight for the soul of the country.

Ayelet: I think Americans as a whole—not necessarily American *Jews*—think Israel still lives in the dark ages; there are camels roaming the streets. And I've made a very conscious decision to go to Israel with only American ladies, because I wanted to see Israel through their eyes, which was very enlightening because they had very different thoughts than what I knew about Israel. They just cannot understand how forward Israel is, with technology, with all of that. That's why I'm laughing. They

were like, “Oh my God, Israel has all this technology, they have Waze!” Nobody even thinks that Israelis came up with Waze, or WhatsApp or so many other things. So it was really funny.

Yuval: First, I don’t like to speak about “American Jews”—there are *many* American Jewish communities. Some of them have a hard time to understand what does it mean to be Jewish-majority. In America, the whole idea of Judaism is about being a minority, which is a huge gift. But they need to understand what it is to be a majority in Israel. The second thing is that some American Jews, I think, understand Israeli *minorities* much better than many Israelis. There are many American Jewish leaders who go to Israel and meet with European Israelis, Arab Israelis, they meet with Druze, ultra-Orthodox. But not all Israelis know them so well, these minorities inside Israel. *Because* American Jews are a minority, they have this sensitivity to other minorities. And I really think that they need to be vocal. Any Jew can say anything about Israel.

Karin: I think for me, there’s a loss of translation. Israeli Jews in many ways have the misconception that because we’re from Israel and we come from a different culture, that we will come to the U.S. and the Jews will open the door and accept us. Unfortunately, in many cases—especially I see it in the New England community—the doors and the places around the table where discussions about the Jewish world are happening are not open for Israelis. We look at every Jewish board in our region and especially New England, most of it is dominated by American Jews, and Israelis are not there to help in that conversation. I think, because of the language barrier, American Jews miss that our Hebrew culture, which evolved in Israel, is so rich and it’s so beautiful. We basically do not share the same cultural language. I always say, “I speak English, but I don’t speak American.”

Etai: The two Jewish communities—Israeli and U.S.—are growing apart in a dangerous way, to the point where I think we’re losing the cohesiveness of the Jewish people. The Jewish community in the U.S. was pushed away [alienated] by the Orthodox power in Israel.

And I think also some American Jews are losing interest in Israel, and some that *do* have interest don’t understand the Israeli politics, don’t understand the complexity of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. So they can actually go in different directions that are not accurate. The net result of that is that we’re losing interest and even losing the feeling of legitimacy to have an opinion, be active. It’s dangerous, horrible.

Elan: I don’t want to be too controversial, but I think what Americans here misunderstand, the misconceptions of Israelis, it’s huge. When I have conversations, there’s a lot of surface-level questions about what’s going on with the politics or what’s going on with the Palestinians. The complexities of Israeli society are so huge, so diverse; there are so many different Israels. But I don’t think that the average American Jew really understands the intricacies of all these different frictions. Let’s not forget that Israel is a melting pot of so many different societies, so many different Judaisms, so many different levels of Judaism. All of these are not one uniform type of Israeli Jew. I am not sure that the American society here understands how, even in a forum like this conversation, you have 12 different people who come from very different backgrounds within the same small Israel.

Dina: I think no one mentioned that the American Jew does not know the depth of racism against the Mizrahi and the Sephardim in Israel. Sorry to say, they were against me. I was the dark, black sheep of my school, of the university. I was the only Iraqi there at that time. And the American Jew does not know that Israel was actually a racist country from the beginning, when Ben-Gurion decided to force the Jews from Morocco and Iraq to leave their country so they will be a workhorse for the Ashkenazi. Even the Israelis themselves do not know. Really, they have no idea.

Etai: Dina, they were jealous. You were the most beautiful there, I’m sure.

Dina: Thank you. I was also the most smart. It doesn’t matter. I was dark.

Tablet: Does anyone want to weigh in on the converse question—what Israeli Jews get wrong about American Jews?

Rabbi Y.: As someone who worked for

Hillel three years and for the Jewish Agency, I think that one of the most important things that young adults in Israel don’t understand about American Jewry is the way that they celebrate the diversity. There’s something in the notion that it doesn’t matter what identity you have or where you come from, so long as you have belief, passion, the will to *be* a part of a community. I think there’s so much for Israelis to learn about the pluralistic approaches to Judaism here in America. I was suggesting to the CEO of Birthright years ago to allow young Israeli adults to come to America to learn about American Jewry, something that I think would not only help young adults in Israel with their Judaism, but actually help change the social cultural context of which this country is constituted on.

Tablet: Just to get the temperature of this group, can you raise your hand if you have been part of the recent protests about the current government in Israel—either here or in Israel? I see seven: Etai, Karin, Dina, Tzippi, Yoav, Miri, Rabbi Y.

Yoav: I think that Israel is in its biggest crisis since the creation of Israel, maybe bigger than the ’73 war. Whatever will transpire from the events or decisions that come down from this government can define the future of Israel for the next few generations. We’re at a very critical moment. I was in Israel twice since the beginning of the protests—I went twice and participated—and I sometimes participate here in Atlanta in front of the consulate.

Miri: Not all Israelis go to synagogues, but so many Israelis go every week to the demonstrations and don’t have fun on the weekend. Everything is dedicated to the demonstrations, to the protests, because it’s a way to fight, to preserve the character of the country if we want to have it as a democracy. There is a loyalty to the ideas on which the country was based and to fight for them.

Tzippi: I talked earlier in this conversation about what Jewish Americans don’t get about their right and prerogative to voice their opinions. Like many Israelis here in the Bay Area, I’m terrified for the future of the country. I agree that it’s one of the worst crises ever. We

Israelis in the U.S. have a very important role both in supporting our friends and family in Israel who were demonstrating weekly and even daily, and even more important, by putting the Jewish Americans into the conversation and getting them to get off the fence to help us save the country.

Tablet: Does anyone in this group want to talk about why they think the protests are problematic?

Tzippi: Who dares to say that?

Tablet: This is a safe space. Anyone?

Elan: I don't think they're achieving their purposes.

Tzippi: The protests have been effective.

Elan: I hope so. I support them a million percent.

Karin: I think the challenge here in the U.S., especially here in the Boston area, is that it took a turn to a very leftist, anti-occupy Palestine voice—which should be addressed, obviously, but it's hard to rally a people toward that end of the spectrum. I think that's one of the challenges: What voice are we using here?

Tablet: Last question for everyone: What is one thing that you would like Americans—not just Jewish Americans—to understand about Israel?

Rabbi Y.: You can't criticize Israel until you live in it or experience a long-term connection with it.

Yoav: I would say you can't criticize Israel until you fully understand it. You don't have to necessarily live there. But what I want Americans to understand about Israel is that like America, like American Jewry, Israel is a canvas of a lot of different views, opinions, and ways of life. You cannot categorize Israeli society as one thing. You have to understand the nuances in order to be able to talk to it, not even to criticize, but to comment about it.

Ayelet: As long as American Jews or Americans as a whole do not study Jewish history and do not know what we had to endure in order to get to that state, then they don't really have a right to criticize us. I'm sorry.

Etai: You just need to remember that the U.S. and Israel are both built on similar values. It's the job of both these countries to work very hard to keep them up. It's dangerous here. It's dangerous there.

America has the right and responsibility to criticize Israel. By all means. Of course, we need to stand up for our values, all of us.

Tablet: Just to clarify, when you say "dangerous," do you mean physically dangerous, or do you mean the "danger" of losing its democratic values in both countries?

Etai: What's happening with the indictment of Trump is the exact same story of what will happen with [Prime Minister] Netanyahu. In 18 months, you'll see exactly the same thing.

Miri: The propaganda about Israel is very bad. I wish that American Jews and American politics will understand better what's going on in Israel. I think that there is a huge misunderstanding, and a lot of criticism is based on ignorance and misunderstanding.

Ben: Israel needs great PR. Whether we are Israelis living abroad or Jewish Americans, there's so much beauty to promote. And we should really focus on the amazing things that Israel has, that Israel is doing, the innovation that comes from Israel. Maybe we should focus a little bit more on that.

Yuval: America needs to understand that Israel is becoming part of the Middle East and therefore democracy is not something that you need to take as obvious. It's very fragile. Israel is an ally, but Israel is also part of the Middle East and there are a lot of implications to that.

Karin: A nondemocratic Israel is going to be a detriment to the whole Jewish people. We need to show some *arout hadadit*—solidarity, like we are all in this together. A nondemocratic Israel is a danger for all of us. I'm worried about my kids growing up here in the U.S. without a democratic State of Israel, this thing that everybody should be proud of.

Adva: We are more than a conflict-ridden country, and our nations are very similar, especially when you consider that we both started our homelands in a war for our independence. Our stories are not that different in their core. We are the younger, troubled sibling, who needs help sometimes, as we are going through what you already had a chance to experience. I think it's important to think about Israel as one of your siblings, your family, who you might not

always have a good relationship with, but you still need to love them, care for them, and be involved in what they decide.

Elan: Within the global turmoil that's going on, Israel should be seen as the good guys. And helping Americans understand that Israel is such a young democracy that went through so much conflict within 75 years, not to lose patience. Help Israel see what it takes to belong to the good guys in today's world.

Dina: Americans need to understand that a strong, democratic Israel will strengthen the Jews here in America and the Jews all over the world. If Israel will fragment—the way it's going, it will fragment Jews here. We will be in danger, all of us. I think there's something about a strong Israel that makes us feel strong here.

Tablet: I just want to make sure you mean Americans generally.

Dina: If Israel is strong, then America will be stronger. That's what I'm saying. There is a relationship of strength. If Israel will discombobulate, the American Jew will discombobulate.

Tzippi: I'd like to push back a bit on the notion that you cannot criticize Israel until you live there, study it, have your Ph.D. in Israeli history. We criticize everybody all the time. I criticized the Sudan for what happened in Darfur, and I have to be honest, I hadn't learned much about Sudan when I had my opinions. Everybody can have opinions about Israel.

Tablet: And what is one thing you would want Americans to know about Israel?

Tzippi: That we are not so special. We are complicated, just as every other country is complicated. There are great things, bad things, and we welcome criticism because we want to get better. ■

This article was originally published on June 29, 2023.

ARTS & LETTERS

Books, culture, and more at
[tabletmag.com/sections/
arts-letters](https://tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters)

THE REST

→ Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis says he can solve America's immigration problems. Announcing the first major policy push in what's been a muddled, uneven presidential campaign so far, **DeSantis says he would solve the crisis at the U.S. southern border by declaring a national emergency, sending troops to the border, building a wall, and enacting a mass detention and deportation of undocumented people.** If that sounds familiar, the DeSantis campaign acknowledged as much this weekend, posting online that "Trump ran on this same promise in 2016, but ended up deporting fewer illegals than Barack Obama." Assuring prospective voters that he has the magic touch his opponent lacks, DeSantis also said he would tackle the nation's drug overdose crisis by sending some of the troops currently working the immigration beat "across the border to secure our territory from Mexican cartel activities."

→ New York City pizzerias that cook with coal or wood in their ovens—as all the best old-school pizzerias do—could soon be **forced to install expensive emission-control filtration systems, as the city's Department of Environmental Protection seeks new regulations that would force pizza shops to cut carbon emissions by 75%.** Upwards of 100 pizza joints could fall under the new regulations that, according to one restaurant owner speaking anonymously to the New York Post, could undermine the quality of their product. "This is an unfunded mandate, and it's going to cost us a fortune, not to mention ruining the taste of the pizza—totally destroying the product."

→ **Number of the Week: 13,082.** That's how many **new homes have been approved for construction by the Israeli government in the West Bank,** smashing the previous record, with six months still left in the year. The number is almost triple the 4,427 approved last year while the center-left coalition led by Yair Lapid was in power. On Monday, U.S. State Department spokesman Matt Miller told reporters, "Settlements are an impediment to a negotiated two-state solution along 1967 lines, which ultimately we believe is the best way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Some see the approvals, including in the Eli settlement where four Jews were shot dead last week, as a response to that and other recent terror attacks by Palestinians. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said last week after one recent attack, "Our answer to terrorism is to strike it hard and build our country."

→ On Sunday in the small Sonnenberg district of East Germany, **Robert Sesselmann, a member of the right-wing Alternative for Germany Party that has championed an anti-immigration platform and faces accusations of being antisemitic, won his race for district council.** It is the first such victory for the party anywhere in Germany, unsettling Berlin's political elite. A recent national poll shows the party as the second-most popular in Germany, suggesting more wins on the horizon.

→ Israelis remain the ultimate mavericks, with their simultaneous embrace of the United States and its leaders and of their belief that Uncle Sam is "meddling in their affairs." A recent **Pew survey found that 87% of Israelis have a favorable view of the United States,** second only to Poland's favorable view of the U.S., at 93%; 68% of Israelis have confidence in U.S. President Joe Biden. Donald Trump received similar ratings from the Israeli electorate.

THE BIG STORY

On Tuesday, the U.S. Supreme Court voted 6-3 to reject a petition by North Carolina Republicans that would have enshrined the right of state legislatures to conduct federal elections without oversight from state supreme courts. The case, Moore v. Harper, centered on a dispute over a 2021 North Carolina congressional map approved by the Republican-led legislature that would have likely given the party 10 out of the 14 seats in the U.S. House. After the North Carolina Supreme Court, controlled at that time by a 4-3 Democrat majority, ruled the map could not be used in the 2022 midterms, seven House members were elected from each party. North Carolina Republicans argued that the state's supreme court violated the constitutional principle of "independent state legislature."

As the second Supreme Court decision this month to shoot down a petition that could have benefited Republicans in a future election, the ruling has largely undermined dire warnings that the current conservative-led bench would lead a judicial power grab in favor of the Republican Party.

—Clayton Fox

SUBSCRIBE TO THE SCROLL



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

COMMUNITY

Our shared Jewish life, at tabletmag.com/sections/community

The Hunt for Judah P. Benjamin, the Spy Chief of the Confederacy

Suspected of orchestrating the Lincoln assassination, the South's most prominent Jew escaped to London to start a new life as a high-powered lawyer. The U.S. government secretly tried to bring him home to face justice.

BY JAY SOLOMON AND JANE SINGER

Two years after the Civil War's guns went silent, the former Union General George H. Sharpe navigated London's bone-biting cold and snowy rail lines to reach the U.S. diplomatic mission at 54 Portland Place. His orders from Washington were both secret and explosive: Capture the former secretary of state of the Confederacy, Judah Philip Benjamin, who'd found exile, and a lucrative law practice, in Victorian England.

The New York-born Sharpe had been chosen for the operation for good reason. He'd overseen military intelligence for Union Commander Ulysses S. Grant during the final stages of the war between the states and emerged as a special envoy for U.S. Secretary of State William Seward in its aftermath. Sharpe had run espionage operations into Richmond, the Confederate capital, and Benjamin's base of operations.

But Sharpe's trip to England that February was on a particularly grave matter, and unknown to the American public. Senior members of the U.S. government, including Secretary of State Seward, believed there was ample evidence that Benjamin had played a central role in developing the plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln two years earlier.

Benjamin's network of Confederate spies and couriers ran from Virginia, up through the Northern states, and into Canada. And this secretive web directly

tied the prominent Southern Jewish leader to members of the hit team that organized the attack on Lincoln and Seward in April 1865. This included John Wilkes Booth and his accomplice, John Surratt Jr., a Southern spy who had worked as Benjamin's personal courier.

U.S. authorities were determined in the winter of 1867 to bring Benjamin to justice along with the former Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who was imprisoned at Fort Monroe, Virginia, with a pending trial for treason. If convicted, Davis would face the death penalty, as would Benjamin.

Once inside the U.S. mission in London, in a dusty basement piled with dispatches, Sharpe took into his confidence the No. 2 official in the American mission, the diplomat and political gadfly Benjamin Moran. Sharpe disclosed to the startled bureaucrat that he'd been ordered by Seward to hunt Confederate leaders who'd fled to England, France, and Italy after the war. This included John Surratt, who'd made a serpentine escape from the U.S. through Canada and Europe before finally being captured in Alexandria, Egypt. He was indicted for his alleged role in Lincoln's murder and set to go on trial in Washington, D.C., just a few months later.

Moran took copious, handwritten notes of his conversations with his visitor from Washington. "Mr. George H. Sharpe, a detective, has been sent here to hunt up evidence against persons implicated in the assassination of

Mr. Lincoln," Moran wrote on Feb. 11, 1867. "[Sharpe] is a bullet-headed fellow and is determined to catch Benjamin if possible."

A week later, Moran scribbled again in his diary, "General Geo. H. Sharpe called. He thinks he will be able to prove that Judah P. Benjamin was implicated in the assassination of Mr. Lincoln. I hope so..."

Judah Benjamin is perhaps the least known of the senior Confederate leaders who fought to carve out an independent nation from 11 Southern states in the 1860s. An affluent Louisiana attorney, plantation-owner, and politician, he served in a number of critical posts in the Confederate cabinet during the four-year war. These included: attorney general, secretary of war, and secretary of state. Benjamin's Jewish faith set him apart in a Confederate movement that promoted and idolized white supremacy, chattel slavery, and a feudal planter culture born out of European colonial settlement. Yet he supported all of these things.

Benjamin's life had myriad chapters and was spectacular in its scope. He was born on Aug. 6, 1811, into a family of Sephardic Jewish traders in the British West Indies, but settled in Charleston, South Carolina, as a toddler. Blessed with an exceptional intellect, he enrolled at Yale University at just 14, before being expelled under mysterious circumstances.

He moved to New Orleans and reinvented himself as a lawyer, politician, and planter in a teeming colonial city that mixed French, Spanish, and British cultures and legal systems. He married into a Catholic Creole family and established himself in the Southern aristocracy by purchasing a massive sugar plantation with 140 slaves.

In the months leading up to the war, Benjamin, a U.S. senator representing Louisiana at the time, was among the South's most ardent and impactful defenders. Up until his final days in Washington, he warned the U.S. government about the costs of the looming conflict.

"You may, under the protection of your advancing armies, give shelter to the furious fanatics who desire, and

profess to desire, nothing more than to add all the horrors of a servile insurrection to the calamities of civil war,” Benjamin boomed from the Senate floor. “You may do all this—and more, too, if more there be—but you never can subjugate us. You never can convert the free sons of the soil into vassals ... Never! Never!”

Historians have often referred to Benjamin as the “Brains of the Confederacy” and President Jefferson Davis’ closest, and most reliable, civilian adviser. Biographies about Benjamin that appeared in the decades following the Civil War often read as hagiography. They extol his legal mind, oratory skills and brilliance in running logistical operations. The general portrayal of Benjamin is of a loquacious and razor-sharp attorney and politician who charmed his interlocutors with his mind.

Benjamin, in his own words, described himself and Davis as effectively joined at the hip. The Louisiana lawyer was a central architect of the Confederate leader’s political and economic policies and the wordsmith behind many of his orations. “You knew my secrets,” Benjamin wrote his old friend and colleague, James Murray Mason, after the war. “I wrote many of President Davis’ speeches.”

All of these writings no doubt offer insights into the Confederate leader’s life and personality. And yet they omit one of the central roles Benjamin played during the Civil War: He was a spy chief of the South and oversaw the Confederate Secret Service that was embedded in Benjamin’s own State Department. He ran agents into Washington, New York, Boston, and other Northern cities, as was expected. But he also produced an early form of fake news, ordering Confederate emissaries in Europe to plant stories about fatuous Southern military victories into British and French papers. He also engaged in financial warfare: using Northern bankers to try and devalue the U.S. dollar through the export of gold.

But it was in the final two years of the Civil War where Benjamin’s espionage operations took a particularly dark turn. Desperate to fend off the collapse of the Confederacy, the Southern secretary of

state put in place an elaborate network of spies and soldiers in British-controlled Canada to seek to destabilize the North. Benjamin’s agents robbed banks, attempted to burn down Manhattan hotels and devised ways to conduct chemical warfare in Washington. They also sought to upend the 1864 Republican Party convention and swing the vote against the incumbent president, Abraham Lincoln, in favor of a peace candidate who sought an immediate end of the Civil War.

And Benjamin’s agents in Canada also hosted in Montreal a famous actor from Maryland, John Wilkes Booth, during the final months of the war, and provided him monies and contacts to conduct a plot that initially focused on kidnapping Abraham Lincoln. It was for these activities, among other business, that retired General George Sharpe went to London in 1867 to search for Benjamin. And it’s the story of this mission that remains one of the great secrets of the Civil War.

By the spring of 1864, the fate of the Confederacy was largely sealed. Ulysses S. Grant had taken command of all Union troops and launched a slow, bloody siege on Richmond that would largely keep Southern troops pinned down for the final year of the war. The Union army also initiated increasingly aggressive operations to target Southern cities, civilians, and food supplies. For Davis and Benjamin, these tactics broke a supposedly genteel code of conflict that had ruled for the first three years of the Civil War.

That April, on the outskirts of Richmond, Davis’ men also stopped a particularly bold Union mission. It was led by a U.S. colonel, named Ulric Dahlgren. Confederate troops killed Dahlgren and found on his body orders, purportedly from Washington, directing his men to infiltrate the Southern capital and decapitate the Confederacy’s leadership by assassinating the entire cabinet, including Davis and Benjamin.

The two leaders were enraged by the plot and decided to retaliate by financing and empowering the Confederate Secret Service to conduct asymmetric operations against Washington and expand the South’s fight into Canada, which

was then a neutral British territory. This, they believed, would force Lincoln and Grant to face a two-front war. The Confederate leadership hoped this expanded conflict could drain the Union’s resources and the North’s support for the war. It could also bring the British into the war—on the side of the South.

To lead the Canadian mission, Benjamin appointed a Mississippi plantation owner and former U.S. congressman named Jacob Thompson, who was a Southern hero. Thompson had served as interior minister in the last U.S. government before the Civil War and established the University of Mississippi in Oxford, the Yale of the South. But he was an odd choice to run a Confederate operation that mixed espionage and warfare. He had no formal military training or experience, though he was Jefferson Davis’ close childhood friend.

Thompson secretly traveled to Canada in the spring of 1864 after receiving his orders in Richmond and established Confederate operations in Montreal, Toronto, and other cities and towns along the U.S. border. His primary headquarters was the Saint Lawrence Hall in Montreal’s old French quarter, where he often stayed with Clement Clay, Beverly Tucker, George N. Sanders, and other Confederate commissioners and operatives.

The city was crawling with British and American spies. But this didn’t stop the Confederates from launching their cross-border war. They believed it was perhaps their last chance to forestall a Northern victory.

Thompson’s Canadian operations ranged from the mundane to the spectacular. But they all suffered from a lack of manpower and competency and the fact that American intelligence had largely penetrated his network. Davis’ and Benjamin’s hopes that these plots would alter the course of the war wouldn’t be borne out.

Confederate agents traveled to Chicago in November 1864 to try and surreptitiously influence the Democratic convention and rally support behind the pro-peace candidate, onetime Union General George McClellan. Thompson’s agents briefly commandeered a Union

warship operating in Lake Michigan. And former Confederate soldiers crossed the border into St. Albans, Vermont, to rob banks and terrorize the local citizenry.

Thompson's most deadly operation involved infiltrating Southern rebels into New York with a form of inflammable liquid, called Greek Fire. The operation sought to simultaneously immolate 19 Manhattan hotels, as well as boathouses and the Barnum Museum. But the would-be arsonists failed to recognize that the Greek Fire needed oxygen to conflagrate and left the doors and windows of the hotels and buildings closed. The hotels simmered but didn't burn, and the smoke allowed fire brigades to prevent the demolition the Confederates sought.

Thompson wrote Judah Benjamin from Canada in December 1864 and acknowledged the failings of his mission. He'd be replaced weeks later by General Edwin Gray Lee, a cousin of the Confederate commander Robert E. Lee. "I have relaxed no effort to carry out the objects the government had in view in sending me here," Thompson wrote. "I had hoped at different times to have accomplished more, but still I do not think my mission has been altogether fruitless."

The Confederacy explored even more radical plots as their military position vis a vis the North grew more dire. Edwin Lee's agents in Canada devised a plot to spread yellow fever into Northern cities. And funds from Benjamin's Secret Service in Richmond were disbursed in an effort to develop chemical weapons to bring "terror and consternation to Northern cities." Benjamin's close assistant, Littleton Quinton Washington, wrote later that both Davis and Benjamin didn't think these attacks on noncombatants went beyond the bounds of "civilized warfare."

One historical fact from the Canadian mission, however, would long outlive the Civil War, and haunt Confederate leaders like Benjamin. This was the trip to Montreal in October of 1864 by the Maryland actor-turned-assassin John Wilkes Booth. His presence in the colonial city, and meetings there, test the accepted conclusion that his plots to kidnap, and then murder, Abraham

Lincoln were totally unknown to the Southern leaders.

Booth spent eight days in Montreal and was spotted in meetings with Benjamin's agents at the Saint Lawrence Hall, as well as in bars and restaurants across the city. Booth's stay appeared to be both a recruitment and training exercise. He was wooed by the Confederate Secret Service and instructed on the types of actions he could take to further their cause.

The actor's presence didn't go unnoticed to Americans visiting Canada that fall. "I met this man Booth in Canada last fall, at Montreal, at the Saint Lawrence Hall," said John Deveney, a reliable Northern witness who visited Canada, and testified against Booth after the war. "He was then in the company with Sanders, Thompson, and others of that class. He seemed to be well-received by these men and was on familiar and intimate terms with them."

Indeed, these Confederate agents directly prepared Booth for his covert operations against the Union. Hiram Martin, a blockade-runner, took Booth to the Bank of Ontario on Oct. 27, the morning of the actor's departure for the U.S., according to eyewitnesses and documents. They opened a bank account in Booth's name and deposited \$455. They also purchased a bill of exchange, technically a traveler's check, for 61 pounds, 12 shillings and 10 pence.

"The funds on deposit would give Booth a nest egg if he needed to make a hasty retreat across the border to Canada, a notion that had already crossed his mind," the historian Terry Alford wrote about Booth's Confederate financing.

Martin also provided Booth with helpful letters of introduction to rebel agents living in southern Maryland and the Northern Neck of Virginia. These men and women would be based along the escape route the actor would take if he made good on his plan to abduct President Lincoln and spirit him to Richmond. An extensive underground of agents existed, some of whom reported directly to Judah Benjamin, and were awaiting Booth and his accomplices.

Booth didn't totally turn his back on the theater while in Canada. One night in Montreal he wooed locals at the city's

popular Corby's Hall by reading passages from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Alfred Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*. His renditions were greeted with thunderous applause.

He didn't disguise his contempt for President Lincoln while carousing in Canada either. One night at the Saint Lawrence Hall, he intimated to a fellow guest that the American leader's days were numbered. "For Abe's contract was near up and whether reelected or not, he would get his goose cooked," Booth told his interlocutor, who recounted the exchange in a letter he wrote to the *Hamilton Times* after Lincoln's assassination months later. The letter was republished in *The New York Times*.

Just six months after John Wilkes Booth's covert trip to Montreal, the Confederacy fell, and Judah Benjamin's life took another dramatic turn. On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House. Then-acting provost marshal General George Sharpe officially paroled Lee's troops and mandated they be allowed to return to their homes in the South unmolested. Just a week later, Booth assassinated President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre, morphing his original kidnapping plot into one of history's most consequential murders.

Benjamin, Jefferson Davis, and the Confederate leadership fled south after Richmond's collapse and were temporarily based in Charlotte, North Carolina, when news arrived of Lincoln's death. No concrete evidence has emerged in the historical record that conclusively proves Benjamin or Davis had any knowledge of Booth's murderous plans. But as the newly victorious North sought vengeance after four years of fratricidal war, Benjamin, for one, knew he'd be a suspect due to his ties, through the Confederate Secret Service, to the actor-turned-assassin.

Union detectives investigating Lincoln's death quickly reconstructed Booth's travels to Montreal and the contacts he'd made there with Benjamin's agents. But even more damaging to the Confederate diplomat, they also found in Booth's hotel room a Confederate cipher key that exactly matched one they

found in Benjamin's abandoned Richmond office. This evidence was presented at the trial of the Lincoln conspirators in Washington.

"On the 6th of April, I went into the office of Mr. Benjamin, the rebel Secretary of State. On the shelf, among Mr. Benjamin's books and other things, I found this cipher key," testified Charles Dana, the North's assistant secretary of war. "I saw it was a key to the official rebel cipher."

Benjamin's spy network also tied him to Booth in other damaging and seemingly direct ways. While serving in Richmond, Benjamin used as his personal courier a Maryland-based rebel, John Surratt Jr., to ferry his messages to Washington and agents further north. It was the same man who served as Booth's accomplice in concocting the kidnapping plot of Lincoln. Surratt's mother, Mary, hosted the actor at her Washington boarding house in the weeks before the attack.

Surratt would later speak of meeting Benjamin at Richmond's Spotswood Hotel, and receiving money from him, just days before the capital fell and the attack on Lincoln commenced. Surratt denied ever telling Benjamin of Booth's activities. But the Confederate leader's intelligence, and expansive control of his Secret Service, raises questions about the truthfulness of Surratt's statement. Mary Surratt was eventually hanged for her role in supporting Booth. John Surratt escaped the U.S. by using Benjamin's overseas spy networks to get to Europe.

Benjamin, meanwhile, commenced after the assassination of Lincoln to launch one of the greatest escapes in American history—especially for a bookish, pudgy attorney with no military service. He peeled off from Jefferson Davis' entourage in the town of Washington, Georgia, on May 3, 1865, and proceeded to make his way down the Gulf Coast of Florida. He disguised himself as a bearded, and disheveled, French trader, named M.M. Bonfals, according to press accounts from the time. "Goggles on ... a hat well over his face," Benjamin was nearly unrecognizable.

He bumped along in a wagon on long, rutted roads and passed by the detritus

"Newly sworn in President Andrew Johnson, a rabid antisemite, told the Northern press: 'There was no rebel, whose hanging seemed so imperatively demanded by public justice, as Judah P. Benjamin.'"

of the war, including burnt-out buildings and scorched fields. He made it to a sugar plantation owned by a Confederate sympathizer in what's now Bradenton, Florida. He hid for a month from Union patrols in the plantation house's second story. He eventually found a Confederate spy ship to ferry him to the Bahamas. But he nearly drowned in subsequent attempts to reach Cuba, dogged by waterspouts and unseaworthy sloops. It took him weeks to reach Havana and the steamships that crossed the Atlantic.

The Union government's obsession with capturing Benjamin, however, only grew as the trial of the Lincoln conspirators commenced in May 1865. Newly sworn in President Andrew Johnson, a rabid antisemite, told the Northern press: "There was no rebel, whose hanging seemed so imperatively demanded by public justice, as Judah P. Benjamin."

The Confederate spy chief finally reached Southampton, England on August 30, 1865, more than four months after Richmond's fall. He would immediately tap into the Confederate networks in England and France that he was so central in creating and deploying. He had allies across the sea.

The England in which Judah Benjamin

arrived that summer had played a supremely duplicitous role in the American Civil War, a point not lost on the newly victorious U.S. government. Officially, Queen Victoria's government had been neutral, and her diplomats sought to orchestrate peace between North and South. But at the same time, London's actions undoubtedly fueled the conflict and aided a Confederacy that was far outgunned by Northern military manpower and munitions. England, concerned about a former colony emerging from the war united, resource-rich, and with global ambitions, seemed content on prolonging the war.

British leaders often spoke admirably of the Confederacy as it took root and won key early battles at Bull Run and Seven Pines. William Gladstone, the chancellor of the exchequer, said of the rebels in 1862: "We may be for or against the South, but there is no doubt that Jefferson Davis, and other leaders of the South, have made an army ... They have made a nation."

Benjamin's emissaries quickly set up shop in London and Liverpool as the war gained momentum, making the latter the Confederacy's de facto European capital. Liverpool's docks, under the watchful eye of the Southern agent, James Dunwoody Bulloch, became a center for the Confederacy's war-making activities, despite Britain's claims of neutrality. There the rebels produced blockade runners and commerce raiders, like the CSS Alabama, which wreaked havoc on the U.S.'s Merchant Marine navy. Bulloch also traded Southern cotton for British-made Ensign rifles and military uniforms.

In London, Benjamin also placed the Swiss American propagandist, Henry Hotze, to run and edit the pro-Confederate newspaper, *The Index*, from the heart of Fleet Street. This weekly publication sought to win over British public opinion, as well as others in Europe, by playing up the South's military advances, if not inventing them, and highlighting the ill effects of the Union blockade on England's expansive textile industry. Hotze also promised in his paper's pages that the Confederacy would be a better trade partner for Europe than the North, due to low tariffs,

and appealed to European liberals to recognize the Southern people's rights of self-determination.

Benjamin immediately tapped into this Confederate infrastructure after arriving in England in 1865. Though the war was lost, his agents still maintained prime real estate in Victorian England, close to the royal seats of power. The South's secretary of state first found shelter in London at 17 Savile Row, appearing unannounced at the Confederate Commercial Agency run by Henry Hotze. The four-story row house was located just blocks from the Regent Street estate of Lord John Palmerston, the prime minister. Buckingham Palace was also only a few blocks away.

Central London was cluttered at the time with other Confederate offices and organizations that had been established to conduct trade and effect perhaps Benjamin's most important aim during the war—winning British diplomatic recognition of the South. Such a step, he and Jefferson Davis believed, would have essentially ended the conflict. Southern ambassadors lived on Half Moon Street in the wealthy Mayfair district. And the headquarters of the Southern Independence Association, which had 47 offices across England, was based at Connaught Place and

lobbied members of Parliament to the Confederate cause.

Benjamin showed foresight before fleeing Richmond ahead of Union troops, shipping cotton to England to give himself immediate access to cash. But, at 54, he still needed to establish himself professionally in Europe and provide for his family, and wife and daughter, who lived in Paris. He initially earned some revenue by penning columns on international affairs for the *Daily Telegraph*. But his main focus was to return to the law and the affluent lifestyle he had attained in New Orleans and Washington.

Thanks to powerful benefactors in England, Benjamin would quickly gain admittance into Britain's premier legal society at the Inner Temple complex near the walls of London's Old City. He'd be called to the bar in just over a year after his arrival in the country, an extraordinarily short time. A formally accredited barrister, Benjamin was now fully integrated into elite British society.

He first employed his legal prowess in England's "Northern Circuit" of courts, which included the Confederate stronghold of Liverpool. It wasn't long before he was representing Southern interests against a U.S. government determined to expropriate the assets of its mortal enemy, both in America and abroad. In an early case, Benjamin successfully defended a Confederate agent, named Colin McRae, against a U.S. effort to seize his lands in Alabama.

In 1867, Benjamin then appeared in a London court as counsel for the Confederate finance company Fraser Trenholm & Co., which was facing another U.S. government effort to seize Southern assets overseas. South Carolina-based Fraser Trenholm grew rich in the antebellum South trading cotton to Europe. But during the Civil War, it financed the building of most of the Confederacy's warships from its office at 10 Rumford Place in Liverpool. The building was situated just across the street from Liverpool's docks and served as an unofficial rebel embassy.

The American public was stunned, if not outraged, when Benjamin suddenly reappeared in local newspapers to battle the U.S. government once again. This

time, in the courts. It was almost as if the lawyer was taunting his enemies in Washington from across the Atlantic.

"Bayard Taylor [an American writer and diplomat] was in London on the 27th and the 26th ... in expectation of hearing a renewal of the [Fraser Trenholm] trial," read a March 1867 article in the *Memphis Daily Avalanche*. "He stood shoulder-to-shoulder for a few minutes with the ex-rebel secretary of state, Judah P. Benjamin, now a full-blown English barrister, bewigged and begowned."

General Sharpe covertly arrived in London that winter just weeks before Benjamin's court appearance, under the orders of U.S. Secretary of State William Seward. Seward and Benjamin had been fierce diplomatic opponents during the Civil War, holding the same, opposing cabinet posts. But their fractious relationship went far deeper, played out over decades, and was driven by ideological differences and a personal animosity.

Seward and Benjamin both served multiple terms in the U.S. Senate and envisioned starkly different futures for their country. Seward was a fervent abolitionist from Auburn, New York, whose home was used as a stop along the Underground Railroad. A lawyer, he defended former slaves against murder charges and advocated for the end of the "peculiar institution" of slavery through any means possible.

Benjamin, conversely, had owned a massive sugar plantation east of New Orleans, called Belle Chasse, which maintained over 100 slaves. He was also one of the Senate's most ardent and articulate defenders of "states' rights," a legal and political philosophy that justified slavery as a core engine driving the South's agrarian economy. It was a rallying cry for the 11 Southern states that ultimately seceded from the U.S. in 1861. According to Benjamin's biographer, Eli Evans, Benjamin and Seward "hated each other on sight" upon their arrivals in Washington.

Seward nearly lost his life during the final chapter of the Civil War. Before killing Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth dispatched his accomplice, a



UPCOMING HOLIDAY

4th of July
Independence Day



[tabletmag.com/tags/
4th-of-july](https://tabletmag.com/tags/4th-of-july)

former rebel soldier named Lewis Powell, to Seward's home in Washington to assassinate the chief U.S. diplomat. Powell failed in his mission, but he did slash Seward multiple times, permanently disfiguring his face. Powell also broke the skull of the Union leader's son, Frederick. Seward's wife, Francis, never recovered from the emotional and mental trauma caused by the attack and died within months.

Seward sent General Sharpe to London on the mission to find any Confederate leaders in Europe who were potentially involved in the plot against himself and Lincoln. But Seward seemed to be particularly focused on Judah Benjamin, his old nemesis. For the U.S. secretary of state, this was personal.

General Sharpe chose Benjamin Moran, the No. 2 American diplomat in the U.S.'s London legation (a precursor to an embassy) to help him pursue Benjamin. Moran had served in the mission for 15 years and was an outspoken critic of the Confederacy, who mandated that all former rebels based in Europe needed to swear allegiance to the U.S. government before reclaiming their passports and returning home. As a side business, he once co-owned the British magazine the *Spectator*, which sought to promote support in Europe for U.S. policies.

Moran took copious notes in his diary of his dealings with Sharpe in the winter and spring of 1867. These diaries have been almost totally overlooked by Civil War histories to date. A few short mentions have appeared in biographies of Judah Benjamin and George Sharpe. But there's no reference of Sharpe's hunt for Benjamin in the archives of the British government, including its Home Office, Foreign Office, and Scotland Yard. This is the most complete accounting of the mission, and the reasons behind it.

Moran first writes of Sharpe's arrival in London on Feb. 11, 1867, the first of three months of diary entries focused on the general-turned-detective's activities. The description of Sharpe's task is straightforward and clear—to capture Benjamin. And Moran initially sounds confident in their prospects for success. On February 18, for instance, Moran writes: "General Geo H. Sharpe

called. He thinks he will be able to prove that Judah P. Benjamin was implicated in the assassination of Mr. Lincoln. I hope so..."

Moran doesn't describe in these early entries how Sharpe planned to capture Benjamin, or what he'd do if he's successful. It's likely that his plan involved snatching Benjamin off the streets of London through a rendition. But these U.S. officials must have known they faced major challenges in trying to bring the Confederate leader back to the U.S. through formal legal channels in England. Benjamin had been born on the island of St. Croix in the British West Indies. And upon arriving in England in 1865, he successfully petitioned the government to classify him as a British subject, due to his place of birth.

One avenue the Americans could have pursued was to seek Benjamin's extradition through the U.S.'s Webster-Ashburton Treaty with England. But its terms were stringent. Extradition of a British citizen wasn't granted on charges of accessory to murder, or conspiracy to commit murder. Sharpe needed to show that Benjamin was directly involved in Lincoln's death, not just tied to it through John Surratt Jr. or the Confederate Secret Service. This was an extremely high bar.

Moran and Sharpe, in the ensuing weeks, took to the streets of London and sought to retrace the steps of Benjamin and other Confederate exiles. They also did some sightseeing at the British Museum. On March 5, Moran goes to London's prestigious Fenton's Hotel to ask if Benjamin had stayed there after his escape. "They had no record of the fact in their book," Moran wrote. "The doorkeeper, however, said he was there."

Sharpe, meanwhile, was tracking George McHenry, a Confederate commercial agent based in Liverpool, who had been active in Benjamin's and Henry Hotze's Southern propaganda efforts in England. McHenry's brother, James, was a Union supporter and close friend of Benjamin Moran's. McHenry may have had information on Benjamin's whereabouts and activities. On March 14, Moran writes: "General Sharpe came

up. He is on track of George McHenry and thinks he will be successful."

But soon, the confidence of the early entries ebbs. Beginning in March, the two men begin enquiring about the prospects of them employing Jonathan "Jack" Whicher of Scotland Yard to aid in their efforts to find Benjamin. Whicher was one of the detective agency's eight original sleuths and had gained national fame after discovering the murderer of a young British boy. On March 16, after several failed attempts to reach Whicher, Moran writes: "Met Sharpe at the Langham [Hotel]... Drove to Mr. Whicher's house, 63 Page Street, Westminster... arranging with him for his services to ascertain if J.P. Benjamin saw John H. Surratt and supplied him with money after Mr. Lincoln's assassination. He will probably undertake the work."

But there's no evidence that Whicher ever joined the hunt for Benjamin. Instead, Whicher was paid a large sum to unmask an impostor posing as an heir to a British fortune, a case that also caught the British public's imagination. Sharpe's search for the Confederate leader, meanwhile, appeared to go cold. The general left London for Rome to try and learn more about the escape of John Surratt to Europe. Benjamin's onetime courier had been captured in Egypt and was now facing trial in the U.S. for his suspected role in the Lincoln assassination.

Moran's last major entry on Sharpe appears on May 7, 1867, and doesn't mention Benjamin at all. Sharpe returned to the U.S. just weeks later. "General Sharpe has just got back from Rome, brought one passport here used by Surratt to get into the Papal States, and I compared it with the copy he had made," Moran writes. "Surratt used the name of John Watson."

Sharpe remained an important political player in the U.S. in the years following his European mission. He was named a delegate to the 1868 Republican Party national convention and campaigned aggressively to place his military mentor, Ulysses S. Grant, in the White House. Grant, in turn, named Sharpe the U.S. marshal for the

Southern District of New York, where he combatted political corruption and the “Boss” Tweed ring.

Sharpe only once publicly discussed his 1867 trip to England and other European countries. He wrote a letter to Secretary of State Seward that July, which was later shared with Congress and President Andrew Johnson. Sharpe, strangely, never mentions Judah Benjamin in the report or addresses the suggestions made in Moran’s diary that the retired American general was seeking to “capture” the rebel secretary of state in London.

Instead, Sharpe largely focuses on his investigation into John Surratt’s escape to Europe after Lincoln’s assassination and the search for any evidence that Confederate exiles in Europe aided the Southern rebel in his flight. Sharpe’s letter seems to exonerate these overseas Confederates of any role in a crime. “I have to report that, in my opinion, no such legal or reasonable proof exists in Europe of the participation of any persons there, formerly citizens of the

United States, as to call for the action of the government,” the report reads.

Judah Benjamin went on to have a spectacularly successful second life in England and became one of the country’s most powerful and affluent barristers. To this day, Benjamin’s legal theories on commercial trade are used in the British court system. His “Benjamin on Sales” is a judicial bible. He was honored by Britain’s elite legal society at the Inner Temple shortly before his death in 1884.

But there’s evidence in the public record that William Seward and George Sharpe never completely cleared Judah Benjamin of playing a role in the Lincoln assassination, at least in their minds. The legal barriers to extraditing him from Europe were huge. On April 8, 1870, the *New York Herald*, one of the U.S.’s largest dailies, ran an article about Sharpe’s swearing-in as the U.S. marshal for the Southern District Court of New York. The story included this passage on Sharpe’s secret trip to Europe three years earlier:

“General Sharpe was sent by the government to Europe on the highly important and delicate mission of investigating the numerous representations being made to the State Department implicating prominent Confederates abroad in the assassination of President Lincoln,” the article reads. “The General’s real mission was concealed by an impression given to the public that he was on the Surratt affair, at Rome, and this is probably the first time that the public has been informed of the true object of his secret expedition at that time.”

It went on to read: “His report, which was very elaborate, vindicated all prominent Confederates except one from the charge of complicity in the assassination of President Lincoln, and in this case there was not sufficient evidence to justify an appeal to the extradition laws.” It was obvious the “one” was Judah Benjamin. ■

This article was originally published on June 22, 2023

COMMUNITY

‘Why Do All Rabbis Hate Me?’

How the Orthodox community can cultivate compassion and sensitivity toward LGBTQ Jews

BY CHAIM NISSEL

A 19-year-old client walked into my therapy office in Monsey, New York, looking defeated. I had been working with him for the past three months, yet I had never seen him this dejected. He asked me point blank: “Why do all rabbis hate me and people like me?”

I immediately understood that he was

likely triggered by something related to his sexual orientation and asked him to elaborate. He told me that he often listened to and watched *shiurim*, lessons by religious teachers, online, and that he was very upset by something he saw. A well-respected rabbi he enjoyed listening to, used “the gays” as an example for something unrelated to the actual content of his lesson, and painted all “gays” as being agenda-driven in

trying to change Halacha, Jewish law. This young man tearfully shared how the crowd laughed as the rabbi demonstrated an exaggerated effeminate hand motion as he referred to “the gays.” My client was devastated, and his pain was palpable. His distress and despair led him to seriously contemplate walking out of his yeshiva and his full-time Torah study, for good. But he also described that despite the pain he felt, he still “loved learning Torah and living in a Torah environment.”

After helping him express the profound embarrassment and pain he experienced and providing much empathic support, my client agreed that I could

SCIENCE

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

speak to the rabbi who shared the egregious material. His one condition was that I report back whatever the rabbi's reaction would be. I contacted the rabbi, drove to his home, and met with him. I candidly shared my client's tormented experience, and the rabbi could not recall having done this and questioned whether I might be mistaken. Having seen the clip myself, I pulled it up on my phone and showed the rabbi the video in question. His face fell and he felt terrible. He did not intend to hurt anyone and had not considered how painful his words and actions were.

Although my client declined the rabbi's offer to apologize in person, he appreciated that the rabbi offered to remove the *shiur* from the web. This rabbi never considered that some of his *talmidim*, students, both in-person and online, either identify as gay, are struggling with their sexual identity, or have close friends who do. Although it was not premeditated, the rabbi was guilty of hostile and painful words. He agreed to be more sensitive and extra careful moving forward, and genuinely thanked me for helping him to begin to understand the struggle of LGBTQ individuals in the Orthodox community. The rabbi did not plan to cause harm, yet this 19-year-old experienced significant pain. Even after the apology, the vision of the rabbi ridiculing him was indelibly engraved in his heart and the hurt remains.

One of today's greatest challenges for the Orthodox community is how to simultaneously balance the primacy of Halacha and sensitivity to community members who identify as LGBTQ. In addition to those who thoughtlessly make hurtful comments, there are those in the Orthodox community who feel righteous in publicly denouncing the LGBTQ community. They are either unaware of the pain generated by their words, or perhaps they are motivated by a pressing imperative to protect the Torah and its laws. It is only after one acknowledges the pain one may have caused that one can commit to change their thoughts, feelings, and behavior moving forward.

The position of sensitivity and compassion is not just a personal opinion. Consider the following *pesukim*, biblical

verses, and rabbinic teachings that describe how we are commanded to interact with others:

"Its (Torah's) ways are pleasant and all its paths are peaceful." (Proverbs 3:17)

"Do not stand by your neighbor's blood." (Leviticus 19:16)

"Love thy neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:16)

"Greet all others with pleasant countenance." (Pirkei Avot, 1:15)

The Torah states: "A male should not lie with a male as one lies with a woman" (Leviticus 18:22). According to the long-established understanding of this verse, the Torah prohibits intercourse between two men. Rabbinic law frequently expands a terse biblical law to include areas not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, and this verse is no exception. For example, the Torah law "Do not cook a goat in its mother's milk" has come to include, according to rabbinic law, the prohibition of mixing all types of animals and fowl with milk, requiring hours of waiting between meat and milk, having separate sets of dishes and cutlery, etc. In the case of homosexual behavior, rabbinic law expands the Torah prohibition to include all sexual behavior between two men or between two women.

While the prohibition is clear, the Torah does not present a well-defined approach for how a community should interact with gay individuals. While eating a McDonald's cheeseburger is a Torah prohibition, desiring to eat a cheeseburger is not. There is no prohibition against having desire toward forbidden unions, but the behavior is prohibited. Being gay or identifying as LGBTQ is not a sin. People's sexual behavior is a private matter and should remain so. Rabbis officiating marriages have learned not to ask if a couple had already been intimate while dating, even though the truth impacts the accuracy of the *ketubah*, or marriage contract. Similarly, rabbis are not continually assessing their congregants' adherence to the laws of *taharat hamishpacha*, family purity, as described by Jewish law. Just as what

happens behind closed doors in a heterosexual relationship is private, so, too, all such intimate matters should remain private. As such, LGBTQ individuals who want to be part of the Orthodox community and are trying to find their place in the community should be welcomed.

On the other hand, when there are attempts to change the Torah or to say particular Torah commandments no longer apply, the Orthodox community rightfully protests. Halacha remains the bedrock of our system of behavior, and the Torah, which is the word of God, cannot be modified or amended to match today's ethos. While it is understandably distressing and painful for those who advocate changing Torah, intellectually honest people should agree that the Torah-observant community cannot accept rhetoric that advocates explaining the Torah contrary to the accepted rabbinic interpretations. Just as Orthodox rabbis would object to a movement that proclaimed that the prohibition of *negiah*, touching, was outdated or that the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* no longer applied, the same approach is required for those who advocate amending the Torah in any manner.

The Orthodox community would benefit from increased awareness and appreciation of how their words can, even when spoken unintentionally,

COMING NEXT WEEK



A special Tablet series investigating the state of American urban life

tabletmag.com

cause great pain. We want to create a climate in which the LGBTQ men and women of our communities will want to remain part of our communities. We want them to come to shul, learn Torah, eat kosher, and observe Shabbat. Equally as important, we want them to feel loved and welcomed, the same way we would hope to be treated if we found ourselves in an uncomfortable setting. Our community's emphasis on family structure is a challenge that will need to be negotiated by anyone who finds themselves outside the normative family structure and especially by

LGBTQ individuals. Considering our family-centric communities, we need to be extra considerate of, and welcoming to, others and make great efforts to not hurt anyone.

I recall the childhood refrain "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." This is not true psychologically and is not the Torah approach. Speech is a very powerful tool that can be used to advance immeasurable good and can also cause colossal harm. Many LGBTQ individuals already feel attacked and marginalized in the Orthodox community and

they experience homophobic comments as someone twisting the knife already plunged into their side.

The Torah demands that we "Walk in the ways of Hashem" (Deuteronomy 28:9), which is explained (Shabbat 133b) to mean that we should emulate the ways of Hashem. "Just as He is kind, so should we be kind. Just as He is compassionate so should we be compassionate." May we merit to walk in the ways of Hashem, always. ■

This article was originally published on June 28, 2023.

BELIEF

Dissent in the Reform Ranks

Judaism's largest denomination sees growing divisions around Israel, political alignment, Jewish peoplehood, and the very future of the movement

BY ARMIN ROSEN

None of the speakers I heard or attendees I met at the Re-Charging Reform Judaism conference, held at Manhattan's Stephen Wise Free Synagogue on May 31 and June 1, referred to themselves as dissidents, and at no point did anyone claim to be part of an internal opposition bloc within what is still the largest American Jewish denomination. In a question-and-answer session after what was officially billed as a "response" to the conference, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, likened the more critical segments of the event to a *dvar acher*—the smaller and perhaps incidental "other thing," as opposed to the larger and more officious main thing that Jacobs leads. The two-day event concluded with the critics and

the criticized joining together in a piano-led group singalong of the Debbie Friedman "*Shehechyanu*," which is about the most Reform Jewish thing one can possibly imagine.

Nearly all of the over 290 attendees were people professionally committed to the mission of the Reform movement, and to its belief that Judaism's unique practices and metaphysical claims can survive—and can perhaps only survive—within the embrace of liberal modernity. But many of those on hand, who included major congregational rabbis and professors from the movement's Hebrew Union College, were there because they now found it impossible to avoid a Jewish version of one of liberalism's great paradoxes: There is a tension between specific objectives and broad-minded principles, and unchecked tolerance can pose a danger to one's core beliefs.

In his keynote address, Ammiel Hirsch, Stephen Wise's senior rabbi, laid out the rationale for the two-day event. Hirsch is a former IDF tank commander, a youthfully energetic, middle-aged pulpit savant who laces his speeches with emphatic pauses and dramatically shifting cadences. Reform Judaism is getting smaller, he warned: "[O]ur institutions seem to be contracting, not expanding." Internal divisions are becoming harder to ignore. "Sooner or later we will have to attend to the growing fissures in the Reform movement itself. We cannot pretend they do not exist for the sake of a false sense of unity," he said. As for the movement's relationship with Israel, Hirsch said, "I worry—deeply—that increasing numbers of liberal young adults, including those entering Reform leadership, express indifference to Israel—or worse, opposition not to the policies of Israeli governments, but to the very legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise and the Jewish state. ... To turn against Israel, to join our ideological opponents and political enemies in castigating Zionism, is a sign of Jewish illness." The speech drew a standing ovation from almost everyone in Stephen Wise's sanctuary.

Hirsch could have limited the scope of his speech, and of the conference he organized, to such immediate topics as the movement's fraught relationship with Zionism, its perceived overemphasis on a sharply partisan *tikkun olam* social justice theology, and its apparently

growing unease with the idea that Jews are a distinct national unit with a particular purpose and destiny. All of these topics were discussed at the conference, but in his address, Hirsch broadened his critique even further, declaring that the movement is now snared in the liberal paradox of self-destructive openness.

Hirsch argued that Reform's egalitarian vision has the potential to alienate the movement's followers from the things they are supposed to care about the most. "There is something innate in the philosophy of Western Jewish liberalism that inclines us to elevate universal aspirations, not as complementary to, or a reflection of, Jewish peoplehood, but as its replacement," he told the conference.

The rabbi reminded his audience that their movement had, at the more assimilationist and anti-Zionist points in its history, threatened to lapse into the kind of Christianized pseudo-Judaism that its more traditional-minded critics still accuse it of practicing. "Judaism absent Jewish peoplehood is not Judaism; it is something else," said Hirsch. "Whenever Jews abandoned their ideological—or practical—commitment to *Am Yisrael*, they eventually drifted away. This was precisely the accusation leveled by Abba Hillel Silver toward his anti-Zionist colleagues in the prewar years. By continuing to insist that the Jews are 'no longer a nation, but a religious community,' Silver contended that Reform rabbis were reconstituting 'Paul's insistence upon a religious creed entirely divorced from nation and land.'" Hirsch's reference was meant to make listeners ponder whether their own Reform colleagues are the present-day version of Silver's incipient Paulites—as well as whether the speaker is a modern-day Silver, sounding the alarm.

For Hirsch, to be a conscientious Reform Jew means to be like Silver, on guard against the self-sabotaging temptations of the movement's own central ideas. The question that the conference posed, but didn't quite answer, is what that vigilance should consist of in our own present day, and how far the movement should be willing to go to protect what it claims to value.

Like many American Jewish gatherings, the Re-Charge conference largely consisted of older people commenting on the mentality of the young. "I've never experienced these kids as apathetic," said Rabbi Matthew Gerwitz of the youthful anti-Israel Reform Jews he's encountered in his rabbinic work at New Jersey's B'nai Jeshurun, during his speech on the conference's first day. "They wanted answers that squared with the Jewish education that we gave them."

It was a 36-year-old rabbi, seemingly the youngest of the first day's speakers, who most vividly laid out the movement's issues. Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh said that as a director of student life at UCLA's Hillel, "students were often in my office in tears weekly, sometimes daily." Campus antisemitism had activated their Jewish identities, but they didn't have the educational or spiritual grounding to settle their own rattled psyches, much less advocate for themselves as Jews.

Rabizadeh explained that the students' confusion was downstream of even deeper failures in the movement, ones she had seen up close as a rabbinical student. She implied that the Reform movement had bred unseriousness and equivocation even into its future rabbis. Rabizadeh said she was rebuffed when she attempted to display an Israeli flag in the Hebrew Union College *bet midrash* during an uptick of violence in the country. (She added that her friends in the Persian Jewish community, which unlike many other subsets of American Judaism has had to flee a hostile theocracy within living memory, were shocked that the room in which she prayed and studied didn't already have an Israeli flag in it.)

Rabizadeh spoke movingly about being in Jerusalem during the death of her grandfather back in the U.S., thousands of miles away. "Go to the Kotel," her mother instructed when she shared her disappointment at not being able to attend his funeral. "He's probably there already." At Judaism's most-visited holy site, Rabizadeh saw a woman explaining to her young daughter that they were in a special place, where you could pray for absolutely anything. Rabizadeh said

she later told her rabbinical school classmates about this powerful convergence of self, place, and peoplehood—which, not incidentally, could only have happened in an Israel under Jewish political control. But: "When I shared that story at HUC, I got snickered at."

After the first day of the conference wrapped up, I joined Hirsch in his office, a couple floors above the Stephen Wise sanctuary. Leaning against a wall-length bookshelf was a poster-board blowup of an article in the Jan. 26, 1898, issue of *Harper's Weekly* about the Second Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. In the accompanying photo, Theodor Herzl speaks from the rostrum to a room full of half-delusional Jewish utopians, a *dvar acher* that would come to be a defining event in Jewish history. Rabbi Stephen Wise, namesake of Hirsch's synagogue and a fierce internal critic of the Reform movement's anti-Zionist mainstream in the early 20th century, is seated on the dais almost directly behind Herzl.

The Reform movement's contraction is sometimes touted as proof that liberal religion is oxymoronic, and that it simply isn't tenable or satisfying or theologically consistent to warp something as awesome and limitless as God or the Jewish people within the contours of our own modern prejudices. But the image of Stephen Wise, a few feet behind the founder of modern Zionism, undermines the traditionalist fantasy that the Reform movement is somehow easily dispensed with. The image should complicate the outlook of those who cheer the decline of the movement, which is accused of being a force for assimilation and whose failure would supposedly prove that the American Jewish future lies outside the broader society's liberal mainstream. The Reform movement isn't a deviation from some fictive strain of pure Judaism: Its history places it in the center of nearly every major Jewish debate and event since the mid-19th century, and in the modern day it is responsible for engaging some large number of people who would otherwise have no strong connection to their identity. The 2020 Pew Survey of American Jewry found that nearly

half of the children of only one Jewish parent between the ages of 18 and 49 identify as Jews, while “three-quarters of those raised as Jews of no religion remain Jewish today.” These numbers would be far lower, and the concepts behind them less plausible, without the Reform movement, whose compromises are ones that most American Jews have already made whether they consciously realize it or not.

How much compromise is too much, though? Once such pillars of the religion as kashrut, Shabbat observance, and the traditional liturgy have been jettisoned as a matter of principle, rather than merely out of expedience, basic communal and intellectual coherence requires that some limiting principle be applied. Reform Judaism has to be more than a justification for not believing in much of anything, just as it can't be a subset of belief in a secular political agenda. In his presentation on the conference's second day, Rabbi David Woznica of the Stephen Wise Temple in Los Angeles noted that the movement's advocacy arm now officially supports reparations for slavery in California. The movement needs to do a better job of distinguishing its social and political goals from those of the Democratic Party, he said: “If that becomes the moral compass, then let the party decide what our Judaism will be,” Woznica slyly suggested. “If Jews are going to hear the same thing in their synagogue” as they would on MSNBC, “why would they go? And they aren't going.”

In his office, Hirsch hinted that the movement's most successful innovations, which are based on the idea that Jews can govern their own religious life while still being authentically Jewish, can only endure as long as there are areas where the movement refuses to compromise. “There's a certain school of Western liberalism that values universalism above everything else,” Hirsch said. Total universalism is a tempting dead end for any liberal-minded movement. “A central objective of this conference is to set out ideological demarcation lines,” explained Hirsch. “If we're a Zionist movement, don't we have an obligation to ordain Zionist rabbis?” “If we all agree” on Zionism as a core

principle, Hirsch continued, “what are the steps we take to enshrine these values in the movement and future leaders of our movement?”

One of the major questions going into the conference was whether Hirsch's well-known dismay at the Reform movement's supposed internal division and drift was meant to forestall some future crisis, or whether it is a reaction to a current crisis that only a senior movement figure like him is in a position to see. The conference ended with “responses” from Jacobs; Rabbi Hara Person, the chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis; and Andrew Rehfeld, president of Hebrew Union College. Jacobs' and Rehfeld's speeches indicated that Hirsch may not be overstating the urgency of the situation: The current leaders of the movement would draw very different demarcation lines than Hirsch would, and their basic priorities and overall view of the movement differ sharply from his.

Jacobs appeared on the Stephen Wise bimah in a sharp blazer and no necktie, the lithe and confident leader of a large national organization. He apparently disagreed that the movement had been sucked into divisive political agendas, and proudly announced that Reform had implemented diversity, equity, and inclusion training among its staff “so that we can more effectively lead our diverse movement.” After all, Jacobs continued, “inclusion is a moral Jewish obligation,” while “it is impossible to detach *tikkun olam* from real Judaism” given that the movement's “commitment to justice is theological.” Jacobs added a condition to the usual liberal formulation for support for Israel, a country about which he had almost nothing positive to say in his speech: Reform now believed in a “secure, Jewish, just and democratic state,” implying that the place might no longer be worth supporting if its democratic will proved to be unjust by the movement's standards. The one apparent bright spot amid Israel's intolerance and extremism was the Reform movement itself, which had organized in opposition to the right-wing government's judicial reforms and challenged the chief rabbinates on its inequitable treatment of

non-Orthodox communities. Jacobs received polite applause, but no standing ovation.

It was the deep-voiced and professorial Rehfeld, sounding less like a corporate spokesperson than a principled defender of his own nonnegotiable set of ideas, who drew the most direct contrast with Hirsch. He embraced the movement's role as an antagonist to the traditionalist end of the Jewish spectrum, condemning “Yeshiva University's medieval restrictions on gay and lesbian student organizations,” and suggesting a new catchall phrase for the Haredi and even yeshivish stands of Judaism: “We have communities that are practicing Jewish fundamentalism,” he declared. “Let's name it for what it is.” Rehfeld said that he found a 2021 open letter harshly critical of Israel that was signed by a significant number of HUC rabbinical students during the height of the early 2021 rocket bombardment from Gaza to be “profoundly offensive and insensitive.” Still, he believed that a “litmus test” for aspiring Reform rabbis would amount to “Jewish McCarthyism.” “A lot of things I've heard here frankly leave me troubled,” Rehfeld continued. “The idea we should refuse admissions or ordination because of political activism is abhorrent to me.” He acknowledged there should be unspecified “certain boundaries.” Still, he said, “what's being suggested is about assuaging our discomfort about a new generation.”

Unlike Jacobs, Rehfeld received a standing ovation from seemingly half the audience, meaning that there are people who rose for both Hirsch and for his critic. The next phase of debate over the movement's future seems likely to unfold at HUC, around the issue of what Reform professionals should be expected to believe about Zionism. But even the *dvar acher*, the nondissidents who are nevertheless concerned about the movement's future, have yet to determine their own willingness to spark a painful self-reckoning within the already fraying institution they've dedicated their lives to. ■

This article was originally published on June 28, 2023.

The Dance of Time

A dispatch from the Russia of the recent past

BY DANA VACHON

Moscow, 2012

In Vladimir Putin's Moscow, a world or so ago, two dozen reporters and six film crews gathered in a Bentley showroom for the Chopard Classic Car Rally, Chopard watches were displayed in glass boxes, waiters served champagne and salmon tartare, all of it paid for by two of Russia's more endearing oligarchs, or mini-garchs, to be specific. They are known to Russian society as Leonchiki, the Little Leonids.

Born into the Soviet Union's persecuted Jewish minority, they'd planned emigration to America before rising to control Russia's fashion and luxury markets through insanely valuable real estate trophies: St. Petersburg's former Leningrad House of Trade, and Red Square's belle époque TSUM, pronounced like *zoom*. More, they'd filled their holdings with Western luxury beyond all Soviet imagining: Gucci, Cavalli, Zegna, Ferrari, Bugatti—you name it.

"No one really knows how much money they have," said one Russian fashion editor, insisting on anonymity; "Or how they make it, really. That is the mystery of Leonchiki."

This is why I'm in Moscow, at the Chopard rally, even though I find cars and watches desperately boring: The Leonids are backing it. The co-president of Chopard sat at a dais with the rally's reigning champion, who in real life plays a real estate executive; headsets connected everyone to translators.

"How many cars will be participating in this year's rally?" asked the reporter from *Automobile Abroad*.

"Eighty-two cars."

"What were the toughest conditions you've ever witnessed?"

"I once drove the Mille Miglia in rain for two days."

"Dana Vachon, *Vanity Fair*," I said, then asked the question that had been with me since I landed in Russia; it seemed a fair one for a watchmaker: "Why does time haunt us so?"

No country is haunted by time like Russia, torn between the mystical past of its interior and the Enlightenment future in neighboring Europe. With no strong natural borders, Russia exists in tormenting eternal recurrence, expanding for want of security, then, ruined by the costs of empire, contracting again before the whole nightmare starts over.

I revisited this scene from my archives after Elizabeth Gilbert pulled her novel set in Russia, fearing insensitivity to Ukrainians, as if 100 million Russians could be honestly ignored: *Do they not also eat and pray and love?* As if literature could ever ignore the land of Tolstoy, Gogol, and Dostoevsky. As if anyone could ignore 5,977 nuclear warheads.

That was a week ago. Last weekend, an armed column of 25,000 Wagner mercenaries occupied the city of Rostov, an apparent mutiny, maybe a coup? Video of rogue tank columns rolling past a KFC (her banners wave in the day, the eternal Fried Chicken Republic) delighted the poets on Twitter. The scenes were reminiscent of the fall of Gorbachev, the coup against Yeltsin. Putin was on TV, invoking World War I like it happened yesterday: "In 1917 the result of the war was stolen which resulted in the collapse of our country and loss of land; we will not repeat the same thing again."

He's at war with the results of a war that ended over a century ago, and it's on his mind, at least in part, because of

the fate of another Russian autocrat after that defeat. And as suddenly as the past reappeared, it was mothballed, and everything returned back to abnormal.

"No other revolution attempted so vigorously to provoke an absolute break in continuity between the past and the present," writes Djurdja Bartlett in *FashionEast*, her masterful history of Soviet fashion. Under Lenin the avant-garde designer Varvara Stepanova conceived of *prozodezhda*, an ideal worker's fashion drawn from pure geometry. But it never went beyond theory.

Stalin created Dom Modelei, the House of Prototypes, in whose windows Russians could see styles the state had no means of mass producing. He sealed the Russian people off from fashion as a measure of time, the surest way to gauge one decade from the next, mini-skirts tick-tocking into bell-bottoms, until two gifted childhood friends rose through the wreckage of the Soviet dream: *The Little Leonids*.

They began selling watches from the lobby of a Moscow Radisson in 1993. Bought a pair of humble shops that made them overnight moguls when the 1998 Russian financial crisis drove all their competitors under. In 2004 they bought the Russian Harrods, TSUM; in 2005, out in Barvikha, Moscow's Aspen, they built Luxury Village—a whole town dedicated to shopping. By that day, a world ago, they even owned an auction house, Phillips de Pury, and were moments away from giving Moscow a gorgeous parade of all the cars the Soviet Union's intelligentsia had decided Russians need never see, cars as a record of lost times: A '26 Rolls Royce Phantom; a '33 Mercedes roadster; a '49 Chrysler Town & Country, a '62 Corvette—this was the 20th century's aesthetic memoir, written in fiberglass and steel.

I was assigned to a red Jaguar, but across the way was something more compelling, a 1941 Nazi-made Horch whose team all wore authentic World War II Red Army battle uniforms. They told me the car had been seized from the Nazis on the Eastern front in 1943, then used throughout the war by General Georgi Zhukov, the Red Army marshal who broke the Wehrmacht at Stalingrad.

“I think I’d rather ride with you guys.”

After some debate (it really could have gone either way) I was invited into Georgi Zhukov’s Horch on the grounds that, while America had betrayed Russia terribly after Gorbachev, Georgi’s jeep was an enchanted space, a steely bubble within which, they slowly agreed, it was always and forever 1943, and Americans and Russians therefore allies fighting Hitler. They said this with grave, sincere faces, the same with which they told me, “World War II is the only real identity we have.”

Outside of the car our driver, Maxim, was an IT executive, but inside, he was a Red Army Air Force colonel. I sat in the back, wedged between Georgi, dressed as a proto-KGB agent, and the beautiful Natalia, who wore a field medic’s uniform. Our navigator, Daniel, was dressed as an artillery captain.

I wore a navy blazer and buttery loafers, a perfect evocation of the American technocrats who, 20 years before, had cruised these same Moscow streets restructuring the Russian economy, preaching market gospel whose flaws were first gleaned in the botched privatizations that birthed Putin and his oligarchs in the ’90s, then created the 2008 financial crisis which, it’s now clear, created America’s own oligarchy at home. As I write this piece, Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg are planning a cage fight, a scene straight out of Thunderdome; or a bare-chested Vladimir Putin propaganda fantasy. Barricades held back paparazzi. An elderly woman waved at us like we were headed off to the front.

“This is where CIA spy was caught,” said Georgi, as we crossed Krymsky Bridge. “Then he poison himself.”

He shrugged as if to say, *That’s the life he chose*. I shrugged as if to say, *So it goes*. We drove for a while, then cruised alongside a pair of leather-jacketed KGB reenactors in a black Moriah. Georgi glowered at them from beneath his own KGB cap, a look of pure contempt. He was the Russian intelligence officer who’d fought Nazis and birthed a new world where miracles would abound; they were the ones who’d drag your grandmother off in the night.

Why were they dressed this way? Why had Maxim bought this car? Growing up in Russia, they told me, they’d all feared failing exams and being sent to Chechnya, being made worm’s meat for Putin’s army, his first attempt to restore the Soviet empire. Some friend would bomb a math test and off he’d go, unlikely to return the same.

The memory seemed to rupture the Horch’s exemption from time. Right after it was shared, the car broke down. Turned out we’d been puttering along on an 80-horsepower engine taken from a compact sedan, or even an alpha leaf blower. Whatever its first life had been, its second life was over.

A Volvo towed us along the Rublyovka road from Moscow to Barvikha.

“This is major artery in and out of Moscow,” said Georgi, “So we are safe from aerial bombing.”

“Bombing by who?”

“The Chinese have been encroaching along the southern border.”

We were towed to Luxury Village, the Leonids’ greatest creation. Glass-box stores and skyways, immaculate lawns, Prada, Gucci, the full pantheon. We unhitched from the Volvo and groaned onto the grandstand, our faces suddenly up on twin Jumbotrons facing Luxury Village’s central square, where rich Russians drank Moët and watched the finish.

Russia’s Howard Cosell is a man named Mark Podolsky, and he’d been hired to do postgame interviews just like a sportscaster at a real sporting event.

“How was it out there?” he asked Maxim.

“A mechanical disaster,” Maxim admitted, but then, this warms my heart now, he said that, with a New Yorker along, that didn’t matter; together we’d paid tribute to the fact of Russo-American teamwork killing lots of Nazis not too far from here, not so long ago.

“Let’s have a word from that American.”

“It was a wonderful day,” I told the Luxury Villagers, grinning like a smug twit. Obama was still in office, printing away the ’08 crash with reams of easy money; our own fine linear view of the future, and our fate, had not yet

been laid low by plague, inflation, insurrection; I was different then, reader, I was happier; I was benighted, is what I’m saying.

“We’ve learned a lot about Russian history, haven’t we?”

The quieter of the Leonchiki, Leonid Strunin, is married to a ballerina and keeps an aquarium full of piranhas. He let his general manager talk for him as vodka flowed in the VIP section.

“We imported all the cedar siding on the storefronts from Canada,” he nodded to the wood slats adorning the glass boxes housing luxury brands like exotic pets, “We have good wood outside Moscow, but the grain isn’t perfect. In Canada we found the very best wood.”

“The bricks of the walkways you see here are all made in Holland,” he drew attention to the gray-black paths making frazzled homage to Copacabana beach; “These Dutch bricks are the very finest bricks. Amazing, isn’t it?”

The Russian Revolution dreamed of everything reborn through pure forms. The project was beautiful and doomed. So they’d rebuilt, something lesser, still a wonder: a Babel of all they’d ever gone without. Once the supermarket shelves were bare. Now, waiters delivered porterhouse steaks as the second of the Leonids approached, Leonid Friedland, hair close-cropped like Caesar, eyes like fragile robins’ eggs. We did a vodka shot, ate some tiny pickles. Asked about his astonishing rise, he bared himself in a way I hadn’t expected, stuttering faintly, even sweetly:

“Our first time out of Russia I was 19 years old. West Berlin. Fantastic. When we saw 300 kinds of cheeses in a store, I was just amazed. In Russia there was four kinds of cheese and never more than one in one store ...”

I’d laughed at Luxury Village, silly consumerism. Back then, I’d never known a busted supply chain. It wasn’t the paradise of Marxist dreams, but it was something even finer: a town built from dreams by two of history’s great survivors, friends whose families had come through pogroms, Hitler and Stalin to adorn, perhaps enchant, a neck of forest outside of Moscow.

Why then, I wondered, back in New York, would no one in the fashion world go on the record to acknowledge even knowing them? Some mixture of moral vanity and outright hypocrisy: Western brands wanted access to Moscow's superrich, but the men who provided it, the costs of their ascent and the very grayness of the Russian economy, made an outright avowal undesirable. Anything is possible, in the late world, but pickles and cheese-rationing have yet to form a Met Gala theme.

Who made the Leonids? The architects of the privatization: *Americans*. And so Westerners used the men while disavowing them as "dirty," making the Leonids ghosts of a kind: You could visit them, drink their vodka, but you would never get enough on-the-record

material for the article to run and threaten the racket. I didn't know this, then. My editor left *Vanity Fair* for Tesla; I got paid a nice kill fee and went to dinner in Brooklyn.

Time palsied, buckled, flew.

One night, in 2020, at an auction held by Phillips in Zurich, several watches sold suspiciously well. When a Patek Phillipe brought \$3.6 million people whispered *money-laundering*.

Oligarchs were fleeing Russia, even dropping like flies, a spate of mysterious deaths, a real-life slasher film. Not the Leonids. Phillips came out early against the Ukraine war with a \$7 million donation to Ukrainian charities. They've avoided sanctions against boycott calls from collectors and artists, Anish Kapoor among them. Why?

Some say that the art market was too useful for the global rich, too essential for moving cash undetected. Let the masses winter without Russian oil; the rich require Russian auctions.

Leonid Strunin has relocated to Cyprus; Leonid Friedland has gone to Monaco. Good for them, I think now, writing this from my own place beyond the American Thunderdome, appreciating what Don DeLillo meant when he said exile compensates the banished with opportunities, for rest, reflection. A seat out on the edge of time. I hope they're making the most of things, preparing for when Babel again needs rebuilding, and all is forgiven. ■

This article was originally published on June 28, 2023.

NEWS

Med Men

How Big Pharma's investment in the advertising model taught us to view health as another consumer choice

BY ANN BAUER

In 2009, I took a job as a copywriter with an ad agency in Minneapolis. After 10 years of academia and publishing in obscure literary magazines, I began writing copy for health care and medical device accounts. The work was boring but the salary was grand, and so I threw myself into learning about stents and dilatation balloons.

About a year into the job a large meeting was called. Suddenly my colleagues—those of the running shoe and vodka accounts—wanted in. Our flagship health care client was looking for a multimedia retail campaign for their pacemaker.

A pacemaker is a simple device that can be lifesaving, essentially a

low-voltage clock used to speed up and regulate a slow or sloppy heart rate. It was developed in the late 1950s and patented in 1962. Since then, the technology has not changed much. The device got smaller and the surgery to insert it more streamlined, but as a mechanical object, the design was pretty perfect.

The problem for an ad agency is that there was nothing new to sell. So our strategy team came up with a new approach: *chronotropic incompetence*.

In younger people, chronotropic incompetence was defined as the inability to increase the heart rate adequately during exercise to match cardiac output. But that clinical condition, while a problem for younger people, was also understood as the normal baseline as people aged into their 70s and their

heart rate became gradually less responsive to exertion.

But why should the elderly live with slower heart rates and ragged breathing? This was our clients' epiphany—what we called a "shared belief." There was nothing specific in the literature that said chronotropic incompetence couldn't include the old. Pacemakers for every senior! We would establish this as the standard of care.

By 2010, people 65 and over made up 13.1% of the American population. But the surge in that demographic was clear and imminent. Just 10 years later, they were nearly 17% of the population and by 2030, it's estimated they'll be more than 20%. This campaign was worth billions to our client over 20 years.

What I was witnessing more than a decade ago was the new face of health care in America: an alliance between big pharmaceutical companies and marketing firms that replaced the old injunction to "do no harm" with a profit-driven mandate to leave no facet of life unmedicalized. American pharmaceuticals were spending \$3.6 billion on direct-to-consumer ads in 2012; as of 2021 that number was at \$6.8 billion. In 2021, the total spend for health care advertising in the U.S. was \$32.76

billion, with projections that it will rise another 5.2% even over pandemic highs by 2029.

These multi-million-dollar campaigns have been a huge success. In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, I suddenly knew multiple people who were getting elective gastric bypass and dozens undergoing plastic surgery. Four older ladies I knew swore if they hadn't had their eyelids lifted and tightened around age 60, they wouldn't have been able to see. The husbands and children of several colleagues initiated surgical gender reassignment; others invested in bionic prosthetics to fix faulty joints and enhance athletic performance. Nearly everyone in my urban circle had multiple prescriptions for mood enhancing or stabilizing drugs. The vast majority took an SSRI (like Zoloft). Roughly half carried a bottle of something for anxiety—usually Valium or Klonopin—in their purse. A few years ago there was a wave of ADHD diagnoses among my over-40 female friends, who immediately started taking daily Adderall.

This is the new normal: fully medicalized living in America. But back in 2009, it wasn't yet so. There were huge swathes of untapped audience for voluntary health care. After learning of the potential profits that pacemaker sales promised in a rapidly aging U.S. population, my agency set up a war room and plotted out a multimedia direct-to-consumer (DTC) campaign. Artful black-and-white photos of 70-year-olds finishing half-marathons, doing yoga on the beach, and chasing after their grandchildren. For the superelderly, our campaign showed them walking to get their own mail, climbing stairs, or strolling hand-in-hand.

You're the evidence, read our headline. (I did not write it.) The message was that we didn't need fancy scientific studies to prove that pacemakers could help mitigate the symptoms of aging. Older people enjoying their lives and breathing deeply were enough to make the case.

If the activities you love are harder to do, ask your doctor about chronotropic incompetence, advised our copy.

It was easy to believe we were doing

“It was easy to believe we were doing something noble: giving elderly people a better quality of life. What we were actually doing was creating a disease state and packaging it for the general public.”

something noble: giving elderly people a better quality of life. What we were actually doing was creating a disease state and packaging it for the general public. But weeks before we released the campaign into the world, Katy Butler (whom I knew briefly in my academic life) wrote a gonzo essay for *The New York Times* called “What Broke My Father's Heart.”

After a disabling stroke at age 79, Butler's father suffered an inguinal hernia that surgeons refused to repair unless he was fitted with a pacemaker. What followed was five years of increasing dementia, memory loss, strokes, falls, blindness and incontinence, through which his heart kept beating. When his wife of 60 years asked doctors to deactivate the pacemaker and let her husband die peacefully, they refused.

Butler's father suffered for five days with end-stage pneumonia, gasping for air through wet lungs, until lack of oxygen finally overcame the pacemaker's pull. A year later, Butler's mother rejected a recommended bypass surgery, had two heart attacks in quick succession, and joined her husband in death.

The article—which led to Butler's *New York Times* bestselling book, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*—was circulated

somberly by one of our clients at the medical device company, who then put the consumer campaign on hold. We never did resume. But somehow the message we had intended for the public got out to doctors, who began recommending pacemakers more widely. My own parents both received pacemakers recently, in their 80s, despite a long list of health problems that keep them bound to the couch. When I asked why, neither could say.

My brush with DTC medical marketing happened at a time when advertising itself was changing course.

After years of wooing consumers with commercials and billboards, marketers realized it was easier—and more profitable—to *keep* customers than to court them. Mobile technology made direct communication with buyers possible. The agency I worked for acquired a massive loyalty/one-to-one enterprise in mid-2010 and began turning campaigns that way.

Loyalty marketing is behind the explosion in subscription services and rewards programs—for car rentals and hotels, groceries and gas, makeup purchases, coffee orders. If a customer felt like they were “part of” the brand, and like they were getting a special deal in exchange for their membership, they would keep coming back.

Direct-to-consumer marketing of medical devices never really caught on among the B2C (business to consumer) audience. But it's used broadly by physicians and hospital administrators (B2B). Device manufacturers stage or rent booths at conferences, where they engage [pay] key opinion leaders (KOLs)—star doctors in their fields—to speak and recommend their products; the manufacturers also treat potential buyers to lavish dinners, swag bags, and bulk pricing that make procedures more profitable over time.

But pharmaceutical companies embraced DTC subscription marketing, blanketing nearly every inch of television ad space, but especially those programs watched by older Americans—news and talk shows, primetime dramas, *Jeopardy!*, and reruns of *Blue Bloods*. Most of these ads use the strategy my team was given—popularizing

a worrisome new disease state with a memorable name—to convince people they're in need of help.

One of the earliest examples is Fosamax, a drug developed by Merck to treat osteoporosis and released in 1995. When sales of Fosamax disappointed the company, they hired a consultant who came up with an outrageous—and wildly successful—marketing plan. First, he set up a nonprofit called the Bone Measurement Institute. The nonprofit funded low-cost bone density scanners that tested only a wrist or a heel, and made sure they were placed in doctor's offices nationwide.

Most important, their scanner's chart spit out three categories for bone density: Good bone health was green, osteoporosis was red. But in the middle was a new category that showed mostly normal bone thinning, due to age or slightness of frame. They called it osteopenia, a term coined by doctors a few years earlier. Merck used this term, however, to scare women into taking medications, thereby medicalizing and monetizing the natural effects of aging. If people had once believed that losing bone density was just part of getting older, the ad-men of the pharmaceutical industry were here to sell a new dream—that every ailment, including mortality itself, could be treated with the right product.

At the same time, Merck lobbied Medicare and private insurance companies to cover bone scans and formulated a low-dose version of Fosamax for osteopenia. A 1997 FDA "clarification" on how broadcasters could get around the required drug risk statement (for instance, by providing an 800 number for viewers to call for information) opened the floodgates. In the following years, marquee actresses like Sally Field and Blythe Danner promoted osteopenia drugs on TV. Millions of women were converted overnight to a condition they'd never heard of—that their doctor might have learned about at a conference the year before. Fosamax went from just over \$500 million in sales that year to \$3.2 billion in 2005, becoming Merck's second-best-selling drug.

Problems emerged in the mid-2000s, when it became clear Fosamax actually caused an *increased* risk of bone fracture

“Sickness used to happen to you. Now we live in a world where it's being sold to us.”

in some women, especially of the legs and jawbones. Patients who were taking the drug were warned not to have dental surgery due to the risk of infection and possible loss of their jaw. By 2006, the American Association of Endodontists drew a definitive link between Fosamax and “jaw bone death,” issuing a position statement that warned against root canal in women taking the drug.

Even for the women who didn't suffer side effects, the drug just wasn't terribly effective. A systematic review of 33 studies published by Therapeutics Initiative in 2012 found “no statistically significant reduction in hip or wrist fracture” for women who fell into the mild bone loss or “osteopenia” category. It was a slickly produced mirage.

“Sickness used to happen to you,” says Kim Witzak, founder of the nonprofit Woody Matters, which advocates for pharmaceutical drug safety. “Now we live in a world where it's being sold to us.”

We're told repeatedly how expensive it is to bring new drugs to market, and this fact is used to justify the methods Pharma uses to push its products, from television advertising to free samples in doctor's offices. They need to generate income in order to create the next blockbuster cure. But Witzak says this is a convenient myth.

“Pharma companies spend \$480 billion every year,” she says. “Of that, 5% goes to research and development; the other 95% is spent on marketing. There is a lot of self-interest working behind the scenes to come up with brand new disorders and dysfunctions, medicalizing everyday life, portraying mild problems as serious by widening diagnostic boundaries, creating extensive assessment tools, and corrupting medical research.”

Kim Witzak knows this corruption, because she's lived it.

In 2003, her husband, Woody, was prescribed Zolofit off-label for sleep issues related to an exciting but stressful new job. He was given a free, three-week starter pack of the drug by his general practitioner—a pack that doubled the dose of the drug automatically after one week.

Kim returned from an overseas business trip to find her usually cheery husband ranting, sweating, and telling her it felt like his head was “floating outside [his] body.” She calmed him down and they called the doctor who insisted the Zolofit needed a few more weeks to kick in. Woody should stay on the doubled dose of the drug.

Things seemed to level out. Kim and Woody were planning a 10th anniversary trip, to Thailand. She felt confident enough to go out of town on business again. But when a day went by and she couldn't get hold of Woody—then his business partner called to say he hadn't showed up for a meeting—she got nervous. She called her dad and asked him to check the house.

Kim Witzak's father found her husband, Woody, age 37, hanging dead from the rafters in their garage. At first, stunned, she had no idea why her happy, successful husband had taken his own life, abruptly, midcalendar, without even leaving a note. Then her brother-in-law pointed out that investigators on the scene seized the bottle of Zolofit. So she started asking questions.

She would spend the years after burying her husband pursuing a lawsuit against Pfizer, the maker of Zolofit; speaking to the Food and Drug Administration about DTC advertising of pharmaceuticals; and pushing for a

“black-box” warning (BBW)—the most severe warning the FDA issues, that a medication has potentially life-threatening side effects—on antidepressants.

Witczak settled her wrongful death suit against Pfizer in 2006, for an undisclosed amount—and with no NDA, so she could keep telling her story. Pfizer documents unearthed by her lawyers during the court case showed Woody precisely fit the suicidality profile from clinical trials: a man in his 30s whose dose was abruptly doubled. But doctors who were gifted boxes full of starter packs by sales reps were never warned.

Multiple factors brought us to where we are with consumer health in America. There’s the aging of baby boomers—that generation determined to stay youthful through science, remain in power forever, and never die. But the love of medical intervention seemed to stretch down through the generations. A recent study shows that most millennials take at least one prescription medication each day.

There was the shift in sales strategy, leveraging technology to reach customers directly, preying on their pain points and worries, using their demographic information and internet search histories to target exactly what pill, product or procedure they are most likely to believe they need. Meanwhile pharmaceutical companies took a near universal turn toward advertising new disease states—osteopenia, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, social anxiety disorder, binge eating disorder, low T—in order to expand the market for their drugs.

Yet the cleverest, most efficient method to sell new drugs requires no fancy advertising or media buys. It’s the simple chart, graph or questionnaire at your family doctor’s office.

Merck highlighted the osteopenia results of patients’ bone density scans in a bright warning yellow. The Sackler family, makers of Oxycontin, created the 1-10 pain scale with simple sad, mad, and happy faces to generate conversations between patients and their doctors about the need for painkillers. And that questionnaire you fill out at every doctor visit—asking if you’ve felt worthless in the past two weeks, had trouble concentrating, if you’ve eaten too much or

too little—was written by three doctors funded by a grant from Pfizer, a brand that’s now as embedded in the zeitgeist as Coca-Cola, even featured in Facebook posts and tattoos.

“That questionnaire is nothing more than a sales funnel,” says Witczak. “It gets people to focus on these problems—even if it’s not what they came in for—and gives doctors the perfect opening to have a conversation, and once they come up with the disorder to match the symptoms, they’re in the funnel. They’re Pharma’s customer. Often, for life.”

When she started Woody Matters, Witczak’s original fight was with Pfizer, maker of Zoloft. But in 2020 with the start of the pandemic, her mission broadened. Pfizer is also the manufacturer of COVID vaccines and the antiviral therapy Paxlovid—both endorsed and purchased by the U.S. government in large quantities. For years, Witczak had questioned Pfizer’s methods and their transparency about clinical trials, but when she asked her standard questions about the Pfizer vaccines, her friends and admirers—people who had attended her fundraisers and cheered her investigative work—insisted she’d gone too far.

“I was told that while they respected my other drug safety advocacy, I was completely wrong in the way I was looking at the vaccines,” she says. The resistance came mostly from former business colleagues, the liberal urban professionals who had kept her nonprofit afloat.

As she voiced skepticism about the COVID-19 vaccines, support for Woody Matters ground to a halt.

There’s a case to be made that more and better access to health care options—including drugs—improves the lot of most people. Take telehealth, which became the standard of care during the pandemic. For the first time, people didn’t need to take hours off work and sit in a crowded, germey waiting room to be seen for a skin lesion or a prescription refill. This has led to hybrid health/lifestyle sites like forhims.com (and forhers.com), where online patients can get help with depression, sexual dysfunction and hair loss—all with a single video conference.

In 2022, tech entrepreneur Mark Cuban launched Cost Plus Drug Co.—a for-profit online pharmacy that sells generic versions of commonly prescribed drugs for the cost of manufacturing them plus a 15% markup. Cuban is undercutting the prices charged by Pharma companies and providing people with a sustainable, affordable way to treat literally hundreds of conditions from allergies and acid reflux to diabetes, thyroid disease, multiple sclerosis, heart failure and cancer.

In a perfect world, low-impact options like virtual mental health counseling, preventive medicine, affordable prescription drugs, and integrated health systems would sound like improvements in terms of customer choice.

That equation is already complicated enough for adults whose choices are shaped by Pharma’s massive ad campaigns and influence on medical professionals, but today it may be children who represent Pharma’s ripest opportunity for profit. Caught between pediatricians, schools, drug companies, governments and parents, kids are—from a sales perspective—the ideal consumers because they aren’t required to give their consent to be administered drugs.

In addition to the schedule of 20-25 individual vaccines by 15 months (mandated in varying formulas by states and school districts), the market for drugs that control kids’ behavior is exploding. From ADHD to anxiety to bed-wetting, there’s a pill to treat them—endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), whose principal donors include Abbott, Merck, GlaxoSmithKline, Novavax, and several formula makers. Criteria for childhood disorders keep broadening. For example, in 2003, just 5.4% of school children were diagnosed with clinical anxiety. The figure grew to 8% in 2007 and 8.4% by 2011–12. In 2016-19, 9.4% of children were diagnosed with anxiety serious enough to require treatment.

In January 2023, the AAP issued guidelines recommending that doctors begin treating children with obesity using newly approved pharmaceuticals and bariatric surgery (gastric bypass), as early as age 12. (Handily, childhood obesity surged during school closures

and lockdowns imposed by elected officials in response to COVID-19.) And since 2021, the AAP in partnership with state and federal government policy, has supported highly medicalized “gender-affirming care” for the fast-growing number of trans youth, beginning with puberty blockers. This leads to the use of feminizing or masculinizing hormone therapy and in some cases genital surgeries, which require drug therapy for life.

Combine that with the ever-growing list of vaccines that are required

for both children and adults—to attend school or work, and at one point in 2022 even enter a restaurant—and it’s clear that Pharma has become an unavoidable third rail of American life.

Like that infamous Batman scene where the walls are closing in as the ceiling descends, relentless health care marketing combined with new government mandates and agency guidelines threaten to squash the consumer—resulting in a system that is less about the individual and more about an inescapable system of medical processes and rules.

But it should come as no surprise. We saw a hint of this new world back in 2010, when Katy Butler wrote her family’s story. Her father was required to get a pacemaker implanted, ostensibly to help him survive surgery. But when he was dying in fear and misery, unable to take a breath but stuck in life as the device sent electrical pulses to his heart, the medical powers from on high refused to turn it off. ■

This article was originally published on May 1, 2023.

ARTS & LETTERS

About Those Amy Winehouse Paintings

An aging art critic educates Gen Z on Jimi Hendrix, the pleasures of Adderall, and the mystery of Gerald Laing, the forgotten pioneer of pop art

BY JEREMY SIGLER

When I woke up in my seat, I could tell the older man next to me, Jeremy—who had struck up a pretty lengthy conversation with me earlier in the flight—was no longer in any shape to talk.

His headphones were on and he was staring straight ahead at his screen. I tilted toward him, peeked at his screen, and discerned that he was entranced by the documentary *Val*—a film I have actually seen, about the thrilling actor Val Kilmer, who suffers a major setback, throat cancer, and has to get a tracheotomy. Take it from me, the film is very moving. Jeremy had made an excellent choice.

Meanwhile, Jeremy’s tray stand was crowded, maybe even sagging slightly under the weight of ... let me count them: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 ... *eight*

empty minibottles of complimentary Pinot Noir.

Jeremy was an intriguing older man, but let me be honest, the only reason I even tolerated him initially (the guy who just happened to be seated next to me on my red-eye to London Heathrow International Airport) was because he made me laugh. He also made the flight attendant (who like me was Asian, and about my age) laugh, when she came down the aisle serving drinks and handed Jeremy the first of his eight minibottles of wine (the equivalent of one glass) and he looked up at her with these childish eyes, held up his mini red wine bottle and asked: “do you have like, um, a ... mini corkscrew?”

“Why,” she asked.

“Won’t I need it to open this?” The flight attendant and I were both pretty shocked at first by the man’s total stupidity, but quickly caught on. Need I explain?—he was pretending to be

oblivious to the fact that A) there’s no such thing as a mini corkscrew, and B) his plastic wine bottle was obviously a twist-off, same as your basic plastic bottle of Mountain Dew.

Another thing that Jeremy Sigler (I believe that was his last name) had going for him was his excellent taste in movies. He had settled on the only in-flight movie worth watching, other than the one I had watched, starring Nicholas Cage—a cult movie star from way back in the ’90s—as himself, out of work, broke, and long overdue, if not desperate, for a role, if not a revival. Cage was famous in movies long before I was born in the year 2000—a year before 9/11 if that helps—meaning I am Gen Z, meaning I am *very* quick on all handheld digital devices. It is important that I clarify that my reason for liking Nicholas Cage (let alone even knowing who he is) is due to a photograph I saw of him recently on Twitter, walking down the street with his new hot, way younger Asian (I would say Japanese) wife, who was about six months pregnant with, according to the picture’s caption, his child.

After *Val* ended, the cabin lights flickered on, our tray stands were cleared and we were served a fresh round of complimentary Pinot Noirs. While twisting open my plastic bottle, I watched Jeremy fumble around in the pocket of his very wrinkled navy pinstripe button-down oxford, spill an assortment of various shaped pills out onto his tray stand, and study them closely. He then

picked a light blue one, tossed it in his mouth, and washed it down with a swig of his wine.

“What was that?” I asked.

“What was what?”

“That, I said, pointing to the remaining scattered pills.

“Ohhhh, that!” He took another swig of wine and answered, “speed. Well technically amphetamines ... Adderall.”

“Of course, Adderall.” Just as I was about to ask him for one, he politely offered.

“OK, just a half,” I said.

He snapped it. Down the hatch it went, and instantly, we were cooking on all burners, as they say, fully engaged in conversation. And while it was clear to me that Jeremy was pretty much totally out of it (dependent on God only knows how many substances), he was also, I have to admit, kind of on his game, and (thanks to his regulated amphetamine bumps) capable of carrying on a pretty lively conversation without losing his train of thought, which was pretty remarkable for any guy—even the young guys in their 20s.

I quickly gathered that Jeremy was some kind of gun for hire in the niche field of art criticism—he was an expert in art and therefore had the power to assign value to works and to help dealers, auction houses, and collectors make money. Jeremy’s writing could, prior to auction, seriously inflate or deflate a work’s price. Right now, he was on the trail of some paintings of Amy Winehouse, who was supposedly some kind of wretched rock star of the 1990s, meaning that she probably shot herself in the head, or stabbed herself in the heart. The paintings were by a British

artist named Gerald Laing, who specialized in pop art, which is something that died before I was born.

Anyway, I began to ask questions. And Jeremy’s answers kept coming. The key to the location of the paintings was a man named Donald Rosenfeld, who had a mysterious involvement with the artist and the gallery preparing to show the artist. My guess was that he had some skin in the game—that he, in other words, had works by the artist in his own collection.

Over the course of our conversation, I discerned that Donald was otherwise known as a big movie producer—presently documentaries, like a PBS documentary on Andy Warhol directed by Ric Burns in 2006 (the brother of Ken Burns); a film called *Forty Shades of Blue* which won the top prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 2005; and a film called *The Tree of Life* by Terrence Malick, which won top prize at the 64th Cannes Film Festival. He also produced *Effie Gray*, a film about John Ruskin and his hideously bad marriage. Before that, like back in the ’80s and ’90s, Donald was the president of Merchant Ivory Films, and had produced a bunch of Academy Award-winning films like *Howards End* and *The Remains of the Day*, which were nominated for eight and then nine Academy Awards, and starred British actors like Emma Stone, or Emma Thomas—no, *Thompson!* In 1992 Donald was elected to be a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, meaning he was a pretty gigantic mover and shaker in Hollywood—the kind of guy who could get me in touch with Nicholas Cage by speed-dialing his number on his cellphone.

But most of the things Jeremy told me about Donald actually seemed like total bullshit. For example, he said, “Donald had his bar mitzvah on the Allman Brothers’ tour bus.”

“The almond butter what?” I asked, picturing an aisle at Trader Joe’s.

Jeremy didn’t bother to explain. He just went on telling Donald’s story. “The band was in St. Louis around 1967—they were actually called Hour Glass back then—and they found a moment of euphoric success at the height of the

Summer of Love and booked a 30-day concert series at the famous Crystal Palace Theater in the Central West End of St. Louis, which was back then a rather dangerous neighborhood. The theater was owned by a close family friend named Jay Landesman.”

“Go on,” I said.

“So Donald’s father’s first cousin Jimmy offered Greg and Duane Allman a comfortable place to camp out and rehearse—at his Uncle Irving’s palatial apartment overlooking Forest Park in St. Louis.” Jeremy stopped to take a sip of wine and snap another Addie, taking one half and handing the other to me.

“And then what happened,” I asked.

“Get a load of this. It was fucking incredible. Donald’s father brought him and his younger sister (they were only 6 and 5) over to Uncle Irving’s, which is where they discovered the Allman Brothers literally set up in the living room with all their big Marshall stacks and electric guitars and stuff, jamming the blues at ear-splitting volume! And there were all these friends and groupies hanging around, drinking beer and dropping acid and stuff. And the jam session went on for hours. What Donald remembers most is when the band’s drummer, this guy known as Jaimoe, like, grabbed his stuffed Tigger doll and refused to return it, and he started crying. And then Duane, bless his heart—he would later die in a motorcycle accident with a peach truck—rescued Tigger and gently returned it to him with a sweet wink.”

Jeremy continued to go on and on and on about this guy Rosenfeld. “You would not believe the lunch we had! He took me to this Chinese place in midtown that served the best—I mean *the best*—Peking Duck I have ever had, bar none.”

By now Jeremy was, like, reenacting the scene at the table when he held one of the pancakes up to the chandelier. “They were so thin I could see right through them! They were so delicate and, with a little hoisin sauce (he imitated the spreading of the sauce and using imaginary chopsticks to set down a slice of green onion), positively delicious!” Even after I told him like 10 times that my family was originally from

UNORTHODOX

What’s in a Name?

Ep: 177: On Unorthodox, everything you ever wanted to know about Jewish last names, featuring name change stories from our hosts and listeners. Plus, Noah Levinson investigates the story behind immigrant name changes at Ellis Island.

tabletmag.com/podcasts

Shanghai, and that I was really more a connoisseur of soup dumplings, he just wouldn't stop with the Peking duck.

"But what is the project?" I finally asked, sensing that Jeremy was in fact maybe a little ADHD for real, and not just consuming Adderall recreationally. "Focus man," I said, and then raised my voice a bit louder: "Focus!!"

"What project? Oh, this project. My gig. Well my editor at the Tablet, this dude David Samuels who is pals with Donald and, like, one of the true legends of the lost art of long-form journalism, and moves in mysterious places I don't get invited to, assigned me to write a long, colorful feature on the late British artist Gerard ... oops, no, I mean *Gerald, Laing*."

"Gerald who?"

"Laing. L-A-I-N-G."

"So it's our job to, like, resuscitate his career, to like, rediscover him?" I asked, with, I have to admit, far greater curiosity than I would have expected myself to feel in a million years.

"Our?"

I smiled, flashing Jeremy my most charming selfie face.

Jeremy just nodded, "I think it's *our* job to, like, discover him—to start from *tabula rasa*."

"Tabula what?"

Jeremy continued: "He's been discovered and rediscovered so many times already. Once upon a time, Gerald Laing was a *very* big deal in New York. At the outset of the pop art movement, he was right at the center. And then he, like, vanished for a few years and reappeared again at the center of minimalism. In 1966, Kynaston McShine included him in his very famous show *Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum. So Laing, like, disappeared off the pop radar, and three years later reappeared on the minimalism radar with an entirely new aesthetic, and was suddenly being associated with artists like Donald Judd and Larry Bell, instead of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. He's really quite a remarkable figure—in somehow being totally off the radar. As if he was digitally scrubbed out of art history."

"Where do you think he went?"

"That's what I (or I guess we) are

going all the way up to Inverness to try to figure out."

I nodded, still a little unsure if Jeremy had actually surrendered to the realization that he had already, more or less, invited me to tag along and help him with his work. But there could be no doubt that my enthusiasm (along with the amphetamines coursing through Jeremy's system) was getting this old dog going.

"Recently there's been renewed interest in Laing. A 1963 painting of Brigitte Bardot, made from a photograph and rendered in half-tone dots, sold at a Christies auction for almost a mil, and in 2016 there was a retrospective spanning his entire career with all its fascinating contradictions and clashing impulses and styles."

"Where?"

"It was held at the Fine Art Society in London. But somehow his family, mainly his two sons, put together this gigantic, 500-page, totally comprehensive catalogue raisonné. It's what I call a 20-pounder."

"Sounds like we are on the cusp of a Gerald Laing moment."

"That's for sure," Jeremy said, shifting to Laing's last body of work, the paintings of the very tragic rock goddess, Amy Winehouse. "I'm not really much of a Winehouse fan, but I'm intrigued by these. They'll be shown next month at Palo Gallery on Bond Street in Lower Manhattan. It's this space designed, and partially owned, by the starchitect Annabelle Selldorf."

Jeremy then started spewing out names as if he had art world Asperger's: "Neue, Rubell, Zwirner, Hauser & Wirth, Gladstone, Haunch of Venison, Acquavella, Michael Werner ... she designed all of these galleries." He paused ... "What was I saying?"

"Selldorf."

"Right. Palo Gallery. It functions as a showroom for Selldorf's line of furniture, called Vica, and will also exhibit art curated by her business partner, Paul Henkel ..."

"But wait, tell me more about this Gerald Laing character."

Jeremy reached for the tote bag under

his seat, pulled out an exhibition catalog and handed it to me. "I actually wrote a short text on Laing already," he said, handing me his reading glasses, which were perched on top of his gray, frizzy hair. "You may need these," he said, "the type is small."

I smiled. "Dude, I'm like 22. I don't need reading glasses." I began flipping from image to image. Paintings from '64, all made in a hypergraphic style that was popular back then, usually accomplished by appropriating images from found sources (like *Life* magazine) and projecting them onto large canvases. These were pop blow-ups, apparently—one showed a skydiver in a helmet and goggles, surrounded by a colorful, wavy parachute that appeared to be fluttering in the wind; another was a helmeted daredevil auto racer sunken down in the cockpit of of a drag car behind smoking tires and a massive chrome-plated engine; and then there were softer, more Beach Boy-ish paintings of pretty girls with stylish haircuts in bikinis. What actually grabbed me most was a large, flat green painting with a matrix of colorful dots vaguely articulating the bodies in the Lincoln convertible at the catastrophic moment when JFK was struck. "I like this one."

"Yeah. That's when JFK's motorcade drove past the grassy knoll in Dealey Plaza. It's taken from one of the stills from the infamous Zapruder film. I guess it's known as frame 313."

I flipped a few pages further to a later painting, of an anorexic-looking Amy Winehouse in a skin-tight black dress, squeezing her tits together and a retro beehive falling loose over her face into a shaggy tangled mess, probably as sticky as a mop dragged through a puddle of her own puke. The simple word "ew" escaped from my mouth. I studied her tattooed upper arm—a retro, pin-up girl named Cynthia in a red shirt knotted at the waist and a skin-tight pair of blue short-shorts that I could see myself rocking.

In the painting, Winehouse is holding hands with the bad-seed boyfriend—in a dark suit and fedora hat—who got her addicted to heroin.

I took a deep breath and began reading about Amy, wondering what had

inspired Laing, in 2008, after 44 years of letting his brushes collect dust, to pick them up again and paint this diva at the most pathetic phase of her career. In another painting, Amy is pushing a vacuum cleaner at her front door while dragging on a cigarette. Jeremy's text commented on how the vacuum was a metaphor for an exploited superstar "being pimped out and jerked around to suck up every last speck of money and fame."

"Poor Amy," I said.

"Poor Laing," Jeremy replied. "Like Amy, he was fast out of the starting gate in the '60s, considered one of the leaders in the first wave of pop, and then dropped." Jeremy opened a research folder with a bunch of xeroxed pages from a July 16, 1965, article in *Life*, titled "You Bought It, Now Live With It." In it, the reader is taken on a tour through the home of two of the earliest and most dedicated collectors of pop art, Robert and Ethel Skull. The walls of their home are jam-packed with large (now very famous) works by Warhol, Rosenquist, Lichtenstein, Indiana, Wesselsmann, Johns, Rauschenberg. Right there among them is Gerald Laing.

In his text, Jeremy compared the Skulls' living room to a collage made back in 1958 by the so-called father of pop, Richard Hamilton, titled "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?" In Hamilton's artwork he depicts a room. In it, there's a can of Spam; a vintage television set framing a woman holding a telephone up to her ear; and a bodybuilder holding a giant Blow Pop as if it were a dumbbell.

"That's pretty phallic," I said, as I studied the room's back wall, with a blown up cover of a magazine that was, apparently, very popular back in the '50s called *Young Romance*. Its poster-size scale in the Hamilton collage gave it the appearance a Roy Lichtenstein, but a decade before the first Roy Lichtenstein.

"I always assumed pop referred to a gun going pop!" I said. "But this collage suggests that pop was in fact a reference to a lollipop, something you suck, like, um ... a penis."

"Yeah, that cherry-flavored Charms Blow Pop has the word pop printed

"I always assumed pop referred to a gun going pop! But this collage suggests that pop was in fact a reference to a lollipop, something you suck, like, um ..."

right there on the label," Jeremy kindly pointed out.

"So I guess pop is all about giving and getting blowjobs."

"Well, back in the past, straight couples were a little squeamish about fellatio, whereas gay men might be more likely to walk right into gay bars, make a little eye contact, and go right back to some bathroom and do whatever," Sigler instructed me. "Straight men, meanwhile, were still begging their wives to go down on them."

"So pop was gay?"

"Laing actually does tell this story about Robert Indiana's pretty much universally loathed artwork, *LOVE*—the one with the letters LO stacked on top of the letters VE. According to Laing, "Bob" (who was gay of course) told him that the "O" was pitched at an angle so that it would look more like the head of a penis."

"Ha," I blurted, "So pop was a blow job in a gay bar." I think Jeremy actually blushed.

"I think pop was a bit more ambiguous," Jeremy said. "The same way Andy Warhol was sexually ambiguous, if not asexual. In fact, Laing wrote a lot about Warhol. He describes his bland non-sequiturs, such as 'I like boring things' or 'machines have less problems, I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?'"

Jeremy then took out a spiral pad filled with scribbles. It looked like a fifth grader's notebook, judging by the words Algebra 2 written on its cover with a Sharpie. Another quote of Laing speaking about another pop painter who was not gay, James Rosenquist, read: "I met Jim Rosenquist first. He is a Scandinavian from the Middle West. Fair-skinned and blond-haired, stocky and strongly built, he gave the impression that he could easily be at home on a tractor in some vast grain prairie ... Jim's technique owes everything to the advertising billboards which he used to paint for a living." He then describes the "painted foam and a misty chill of condensed moisture sliding down the side of a glass of Heineken 40 feet high."

"Another cock," I shamelessly offered.

A few minutes later, our jet made a smooth landing in London, and I was standing in the clogged aisle unlatching the overhead storage bin responding to Jeremy's questions about whether I had any idea which gate his connecting flight to Glasgow would be departing from.

"What am I your babysitter?" I asked, grinning. Guys Jeremy's age, who consume that much alcohol and Adderall on international flights, usually don't have a clue how to get to their connecting flights. Without their wives, they really can't do anything, or get anywhere—which leaves them quite vulnerable to Zoomers like me. Not to brag, but in college, if the teacher was a frumpy white man over 30, I knew I could get an A in the class without ever attending the class. All I had to do was write the teacher a thoughtful email at the end of the semester explaining my traumas. Where should I start?

"Where are we going next?" I asked, tossing him his bag, which rattled with pills. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and gave him my best selfie face as he responded "Glasgow."

After finagling with the agents at the British Airways ticket counter and managing to get new seating assignments, Jeremy and I were seated side by side on the short flight to Glasgow. Even before we had taxied out to the runway, Jeremy flagged down the flight attendant. "How 'bout a cold beer?" Picturing

the Rosenquist, I added, “Can you make that two?”

Soon the plane landed and Jeremy reached for his phone, dialed a number, and spoke to whoever we were traveling to meet. “Hi. Is this Fuck?” I heard him ask, before realizing he was attempting to pronounce the Scottish name, Farquhar, which is often wrongly pronounced “Far-Quar” but is in fact closer to being pronounced “Far-Kur,” or just “Fuck.”

“So I don’t think I mentioned that I will NOT be arriving alone.” There was a short pause and Jeremy looked at me while speaking into the phone. “Excellent! I’m so glad. So we will be on the next express train to Inverness. You can expect us around dinner time.” Jeremy held his hand over the phone and whispered to me, “Farquhar wants to know if we eat pheasant? Do we eat pheasant?”

I nodded.

“Yes, we both love pheasant!”

I watched Jeremy’s eyebrows grow intense as he listened. “No, my friend will not need her own room or bed. That’s no problem at all.” He didn’t even bother to look back at me, which struck me as kind of bold.

Anyway, we hustled by taxi to the station and hopped on the last train headed to Inverness. Again, not to brag, but it was only my Gen-Z smartphone skills that allowed me to purchase our tickets online and flash a barcode to the conductor just seconds before the train departed. Had it not been for me, Jeremy would have been stranded in Glasgow all night, probably blowing his earnings on whiskey in a five-star hotel bar.

Pretty soon we were well situated on the train, sitting across from one another at a little white table and staring out the window at the expansive mountain terrain and unpredictable cloud formations that occasionally locked together into ordered compositions of grays, pinks, purples, and oranges, then quickly evaporated into mist. We watched herds of crofting sheep drifting across green hills, clean of even a single tree, as our train rocketed toward our destination in the Black Lake region at the northern tip of Inverness.

I watched Jeremy dig through his bag, fiddle with the lid of one of his medications, spill out another blue pill, and

this time use his credit card to crush it into a powder. He then formed it into a thin light blue line, rolled up a dollar bill, snorted half the powder, and handed me the bill. I inhaled the rest, taking my first-ever blast of pharmacy-grade speed, which I immediately knew was far better than any of the bad cocaine my friends and I tended to use as our “alcohol stabilizer.”

I grabbed for the book *Kinkell: The Reconstruction of a Scottish Castle* by Gerald Laing, and quickly became intrigued by still another aspect of the Gerald Laing experience. The man was an excellent writer. From page one, I just couldn’t put it down, until I came upon a word I didn’t know.

“What’s a ‘castillated dwelling?’” I asked Jeremy.

“A castle,” he replied, keeping his face basically glued to the window.

I read how Laing, “was able to obtain a ruined castle and begin work on it” with his “new bride” Galina—who was, back then, working in the city for this famous fashion photographer, Bert Stern, who had shot Marilyn Monroe (in a gauzy yellow see-through top) and other big celebrities. It was Bert Stern who had given Galina a dove—like, an actual dove—to take home with her after they’d used it on a Dove Soap photoshoot. According to the book, using chance, Galina and Laing set the dove down on top of a huge map of Scotland’s upper highlands and decided that wherever the dove laid its first dropping would be the spot on the map where the romantic couple would be destined to find their ruined castle.

“These guys were pretty adventurous,” I said, but Jeremy wasn’t paying attention. I kept reading and came across a second amazing story of chance—about the moment that a hub cap fell off their tire and bounced across the pavement, right to the little gravel road that led to Kinkell.

“Listen to this,” I said, reading the next paragraph out loud to Jeremy about the day Gerald and Galina bought Kinkell off this old farmer named Angus Macdonald. “Whisky followed whisky; Angus became more voluble; the shadows grew longer and we grew more impatient to see the building. Finally we

suggested that if we did not go soon it would be too dark to see anything.”

“And what did they find?”

“Says here: ‘the overall impression was of solid walls, but collapsing roofs and floors ... The building was well on the way to returning to nature ...’”

“I guess we will soon see for ourselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well that’s where we’re going!”

“We’re going to Kinkell!?”

“Actually it’s pronounced Kin-kell! With emphasis on the second syllable. But yes, that is where we are going.”

“No fucking way! We’re going to stay the night in a castle?”

“No, even better—in the guest house right next to the castle.” I looked down at my belly and imagined myself pregnant, just like Nicholas Cage’s wife, who was not just one, or two, but THREE decades younger than her husband.

“He can be very funny,” I said to Jeremy. “Listen to this part about when he was preparing to pose in a photograph with a bunch of hot British artists—Allen Jones, Richard Smith, and David Hockney—for this article about the mini-British Invasion: ‘I wore a new lightweight Italian suit which I had bought just before leaving London—one that, worn with the requisite aviator sun glasses and white leather shoes, projected the sort of image deemed appropriate: cool, efficient and full of a sang-froid which was brutally upset when my trouser seam split clear around the seat from stem to stern. The suit was very inexpensive. I kept my back to the wall and sat down for the photograph. I do not think that you could know by looking at it what had just occurred.’”

Our train pulled into Inverness station. Jeremy and I stepped out onto the platform, and were greeted very warmly by one of Gerald’s two sons. It was the younger one, named Sam. We slid into the van and I introduced myself from the back seat, looking at Sam through the rear view mirror. “I’ve never driven on the wrong side of the road,” I said, trying my hardest not to seem too much like a tagalong.

“Welcome to the United Kingdom,” Sam replied in a soft voice with a beautiful Scottish accent. Soon we pulled

into the driveway, past a stone wall, and there it was, Kinkell, the medieval castle pictured on the cover of the book I had been reading, surrounded by fields covered with rolled bales of barley ready to be hauled off, and a mountain range off in the distance. The sun was going down, so there was a golden, rosy glow on everything.

We walked across the yard approaching the castle and passed a very commanding jet-black metal sculpture perfectly positioned (by crane, supposedly) on the lawn about 30 feet away from Kinkell—in perfect dialogue with its white, sleek vertical stature. Jeremy pulled his long, frizzy, gray hair back into a bun and circled the 15-foot-tall artwork, which was clearly a cubistic head of a woman.

“It’s my mom, Galina,” offered Sam.

Jeremy kept circling the piece, apparently surprised by its contours and unexpected, scooped-away voids.

Just then Farquhar came out of the house and made a beeline toward us. He leaned in, gave me a soft kiss on the cheek and introduced himself to Jeremy with a very firm handshake. I immediately pulled out my phone and took a selfie in front of Galina. Then I had the good sense to ask Sam and Farquhar to pose in front of the sculpture with the castle in the distance. I was proud to have made myself of use, in a Gen-Z, iPhone-ish sort of way.

Jeremy compared the work to “Darth Vader.” He then compared the artwork to a famous futurist work called *The Dark Horse*, by an artist named Villon-Duchamp.

Farquhar stood with his arms crossed, as though he were admiring his own masterpiece as much as his father’s. “I wish Dad were still alive to see it produced on such a commanding scale. It’s never been done this large.” He gave it a single knock, creating a dull ring. “It’s hollow, and not a single weld shows. I think there are over 20 casted parts to it.”

“You made it yourself?” I asked.

“No, no, no. Now the foundry employs close to 15 men. We’re called Black Isle Bronze. We do projects all over the place. I actually took what I learned about casting bronze from my dad, who

basically was self-taught, and developed a bit more expertise.”

“She really fits nicely with the castle,” said Jeremy. “Her face is fortified, as if she’s going into a medieval jousting contest. It’s not just a cheekbone.”

I followed the three men in through a very thick, solid oak castle door and suddenly I was surprised to find myself in a cozy kitchen, greeted by a beautiful and charming woman with a very friendly smile. It was Farquhar’s wife, Jill, and she was already preparing dinner. She joked that she was working very hard to remove all the lead shot from the numerous pheasants that Farquhar had killed in a hunting expedition over the weekend.

“Smells great,” said Jeremy, making some crack about “expecting haggis,” which I quickly googled, discovering a traditional Scottish dish that is said to be “an acquired taste.” Farquhar then offered to lead us on a tour of Kinkell, which began on the thick, stone, spiral steps inside the fortified turret. All I could think was that it was the first and possibly the last time I would ever step foot in a home constructed in the 16th century. Farquhar (or Silver Fox No. 2) stopped to explain how, back in medieval times, any Viking intruder would be forced to carry his sword in his left (weak) hand, in order to have enough overhead space to move up the steps, giving the man defending his home the so-called “upper hand.” Sam (Silver Fox No. 3) then squatted down and pointed to a tiny hole in one of the very thick, angled stone steps.

“See that little hole?” he asked.

“Oh! I read about it in the book,” I blurted out, a bit too much like a middle schooler trying to impress her teacher. “The owner of the house would use that hole to peek down and see whatever intruder might be trying to invade the castle.”

“Indeed,” said Sam, as we entered a room on the second floor. Farquhar lit a fire in the wood-burning stove, and Sam went in search of a bottle of whiskey and four glasses. We toasted to Gerald Laing and moved on to Gerald’s studio.

This is where Jeremy took an interest in Gerald’s record collection, lined up on a shelf under his vintage-looking

stereo system. He blew some dust off an album cover and flashed it to me. It read *Axis, Bold as Love* by Hendrix. Its cover art is borrowed from a Hindu image of the various forms of Vishnu—what a rock journalist once described as “a lot of freaky looking Indian cats and gods, sages and one guy with an elephant’s trunk for a nose or something!”

Jeremy then asked Farquhar if he didn’t mind putting it on. Sam splashed a second bolt of whiskey in each of our glasses, and on came the crackling sound of this old record from the ’60s, and a song called “Castles Made of Sand.” Jeremy hushed us all and asked our hosts to turn it up, as he threw yet another blue Adderall into his mouth and chased it with a gulp of whiskey. I grabbed the album and began to read the lyrics, as the three silver foxes sang along with Jimi in unison.

Down the street, you can hear her
scream, “you a disgrace”
As she slams the door in his drunk-
en face
And now he stands outside
And all the neighbors start to gossip
and drool ...
He cries “Oh girl, you must be mad
What happened to the sweet love
you and me had?”
Against the door he leans and starts
a scene
And his tears fall and burn the gar-
den green ...
And so castles made of sand
Fall in the sea
Eventually

After the word “eventually,” Jeremy sort of rolled back his eyes in a kind of ecstatic moment, listening intently as the room filled with a guitar solo, which, he somewhat obnoxiously pointed out, was recorded backwards causing it to pluck and resonate a little more like a Sitar or a Hindu harmonium.

After the pheasant dinner, exquisitely prepared by Jill and cleansed of lead, we climbed the steps back to the second floor, splashed our glasses again with whiskey, and sat around a table looking through an old photo album from Gerald and Galina’s glory days in New York, and then in Kinkell, which was seen in

many stages of renovation. Both Farquhar and Sam also appeared in many of the pictures at different ages, as did visitors from New York, like their closest friend and art dealer, Michael Findlay, who is dressed audaciously, in one snapshot, in a tartan plaid kilt held up with a leather belt ornamented by a big fat Texan buckle.

“Gerald and Galina were real contenders,” Jeremy said, commenting on a picture of the couple together with Roy Lichtenstein at some fancy party. And then another where they are seen with Warhol, Gerard Malanga, and the famous drag queen Candy Darling.

“My mom, Galina, actually had lunch with Andy only a few hours before he was shot by Valerie Solanas,” Farquhar said.

We then admired a postcard sent via airmail from New York City to Inverness from Robert Indiana, dated 1979. The funny thing was that the four 8-cent stamps were Robert Indiana’s actual U.S. postal stamp, picturing, naturally, the ubiquitous “LOVE” (or as we now know, the love cock).

But the most fabulous image of them all was one gorgeous black-and-white studio shot of Gerald and Galina taken by *the* Jack Mitchell. The very hip couple is seen entirely nude, embracing. The image shows them from the side, so that their private parts are mostly hidden. Jeremy didn’t actually know who Jack Mitchell was, until he discreetly typed the name into my phone and discovered a very iconic black-and-white portrait of John and Yoko, and then many others of airborne Alvin Ailey dancers.

“So how is it possible,” I asked, kind of taking over for Jeremy as lead journalist, “that Gerald Laing is not a household name?”

Both sons got very serious, almost grave, and took turns explaining a few facts. “It’s very complicated,” Sam almost whispered, as if the ghost of his father might overhear. “They were tired of playing the game. People like Robert Indiana once told my dad, ‘You must be seen everywhere.’ And that was the way it was. And they got tired of being seen everywhere!”

I just nodded, knowing if I said nothing, I was about to learn more.

“Dad refused to stay with one style, the way Roy did, sticking rigidly to those same Ben-Day dots.”

Farquhar continued. “My dad and mom’s decision to leave New York when he was at the peak of his career may not have been the best choice. Because his market pretty much dried up within a few years. Dad refused to stay with one style, the way Roy did, sticking rigidly to those same Ben-Day dots. Also my dad’s gallerist, Feigen, decided to focus on the secondary market, and he kind of dropped his young talent and liquidated his contemporary art, rather cruelly selling a huge number of my dad’s early paintings at auction for nearly giveaway prices.”

“So you’re saying that Feigen maliciously hurt your dad’s career?” Jeremy asked. “Because evidently, certain critics, like Barbara Rose, had written pretty scathing reviews of one of his shows, claiming that his ideas were ‘received,’ or in other words, derivative of other pop artists. Rose also said Laing’s work ‘lacked content to an astonishing degree.’ Remarks like that, in print, certainly couldn’t have helped.”

I just had to cut in. I was no art scholar, but I just couldn’t hold back. “Maybe she failed to see how interesting your dad’s subjects were.” I had the stage. “He really seemed to understand the adrenaline and the exhilaration of consumerism, not merely products like Campbell’s soup cans on the supermarket shelf.”

Sam, Farquhar and Jeremy were silent.

It was, like, my moment. “On the plane over, I read one quote by your dad ...” I brought it up on my phone, as I had snapped a picture of the text earlier on the train. “Even the dealers would slip away from their own galleries in order to appear, however briefly ...” I said the word “popular” in my head and kept reading how he described the remarkable turnout to his first show that included Leo Castelli and Roy Lichtenstein, everyone who was anyone. “Andy Warhol, Jim Rosenquist, Tom Wesselman, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and, of course, Robert Indiana—came to my first opening.”

“So, bold as love,” Jeremy said, “off they went to try to do something really romantic!—instead of settling for a life of slavery to the New York art world.”

We said our goodnights, confirming that indeed, we would love to meet them in the kitchen at 9 a.m. for a bacon and egg breakfast. Farquhar handed Jeremy what remained of the bottle of whiskey and encouraged us to polish it off back at the guest house. We carefully made our way down the spiral steps commenting that we were feeling lucky not to be carrying swords. And we walked out into the very dark night. No moon or stars were in sight. The fog had rolled in like a velvet curtain over the deep black horizon.

Back at the guest house, Jeremy popped an Ambien and ran himself a bath, while I got out of my clothes and slipped under the cool, crisp, starched, four-star, 100% cotton sheets. I took out my laptop and began to peck away at my keys, writing as fast as I could possibly move my fingers.

Emotions started pouring out of me about the tragedy of Amy Winehouse as I tried to describe one of Laing’s painful last paintings of her copied from a clipped newsprint cover of the *Daily Mirror* dated Friday, Nov. 9, 2007, with a headline reading “Amy’s man is cuffed and off to cells.” The painting was almost entirely black and white with its diagonal rays of half-tone dots and solid saturated flat shapes. It captured the frozen moment Amy clutches her boyfriend with bare hands holding on to the naked flesh of his face desperately kissing him goodbye. Our inquiring

eyes then slip across the young man's black tee down his white thin arms to his hands which are held in police cuffs behind his back. It had that French new wave aesthetic, or perhaps it was even more breathless—like the '80s film Jeremy had compared it to by John Lurie, *Stranger than Paradise*, with the unforgettable song he played for me by a guy named Screamin' Jay Hawkins, "I Put a Spell on You."

The painting's title once again required Google: It was quite biblical actually, "Gethsemane," which, according to Wikipedia refers to the olive grove in Jerusalem where Jesus lay in "agony" (was he suffering from withdrawal?) the night before being escorted away, nailed to a cross, and left to just hang there.

Who in Laing's allegorical painting, I wondered, was playing the part of Jesus? Amy or her ne'er-do-well boyfriend? And would Amy be saved by the grace of God who presumably had called the cops to come and drag away the evil druggy enabler and punish him for all our druggy sins? Was Amy being depicted as a martyr, on the verge of soul sacrifice. Or was she finally being set free to sing the gospel?

As I wrote, I arrived at the conclusion that Winehouse's problems ran deeper than her bad-seed boyfriend, with his class A crack and her infamous father who was also her worst exploiter. Amy's downward spiral was written into her every fiber—her perfect Warholian car crash moment was coming head on in slow motion from the first time she ever stepped out on stage. It was the drug of celebrity that failed her, the spot light that spoiled her rotten.

I took another swig and went searching on YouTube and discovered a handheld cellphone video poorly shot of Amy's last performance before her death from alcohol poisoning on July 23, 2011, at the age of 27, when she joined the 27 Club (Janis Joplin, Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain ...). In a very poorly attended venue, Amy is caught out on stage trying to sing, while her sturdy backing band stands around indifferently letting her unravel. She no longer seems to know the words to her songs or how to sing them. She can no longer find her legs or keep her balance. There's no more foxy lady, or cool Lady Day; no more R

(rhythm) nor B (blues); she's just a black-out drunk and drugged victim being urged on by a few cruel hecklers to humiliate herself a little bit more.

I could hear Jeremy singing in the bathroom.

Anger,
He smiles
Towering
in shiny-metallic-purple-armor
Queen Jealousy, envy waits behind him
Her fiery-green gown sneers at the grassy ground
Blue are the life-giving waters
Taken for granted ...
They quietly understand
The once happy turquoise armies lay opposite ready
But wonder ... why ...
The fight is on!

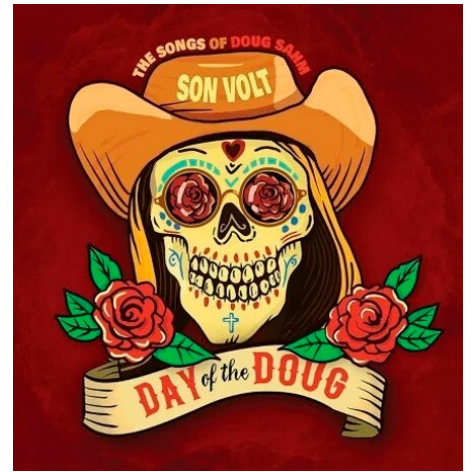
Then he came walking out of the bathroom, entirely naked, dripping wet with a towel in his hand, and belted out:

But they're all bold as love ...
Yeah, they're all bold as love ...
Yeah, they're all bold as love ...
Just ... ask ... the axis

Jeremy crawled into bed, picked up the Kinkell Castle book and started to read out loud a section describing a raid that might have once taken place on the castle: "The vaulted ground floor ... was very strong and also fireproof—an important consideration when a flaming torch might be thrust through an arrow slit or gun loop." Then the Ambien must have kicked in, because Jeremy was fast asleep and snoring.

So I popped one of Jeremy's Adderalls, washed it down with a swig of whiskey straight from the bottle, and kept on typing. I knew I'd be up all night writing, and that by morning I'd have a text about the missing pop art painter Gerald Laing and his mysterious Amy Winehouse paintings to send to editor David and that other guy Donald, who'd had his bar mitzvah on the Allman Brothers tour bus. ■

This article was originally published on January 29, 2023.



Album of the Week

Son Volt, *Day of the Doug*

You might be forgiven for being unfamiliar with the music of Doug Sahm, who was born in 1941 and died of heart attack in 1999. Bigger musicians came out of Austin's hippie-country scene, like Willie Nelson, but Sahm became the lifer who stayed local. That dedication is part of what made him a cult figure, resulting in Son Volt's latest album, a collection of covers called *Day of the Doug*. Cult figures themselves, Son Volt have used Sahm's music to make one of their strongest albums in years.

Son Volt's main figure is Jay Farrar, who will be forever tied to a previous band of his, Uncle Tupelo, which he formed with Jeff Tweedy, now of Wilco. That band helped define "alt-country" in the '80s and '90s—a Nirvana to the Nashville mega-acts of the time. When Uncle Tupelo broke up acrimoniously, Tweedy became a genre-shifting wizard, bestselling author, and NPR guest. Jay Farrar founded Son Volt and continued more or less down the same path.

Son Volt has consistently delivered deeply felt, sometimes very wordy, alt-folk music over the years. But listening to *Day of the Doug*, it's clear that an album of cover songs so personal to Farrar was just the thing he needed to break out of old patterns. It's still alt-country, but here Farrar is wearing another man's boots, and they seem to fit.

—David Meir Grossman

In the Swim

Jewish visionaries helped create New York City's public pools

BY MARJORIE INGALL

New York City's 54 outdoor swimming pools open the day after public school lets out for the summer. This year, that's June 27. Many of these pools are gorgeous structures with art deco flair: decorative marble panels, colorful mosaics, snazzy geometric ornamentation, glazed bricks, swooping steps, and curvy balustrades. And for their existence, we can thank two Jewish visionaries—one generally revered, the other reviled.

The first visionary of urban bathing facilities was physician Simon Baruch (1840-1921). Baruch was an immigrant to America, a social reformer who wanted to improve the lives of other immigrants. He was a passionate believer in the healing powers of clean water at a time when that was in short supply ... and when many other physicians didn't grasp the importance of hygiene in public health.

Baruch had emigrated from Germany to South Carolina as a teenager and graduated from the Medical College of Virginia in 1862. He served as a surgeon in the Confederate army and remained in the South during Reconstruction. He wrote a well-received medical treatise on healing bayonet wounds and became a fierce advocate for universal smallpox vaccination.

In the 1880s, he moved to New York City. There he set about helping the huddled masses and wretched refuse of the city's tenements. At the time, New York City's population was skyrocketing, and cholera and typhoid epidemics were ravaging the Lower East Side. Baruch thought about the public bath system in Germany and returned there to study it, convinced that it could help New York City's communities living in

unsanitary conditions. Upon his return to the States, Baruch wrote *The Uses of Water in Modern Medicine* (1892) and other books on hypnotherapy. He began working to create a network of free public baths.

In 1895, his campaign was given a huge boost by the New York State Legislature's passage of a law that required free bathhouses in cities with populations over 50,000. At the time, one survey found, there was just one bathtub per 79 families on the Lower East Side. For those without bathtub access, an option was the People's Baths, at Centre and Grand streets, which opened in 1891; there, a bath plus the use of soap and a towel cost 5 cents.

But with the new law came the funding for multiple new structures that offered cleanliness at no cost. In 1901, after many delays, Baruch opened the city's first public bath: the Rivington St. Municipal Bath at 326 Rivington Street. It had indoor and outdoor bathing pools, 67 showers (45 for men and 22 for women) and five soaking tubs. In 1902's *The Battle with the Slum*, Jacob Riis wrote that it served 224,876 bathers in the first five months of 1902. "And this in winter!" he exclaimed. Now that the bathhouse had finally opened, he said, "godliness will have a chance to move in with cleanliness." He added, with nearly audible tongue-clucking, "Rome, two thousand years ago, washed its people most sedulously, and in heathen Japan to-day, I am told, there are baths, as we have saloons, on every corner." Riis quoted a study showing that only 306 tenement dwellers in a population of over 250,000 had access to a bathtub; the fact that the Rivington baths were a huge hit, as were the free temporary baths floating on pontoons on the Hudson and East rivers, showed

that "the 'great unwashed' were not so from choice, it would appear." Indeed.

By 1911, Manhattan had 12 bathhouses. A few of them had actual swimming pools, like the majestic (still!) Asser Levy Public Baths, built in 1908 by Brunner & Aiken and designed to look like an ancient Roman bathhouse. A "superb example of the Roman Revival style, which features vaulted ceilings, balconies, mullion windows, skylights, and stone urns," it was made a New York City landmark in 1974 and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. Its namesake, Asser Levy, was one of the first Jewish citizens of NYC and a civil rights advocate. He was one of the 23 Jews who fled Brazil for New Amsterdam in 1654 and distressed Peter Stuyvesant with his very presence. Levy co-founded Shearith Israel, the country's first Jewish congregation, and became the first Jew in America to own property as well as America's first kosher butcher. The elementary school named after him in Manhattan's East Village is called the Asher Levy School, because Asser Levy is not a good name for an elementary school.

Meanwhile, the floating outdoor baths that Riis mentioned, which served between 5 and 6 million New Yorkers a year, began to prove untenable. By the early 1920s, the rivers were becoming too polluted to be safe for bathing. The city began closing the wooden structures, and the last floating bath disappeared in 1938.

Fortunately, by then there were more cooling-off options in New York City. That's because the scorching summer of 1936 became known as The Summer of Pools. The city opened 11 huge new state-of-the-art Works Progress Administration pools; the city's Parks Department called them "among the most remarkable public recreational facilities in the country, representing the forefront of design and technology in advanced filtration and chlorination systems." The Summer of Pools was spearheaded by controversial city Commissioner Robert Moses, who attended every pool opening with Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and made sure each one was a huge megillah, featuring

entertainments ranging from celebrity appearances to synchronized-swimming shows and swimming clowns and diving competitions to blessings of the waters by religious figures and performances by professional musicians and dancers. Today, of course, Moses is best known for his domineering and bullying ways, for valuing expressways and private cars over foot traffic and public transit, for making urban planning decisions that repeatedly hurt poor people and people of color, and for being a total schmuck to Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of American Cities*. But he did a great job building pools!

Moses launched a free citywide Learn to Swim program in 1938, since up to 400 people a year drowned in NYC's waterways. (It's unclear whether Moses knew about the Talmudic instruction that teaching a child to swim is a primary parental obligation.) Moses also wanted to keep kids from getting sick swimming in the polluted river water. The city's Learn to Swim campaign still exists, instructing around 7,000 kids every summer.

While Jewish men spearheaded the creation of the city's pools and bathhouses, very few Jews actually designed them. A notable exception: In 1971, Brooklyn native Morris Lapidus, who also built Miami Beach's Fontainebleau and Eden Roc hotel pools, designed the Kosciuszko Pool in Bed-Stuy. If you're not familiar with the Fontainebleau, perhaps the title of Lapidus' memoir, *Too Much Is Never Enough*, will clarify his aesthetic. Lapidus claimed that his design vision originated with his first sight of chaotic, colorful, populist Coney Island as a young Russian immigrant; he felt "an emotional surge" about architecture for the very first time. So he was thrilled to return to Brooklyn to create a public pool. "I came from yesterday's ghettos," he said. "Of course we will do this project. I owe it to this city and to myself."

Morris Lapidus' son Alan was a partner in his architectural firm and the author of a sly memoir of his own, *Everything by Design*. Alan is perhaps best known as the designer of several Donald Trump properties, including his Atlantic City casino. (Trump himself blurbled

“Moses launched a free citywide Learn to Swim program in 1938, since up to 400 people a year drowned in NYC’s waterways.”

Alan's book: "Pay attention to what he has to say—he is very good!" I believe Trump actually wrote that blurb. I do not believe he read the book.) Alan recalls that when he and his father met with Mayor John Lindsay at Tavern on the Green to discuss the project, Morris reminisced about growing up just two blocks from the future pool site and suffering during the sweltering summers; he and his friends resorted to diving off the Brooklyn wharves into the East River.

Alan writes that he, not his dad, actually created the Kosciuszko Pool design: a semi-underground building with broad graduated platforms that water cascaded down, along with vast platform steps leading up to a rooftop playground, a sculptural fountain, an adjacent wading pool, a jungle gym, and 200-foot lights too tall for little miscreants to break with projectiles. Many of the building materials came from Brooklyn's shipyards. The pool is gigantic: 230 feet long by 100 feet wide, with a 3,000-person capacity. It was not a joy to build. "New York City has the most archaic and unworkable rules governing municipal construction since Pharaoh built the Great Pyramid," Alan Lapidus writes in his memoir. "And city functionaries administer these dictates with all the competence of Lucille Ball

on the chocolate factory assembly line." His story of how the pool actually manifested, despite obstacle after obstacle thrown up by the city (hey, Baruch had problems with city construction, too) is very funny.

The pool was a hit with critics as well as the public. The architecture writer Ada Louise Huxtable, who despised Lapidus' work and used "Lapidus" as an adjective meaning *ungapatchka*, loved the Kosciuszko Pool. It won design prizes and rave reviews in architecture journals. According to Alan, this infuriated Morris and drove a wedge between the two of them; they never again spoke of the pool. "The whole Bed-Stuy affair qualifies as a father-son tragedy," Alan writes.

The Kosciuszko Pool will welcome this generation's young swimmers this week. The Rivington Street Municipal Bath, though, remains in limbo. In 1917, it was renamed the Baruch Baths (Simon's son Bernard M. Baruch, a Wall Street titan, put his father's name on many things) and acquired a swimming pool, but during the city's financial crisis in 1975, the building was shuttered. It has remained bricked up and unloved since then. The beleaguered New York City Housing Authority went inside in 2001 to see whether it could be saved, and found rotting beams, trees growing through the roof, structural damage, extensive mold, basement flooding, and probable lead paint. NYCHA recommended demolition. And then the building sat for another two decades.

Last year, the city began seeking proposals for what to do with the bathhouse building; neighbors are hoping it might become a community center. That would probably make Simon Baruch happy. ■

This article was originally published on June 28, 2019.

HISTORY

Tablet explores the past at [tabletmag.com/sections/history](https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history)

When Shabbes Is the Longest Day

If I wanted my daughter to learn to love the Sabbath,
I had to bend my own rules just a little

BY ALTER YISRAEL SHIMON FEUERMAN

It was a long July shabbes some years ago. If you grew up observant, you remember how long this kind of shabbes seemed when you were a child—endless, like summer itself. A long July shabbes is enough to turn even a devout child into a young apostate, enough to make you deny Moses and all of God’s Torah.

Out of kindness to our little children—and ourselves—we had decided to leave our Brooklyn home and go to a place where the Sabbath could pass more quickly, less painfully, and more interestingly to a child: Ocean Grove on the Jersey Shore. We would stay at a bed-and-breakfast (although we’d bring our own food). There was a shul within walking distance, but there were also beachside playgrounds nearby, where our kids could enjoy their long shabbes afternoon.

Ocean Grove was originally founded as a camp meeting site by Methodist Evangelicals, and it has retained some of that culture even as it became a destination for all kinds of people. We had never spent shabbes in such an environment before. As the sun set on Friday evening, there was a festive air. People gathered on the veranda of our guesthouse to eat dinner. I noticed a round, red-faced man eating lobster nearby as I quietly sang *Shalom Aleichem*. Just inside the parlor a short man played the piano: ragtime and Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. We made Kiddush with a small silver becher that we brought along, while he played piano in the background. I rather enjoyed it. There was something homey, quaint about

this place, yoking these opposites together in a sort of spiritual plaid.

We got up, snooded wife and yarmulke-ed little kids, and trekked across the porch and the parlor to wash our hands. Some people watched us and our young family; most ignored us. As the pianist continued to play *An American in Paris* and *Porgy and Bess*, there was a noisy giddiness in the room and some people started to dance. After a while, the last tune was played on the piano and the place emptied out. It was a beautiful evening and we decided to go for a walk. As were stepping down from the porch, the pianist passed us, about to get into a waiting cab. “Gut Shabbes,” he said.

My mother had a terrible fear of “the streets”—a catch-all term for the outside world, rife with lusts and formless enemies that would snare her children. For her there was no neutral ground for cultures to meet, no safe place for mingling of ideologies. She was completely under the sway of the Eastern European mistrust of the goyishe culture as being wholly corrupting. One could read a book or listen to “gentile” music, but the lure of “their” culture up close—like sitting and eating with goyim in Ocean Grove—would be too much. We would all succumb in the end, she believed, if we allowed ourselves to be too close.

The degree to which I internalized this consciousness was tested the very next day when we were awakened by sheets of rain and massive lightning and thunder. Despite the deluge, I made it to shul in nearby Bradley Beach and returned to the inn at midday when there was a short break, but from the

sky I knew that there was no hope for the day. We would all be confined indoors. A feeling of panic crept up in me. It was going to be a long, intolerably long, afternoon—exactly what we’d hoped to escape by spending shabbes at the beach. I was particularly worried about my then 6-year-old daughter Avigayil, who had already been forcefully agitating for a kinder, gentler shabbes that would end, say, around 3 o’clock in the afternoon. She’d wanted on several occasions to paint and color on the Sabbath. So, it was with good reason that I feared that the “torture” of one more endless, boring shabbes could spoil her for receiving the faith of her forebears and render her, instead, ripe for a lifetime of reactionary hedonism.

My wife suggested that we delay eating the afternoon meal until 1 o’clock, drag it out for an hour or so, and go upstairs back to our room, where the heavy rain would lull everyone into a deep Sabbath afternoon sleep. But it was not to be. At around 2:45 Avigayil woke up from a short nap and nudged me awake. I looked at the clock: six more hours till shabbes was over. The others were still asleep. It was pouring outside. I had no idea what to do. We would go

BELIEF

Spirituality, ritual, and more at
tabletmag.com/sections/belief

FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

 twitter.com/tabletmag

 instagram.com/tabletmag

 facebook.com/tabletmag

All-purpose Texas BBQ Dry Rub

BY ARI WHITE

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup white sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 2 Tbsp garlic powder
- 2 Tbsp chili powder
- 2 Tbsp Colman's mustard
- 2 Tbsp oregano
- 2 Tbsp chili flakes
- 2 Tbsp onion powder
- 2 Tbsp paprika
- 2 Tbsp cumin
- 4 Tbsp coarse black pepper
- 2 Tbsp coarse sea salt
- 2 Tbsp instant coffee

PREPARATION

Step 1

Mix together in a bowl. Coat meat (or fruit) in the mixture and grill.

Hundreds of recipes at
tabletmag.com/recipes



Broccoli and Pea Guacamole Dip

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- ¾ cup broccoli florets**
- 1 cup fresh or frozen peas, defrosted**
- 2 medium avocados (about 8 ounces each), peeled and pit removed**
- 1 medium tomato, diced**
- ½ red onion, finely diced**
- 1 scallion, trimmed and thinly sliced**
- 1 jalapeño pepper, seeded and minced**
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled and minced (about 4 teaspoons)**
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro, plus cilantro for garnish**
- Juice of 2–3 limes (4 to 6 tablespoons fresh lime juice)**
- Salt to taste**
- Raw cut-up vegetables for dipping**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Put the broccoli on a plate, sprinkle some water on top, cover with plastic wrap, and cook on high in the microwave for about 5 minutes, or until soft.

Step 2

Transfer the broccoli and peas to a food processor, add the avocados, and process until smooth. Scrape the mixture into a bowl, then add the tomato, red onion, scallion, jalapeño, garlic, and chopped cilantro and season with lime juice and salt. You really have to keep tasting until you reach the right balance of lime juice and salt. Mix well, cover and refrigerate for up to 2 hours. When ready to serve, surround with cut up vegetables for dipping.

Yield: About 2 cups