The Jews Who Didn’t Leave Egypt
A lesson from the past about choosing freedom over servitude

BY ALANA NEWHOUSE

This weekend, millions of people will sit around Seder tables and memorialize the exodus of the Jews from Egypt.

Guided by the Haggadah, or Passover text—one of the most popular Jewish books ever written—Seder participants are led along in a series of prayers, texts, and activities. We talk and talk and talk about the miracle of liberation; we parse the details of its unfolding, enumerating the many miracles involved; we go over whether we are supposed to commemorate the blessing of freedom only in this life or also in the next one; we assert in words and song the gratitude we feel for being the lucky descendants of those who escaped from slavery.

One thing we do not generally discuss, however, are the Jews who didn’t leave. “Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, ‘The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt,’” states Exodus 13:17. But it is in the next sentence that a mystery emerges: “So God led the people round about, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds. Now the Israelites went up chamushim out of the land of Egypt.”

Wait—what? The Jews went out of Egypt how? What does “chamushim” mean? It is generally translated as “armed,” but nearly all commentators note that its definition is, in fact, uncertain.

Into this breach arrives the legendary medieval Torah commentator Rashi, with a startling assertion. After acknowledging the “armed” option, Rashi offers, with casual sangfroid, another idea: That “chamushim” relates to the Hebrew word for five, and the text should be understood to be saying that only one-fifth of the Jewish people chose to leave Egypt.

What happened to those who stayed? Nothing good. “There were among
Israel of that generation wicked individuals who did not wish to depart Egypt and they died during the three days of gloom," Rashi continues.

Rashi’s contemporary, Ibn Ezra, was positively outraged by this interpretation, calling it “a sick evil.” But Shemot Rabbah finds Rashi’s explanation perfectly reasonable, and even adds to it: “There were sinners among the Jews who had Egyptian patrons, and they had wealth and honor there, [so] they didn’t want to leave.” In other words, they liked the good life in Egypt.

This, of course, flies in the face of what is commonly understood to be the definition of slavery. Jews who stayed behind were not inexplicably choosing a life of torture; they simply did not want to give up on the comforts of the life they knew. In the later words of Rav Yehuda Henkin, they were “disinclined to trade flesh-pots for freedom.”

I’ve been thinking a lot about these Jews lately.

I think about them when people refuse to accept that beloved blue-chip organizations—the ACLU, the ADL, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International—no longer fight for their own founding values.

I think about them when I talk to people who straight-facedly cite The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, or other formerly great outlets as authoritative sources of news.

I think about them when friends text me openly antisemitic Instagram posts from artists they admire, or internal threads from storied museums in which Jews or Israel or America are maligned as evil, asking how they can “educate” these people.

I think about them when I meet people who can’t imagine—literally cannot make their brains consider—their child or mine!—not going to a prestigious American college or university.

I thought about them when I watched as Ukrainian flags went up in a matter of hours in all of my friends’ social media profiles, the latest in a collection of pins for our lapels—the parentheses around Jewish names, #MeToo, #TimesUp, #BLM, #TransRightsAreHumanRights, #MaskUp, and more.

I think of them when I see people’s language change on a dime, and in lockstep: systemic racism, gaslighting, victim-blaming, platforming, deplatforming. And when I see people with previously solid moral compasses lose their footing in the face of this or that hysteria du jour—suddenly incapable of saying clearly “this is wrong” (or “this isn’t wrong”), regardless of how emotionally it is positioned by a collective swarm.

I think about these people, about the moral imagination needed to take risks, to leave old worlds and build new ones; about the confidence required to believe that it is you who makes a given institution or cause or idea legitimate and special, and not the other way around; about the bravery and faith needed to withstand the loneliness of the desert of outsiders before getting to the Israel of a new life. I think about all of this, and suddenly Rashi’s insight becomes less mysterious.

In 2017, I was one of the few among my friends who didn’t attend the Women’s March. I recognized the legitimacy and even urgency of the cause, but I had concerns about the movement and its leaders. When I asked questions or noted inconsistencies, clear answers were never forthcoming. Instead, my impulse to examine and weigh evidence was suddenly considered suspect. I was sneered at, if not openly attacked: Was I against empowering women? Against the elevation of women of color? In favor of rape?

Once the answers were finally uncovered—showing the march to have been mired in financial mismanagement, to say nothing of the antisemitism espoused by its founders—some of the same people who questioned my allegiance to my own sex, or my politics, or whatever else they suspected, confessed to being shocked that they were putting money in Louis Farrakhan’s pockets while funding an organization that badly damaged the cause they meant to support.

In the summer of 2020, Jewish groups tripped over each other to issue press releases supporting Black Lives Matter—the movement, not the idea. Every Jew of goodwill agreed that nothing could be more important than adopting this slogan wholesale, painting it on walls, adding it to websites, stamping it on children’s clothing, putting it on lawn signs and, of course, writing out large checks from personal and communal accounts, immediately. The fact that the checks hadn’t been written yesterday, or years ago, was already a scandal.

When well-meaning people inside of communal life asked whether those Jewish leaders knew anything about the organization that would be cashing these checks, the questioners were reflexively branded as racist enemies of progress. I believe that many of the people who said these things sincerely felt, in the moment, like they were on the right side of history, and that those asking questions were not. But now that the truth has come to light—with one BLM organizer holding forth about how charity transparency laws make her feel unsafe—I wonder if they will ever be granted apologies.

When Tablet defended the Satmar community’s response to draconian COVID policies, including their insistence on sending their children to school or their commonsense inquiry into why one would close playgrounds—forcing people to stay indoors, often in close quarters, during an airborne pandemic—our writers were called medival science-deniers. When people asked questions about mask mandates and vaccine passports, they were smeared as anti-vaxxers and right-wingers—even when they were obviously nothing of the sort.

In an age of uncertainty, it feels good to cast the habit of questioning aside and embrace the idea that the cautious weighing of evidence is unnecessary. Your side walks in light. The other side dwells in darkness. And indeed, there is nothing wrong with fighting racism, wherever you find it. Fighting for equal rights for people of any gender,
orientation, or sexual preference is good. Promoting public policies that bring safety and security, and clear air and clean water, and needed medicine and economic opportunity to more people is a noble aim. Protecting the environment is also good. There is nothing wrong with opposing Vladimir Putin’s brutal invasion of Ukraine.

What is wrong, as I now see it, is that none of this activism results in making anyone’s lives better. The Women’s March collapsed under the weight of the very sorts of problems raised by its few early skeptics. Time’s Up has been mired in one scandal after another. Barely a year and a half after garnering an Emmy, a $5 million book deal, and an army of “Cro-mosexual” fans online, the former governor of New York left office in disgrace. According to New York Magazine’s Sean Campbell, Black Lives Matter spent $6 million on a mansion for its leaders. The word “science” was used to shame those who wouldn’t fall in line and boost the profit margins of large pharmaceutical companies that had been, barely minutes before, justifiably furious for lying to the public and profiteering off of illnesses that they often did little to heal—and even, as in the case of America’s recent opioid epidemic, caused.

The public campaigns that utilize these virtuous slogans on social media are political tools, wielded by people who are interested in corralling the public toward a variety of unrelated ends—including their own self-enrichment. If you’re wondering whether or not your favored cause is a radical effort to help those who are genuinely in need or powerless, there’s an easy way to find out: Look at the websites of places like BlackRock, which describe “actions to advance racial equity and inclusion”; Uber, “supporting Ukraine” with a picture of a Ukrainian flag; or Goldman Sachs “empowering women.”

Ask yourself why BlackRock—a corporation making it impossible for middle-class Americans to own homes—is draping itself in the language of social justice. Ask yourself why, in fact, so many corporations now all support the same roster of causes. Ask yourself how all channels of discourse in America suddenly flow in the same direction, making local and institutional and communal distinctions that were once defining seem vanishingly trivial. Why do all universities have the same politics and curricula and trigger warnings and quotas? Why must all hospitals and schools have them too? At what point does one accept that all of these causes and crises are related, that the closeness of their relationship to each other is quite strange?

A new and decadent power center has been built, made up of the federal government and a constellation of corporations and nonprofits that operate as connected wings of the same sprawling complex. The people who control the key platforms and networks are aggregating power to themselves at the expense of everyone else. These people and the institutions they dominate are not interested in social justice, or any other kind of justice, except to the extent that they can be used as shields. They festoon their corporate headquarters with slogans about women’s rights, Black rights, and trans rights while hoovering up millions of jobs and billions of dollars that once belonged to small- and medium-sized American businesses and shipping it all to China. Through their networks of foundations and NGOs, they have emptied out America’s free press and turned most of it into a quasi-governmental political propaganda apparatus that is remarkably empty of meaningful information about how power works in America and why the quality of so many people’s lives keeps getting worse.

Different people have different words for this new monolithic reality, but everyone who isn’t either naive or craven knows that it exists. I envision it as a pyramid—one that contains the sum total of every slogan and brand name and source of prestige, acting and speaking in unison. To live in its shadow, to take one’s moral or political or social cues from the pyramid’s overseers, is not simply an act of idol worship; it’s a form of servitude.

For American Jews, our addiction to being insiders is especially dangerous at this moment, because it means siding with people who don’t like Jews very much, and in some cases actively wish us harm. But it’s more than that, for everyone: When status becomes the reward for serving those in power, who in turn reduce the rest of the population to forms of abject powerlessness, then seeking it out becomes toxic. And it’s not simply that we shouldn’t be participating in this system; it’s that we—especially those of us who care about the less fortunate, who want to see more justice in the world, who want more safety and health and prosperity for greater numbers of people—should be leading the charge out of this Egypt, helping to build the institutions and communities and companies and cultural organizations of a new and better future.

Because if there is the pyramid, there is also a space emerging outside of it—a space increasingly populated by people who want to take back their right to question, who want to experiment and quarrel and even get things wrong sometimes but to do so according to their own consciences, and who are willing to sacrifice comfort and prestige for that freedom. The people who dwell here are not part of any political faction or ideological school—or rather, they are from all of them. Indeed, the operative distinction in the near term in American politics will not be between left and right, but between insider and outsider; between those incapable of leaving their fleshpots and those who would willingly face uncertainty and risk for the chance at a better world. Between the majority that stays and is swallowed up by history, and the minority that leaves and makes the future.

Whoever you are, if you are sitting around a Seder table this weekend, your ancestors were among those who opted not to serve the people who built the pyramids. They were people who chose to pursue the spark of the divine that makes us human, even if it meant being pursued by Pharaoh’s chariots and then enduring 40 years of uncertainty wandering in the desert. If it’s no surprise that most Jews preferred to stay in Egypt, this Passover let us celebrate the ones who left—by following their example.

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The End of Progressive Intellectual Life

How the Foundation-NGO complex quashed innovative thinking and open debate, first on the American right and now on the center-left

BY MICHAEL LIND

I have never liked the term “public intellectual,” but like its 19th-century predecessor, “publicist,” it describes a social type that plays a useful role in liberal democracies in which at least some government decision-making is influenced by open debate rather than secret discussions behind closed doors. To influence voters, public intellectuals write for a general educated public (not necessarily the less-educated majority) in ordinary language, not jargon. Like the policymakers whom they also seek to influence, they are necessarily generalists. In the service of what the Brazilian-American public intellectual Roberto Unger calls a strategic “program,” public intellectuals ponder connections among different policy realms—economic, foreign, and cultural—if only to ensure that one policy does not contradict another. Public intellectuals tend to annoy their own side by probing its internal weaknesses, while trying to convert members of the other team rather than simply denounce them.

The centralized and authoritarian control of American progressivism by major foundations and the nonprofits that they fund, and the large media institutions, universities, corporations, and banks that disseminate the progressive party line, has made it impossible for there to be public intellectuals on the American center-left. This is not to say that progressives are not intelligent and/or well-educated. It is merely to say that being a progressive public intellectual is no longer an option, in an era in which progressivism is anti-intellectual.

If you are an intelligent and thoughtful young American, you cannot be a progressive public intellectual today, any more than you can be a cavalry officer or a silent movie star. That’s because, in the third decade of the 21st-century, intellectual life on the American center-left is dead. Debate has been replaced by compulsory assent and ideas have been replaced by slogans that can be recited but not questioned: Black Lives Matter, Green Transition, Trans Women Are Women, 1619, Defund the Police. The space to the left-of-center that was once filled with magazines and organizations devoted to what Diana Trilling called the “life of significant contention” is now filled by the ritualized gobbledygook of foundation-funded single-issue nonprofits like a pond choked by weeds.

Having crowded out dissent and debate, the nonprofit industrial complex—Progressivism, Inc.—taints the Democratic Party by association with its bizarre obsessions and contributes to Democratic electoral defeats, like the one that appears to be imminent this fall.

Consider center-left journals of opinion. In the 1990s, The New Yorker, The Nation, Dissent, The New Republic, The Atlantic, and Washington Monthly all represented distinctive flavors of the center-left, from the technocratic neoliberalism of Washington Monthly to the New Left countercultural ethos of The Nation and the snobbish gentry liberalism of The New Yorker. Today, they are bare Xeroxes of each other, promoting and rewriting the output of single-issue environmental, identitarian, and gender radical nonprofits, which all tend to be funded by the same set of progressive foundations and individual donors.

It is not surprising that the output of this billionaire-funded bureaucratic apparatus does not make for very interesting or original reading. Open any center-left journal at random and you will find the likes of this, from a recent interview of an academic named Wendy Brown in Dissent: “It is also important not to stay inside our tiny circles because most of our inherited traditions of political theory, including critical theory, have in them the masculinism, the whiteness, the colonialism, and, above all, the anthropocentrism that have brought us to our current predicaments with racism, with the planetary crisis, with democracy, with gender, which is still always a secondary consideration.” The only ingredient lacking from this NGO word salad is crunchy croutons, in the form of the acronyms that stud post-intellectual progressive discourse: DEI, CRT, AAPI, BIPOC, LGBTQ+. Wokespeak is Grantspeak.

Meanwhile, in one area of public policy or politics after another, Progressivism, Inc. has shut down debate on the center-left through its interlocking networks of program officers, nonprofit functionaries, and center-left editors and writers, all of whom can move with more or less ease between these roles during their careers as bureaucratic functionaries whose salaries are ultimately paid by America’s richest families and individuals. The result is a spectacularly well-funded NGO sphere whose intellectual depth and breadth are contracting all the time.

In the 1990s, you could be a progressive in good standing and argue against race-based affirmative action, in favor of race-neutral, universal social programs that would help African-Americans disproportionately but not exclusively. Around 2000, however, multiple progressive outlets at the same time announced that “the debate about affirmative action is over.” Today race-neutral economic reform, of the kind championed by the democratic socialist and Black civil rights leader Bayard Rustin acting
and the Marxist Adolph Reed, is stigmatized on the center-left as “color-blind racism,” and progressives in the name of “equity” are required to support blatant and arguably illegal racial discrimination against non-Hispanic white Americans and “white-adjacent” Asian Americans, for fear of being purged as heretics.

Immigration policy provides an even more striking example of the power of Progressivism, Inc. to crush debate among actual progressives. Up until around 2000, libertarians and employer-class Republicans wanted to weaken laws against illegal immigration and expand low-wage legal immigration, against the opposition of organized labor and many African-Americans—who for generations have tended to view immigrants as competitors. The Hesburgh Commission on immigration reform, appointed by President Jimmy Carter, and the Jordan Commission, appointed by President Bill Clinton and led by Texas Representative Barbara Jordan, the pioneering civil rights leader who was left-liberal, Black, and lesbian, both proposed cracking down on illegal immigration—by requiring a national ID card, punishing employers of illegal immigrants, and cutting back on low-skilled, low-wage legal immigrants. As late as 2006, then-Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton both voted for 200 miles of border fencing in the Southwest.

Then, virtually overnight, the progressive movement flipped and adopted the former talking points of the Chamber of Commerce cheap-labor lobby. While Democratic politicians deny that they oppose enforcing immigration laws, center-left journals and journalists keep pushing the idea of open borders, in alliance with crackpot free market fundamentalists. On April 12, 2022, David Dayen in the American Prospect wrote that “declining immigration rates since the pandemic have contributed to labor shortages in key industries and harmed Americans who rely on those services.” Dayen linked to an article in the libertarian Wall Street Journal bemoaning rising wages as a result of lower immigration. On February 20 of this year, The New Yorker published a long essay by Zoey Poll, “The Case for Open Borders,” a fawning profile of the libertarian ideologue Bryan Caplan, author of Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration, which, appropriately, takes the form of a graphic novel—that is to say, a comic book.

Back in 2015, Ezra Klein, then editor of the “progressive” outlet Vox, asked Senator Bernie Sanders about the idea of “sharply raising the level of immigration we permit, even up to a level of open borders.” Sanders replied in alarm: “Open borders? No, that’s a Koch brothers proposal.” The lobby FWD.us, funded by Facebook and other large tech corporations that prefer hiring indentured servants (H-1bs) bound to their employers instead of free American citizen-workers and legal immigrants, denounced Sanders for holding “the totally-debunked notion that immigrants coming to the U.S. are taking jobs and hurting Americans.” Vox then published an article by Dylan Matthews entitled “Bernie Sanders’s fear of immigrant labor is ugly—and wrong-headed.” “If I could add one amendment to the Constitution,” Matthews declared, “it would be the one Wall Street Journal editorial page editor Robert Bartley once proposed: ‘There shall be open borders.’” In 2018, the progressive author Angela Nagle was canceled by Progressivism, Inc. when she published an essay in American Affairs, “The Left Case Against Open Borders.” By 2020, when Matthew Yglesias, a co-founder of Vox, published One Billion Americans, the purging of dissidents and the fusion of the Progressivism, Inc. party line on immigration with the anti-union, cheap labor policies favored by the Wall Street Journal and Silicon Valley was complete.

The energy debate provides another example of the closing of the progressive mind. As recently as the early 2000s, some environmentalists favored reducing atmosphere-heating carbon emissions by expanding nuclear power, replacing coal with lower-carbon natural gas, or both. By 2010 these positions had been thoroughly anathematized by Progressivism, Inc. Not only all fossil fuels but all nuclear energy—which provides 20% of utility electric generation in the United States, roughly the same as all renewable energy sources put together—must be completely eliminated from the energy mix, according to the Green commissars. Insofar as only around 11% of global primary energy, and only around a quarter of global electricity, comes from renewable energy (chiefly hydropower, which has limited potential for expansion), the Green fatwa against nuclear energy seems self-defeating—as well as certain to shovel American money to China, which holds near-monopolies on the rare earth metals and production facilities used to make things like solar panels and lithium batteries. China also happens to be a major source of the fortunes of some of the billionaires who fund progressive media and NGOs.

At this point in history, the foundations and advocacy nonprofits of Progressivism, Inc. do not even bother to go through the charade of public debate and discussion before imposing a new party line. Half a century of debate, discussion, and activism gradually led to a majority consensus among American voters in favor of “negative liberty” for gay men and lesbian women, whose right to be free as individuals from discrimination in employment, housing, and military service does not require other Americans to undertake any actions, and leaves people perfectly free to oppose homosexuality on religious or other grounds.

In striking contrast, in a few years the ideology of gender fluidity went from being an obscure strain of thinking on the academic left to becoming the centerpiece of a radical program of social engineering from above carried out simultaneously by progressive, corporate, and academic bureaucracies. During President Obama’s second term, Americans were startled to be told by the federal government that Title IX, a civil rights law passed as part of the
Thanks to the takeover of the American center-left by Progressivism, Inc., there is literally nothing for a progressive public intellectual to do.

from publicly criticizing the positions of any other grantee. At a conference sponsored by the Ford Foundation that I attended more than a decade ago, an African-American community activist complained to me privately: “Immigration is hurting the people in the neighborhoods we work in. The employers prefer illegal immigrants to young black workers. But if we say anything about it, Ford will cut off our money.”

Shoe-horning is what I call the progressive donor practice of requiring all grantees to assert their fealty to environmentalist orthodoxy and support for race and gender quotas, even if those topics have nothing to do with the subject of the grant. It is not necessary for the donors to make this explicit; their grantees understand without being told, like the favor-seeking knights of Henry II: “Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?” In the last few years, even the most technocratic center-left policy programs—advocating slightly higher earned income tax credits or whatever—have often rewritten their mission statements to refer to “climate justice” and “diversity” and routinely sprinkle Grantspeak like “the racial reckoning” and “the climate emergency” throughout their policy briefs in the hope of pleasing program officers at big progressive foundations.

Thanks to the takeover of the American center-left by Progressivism, Inc., there is literally nothing for a progressive public intellectual to do. To be sure, there are plenty of other kinds of mental work that you can perform as a member of the rising generation of young progressives even in the absence of a functioning public intellectual sphere. You can keep your head down and doubts to yourself, as you work on the technocratic policy that appeals to you the most: raising the minimum wage or free school lunches, perhaps. Or you can write endless variants of the same screed denouncing Republicans and conservatives as rabid white nationalists threatening to create a fascist dictatorship right here in America. Or you can join mobs on Twitter and social media to take part in Two-Minute Hate campaigns against individuals or groups singled out for denunciation that day by Progressivism, Inc. Or you can try to obtain fame and bestseller-status and wealth and tenure by getting the attention of the MacArthur Prize committee and editors at The Atlantic by auditioning for the role of Designated Spokesperson for this or that “protected class” or minority identity group (non-binary Middle East or North African (MENA), for example, not low-income Scots-Irish Appalachian heterosexual Pentecostal).

You can even be a professor. High-profile American progressive academics like Paul Krugman and Jill Lepore and Adam Tooze who moonlight as public affairs commentators are not public intellectuals—they have the pre-approved left-liberal opinions on all topics that are shared by nine-tenths of the U.S. academic bureaucracy, from the richest Ivy League superstars to the lowliest adjunct at a commuter college. Back in the early 1990s, when as a young neo-conservative Democrat I worked for The National Interest, our publisher Irving Kristol exploded in comic exasperation one day: “People are calling professors intellectuals! Professors aren’t intellectuals. Intellectuals argue with each other in cafes and write for little magazines. Professors are boring people who take out their dusty 20-year-old notes and give the same lecture over and over again.”
Unlike academics who recite the approved current center-left positions on all issues, genuine intellectuals, even if they happen to be employed by universities, are unpredictable and aggravating. They criticize their own allies and appreciate what other schools of thought get right. They do not indulge in contrarianism for its own sake but tend to be controversial, because they put loyalty to what they consider to be truth above party or faction. Needless to say, such people tend to perform quite poorly when it comes to the boot-licking, rote repetition of political slogans, acronym-juggling, groupthink, and “donor servicing” that constitute the forms of intellectual activity favored by big foundations and NGOs, whether of the right or of the left.

Young progressives who remain invested in the life of the mind rather than the life of the party may take some solace from the fact that we have lived through this kind of foundation-driven extinction-level event in our nation’s intellectual life before. In “Why Intellectual Conservatism Died,” published in Dissent back in 1995, I wrote that “instead of boldly attacking falsehoods wherever they are found, conservative editors tend to print only what they believe will confirm the prejudices of the program officers. The addiction to foundation dollars has reinforced the disastrous ‘no enemies to the right’ policy. The last thing the foundations want is for one set of grantees to criticize the policy views or intellectual standards of other grantees.”

Sound familiar? In hindsight, the end of the Cold War under Ronald Reagan and George Herbert Walker Bush witnessed a golden age of discussion and controversy on the American right, as neoconservatives debated paleoconservatives and religious right thinkers, and national security hawks debated isolationists and foreign-policy realists. Around 1992 that window suddenly closed, as right-wing foundations like Bradley and Olin made it clear that the only nonprofit organizations and journals that would receive funding would be those that espoused a new version of “fusionism”—uniting neoconservative fantasies of American world domination in foreign policy, libertarian fantasies about privatizing Social Security, and religious-right wishful thinking about a Christian or Judeo-Christian revival.

Thanks to blacklisting and censorship, foundation-imposed groupthink triumphed on the right, consolidating Conservatism, Inc. and driving away those of us who sought to put the life of the mind above the life of the party. A decade later, President George W. Bush attempted to implement fusionist conservatism with a rigor that Reagan never attempted. In foreign policy, the Bush administration used 9/11 as an excuse to invade Iraq and attempted to realize the conservative fantasy of an American global empire, plunging the Middle East into chaos and bringing Iraq War critics Barack Obama and Donald Trump to power. In domestic policy, Bush tried to partly privatize Social Security, creating a voter backlash. The 2004 Bush-Rove campaign against gay marriage, calculated to bribe working-class Evangelicals into voting for the party of tax cuts for the rich, backfired and led to majority acceptance of gay men and lesbians and the defection of many younger Protestant Evangelicals.

On today’s center-left, as on the bygone center-right, the groupthink imposed by behind-the-scenes donors and their favored nonprofits and media allies is resulting in electoral disaster—this time, for Democrats. The progressive foundations, billionaires, and woke corporations backed a California initiative to legalize anti-white and anti-Asian discrimination; it lost, in part because so many Black and Hispanic Americans support the ideal of a color-blind American society. Democrats underperformed dramatically in 2020, even after COVID killed the economy and terrified most Americans, because the slogans of foundation-backed nonprofits—like Defund the Police and comparisons of the U.S. border patrol to the Gestapo—alienated many Democratic voters as well as swing voters. Black Democrats have favored candidates like Joe Biden and New York City Mayor Eric Adams who oppose anti-police radicalism. And a major reason for the political shift of Hispanic voters in Texas border counties is their opposition to the Democratic Party’s toleration of mass illegal immigration, summed up in the fatuous slogan “No human being is illegal.”

Conservatism, Inc., including flagship journals like the National Review and flagship think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, remains a museum of mummies. Today, Progressivism, Inc. is equally brain-dead. What survives of intellectual politics in the United States today consists of a growing number of exiles from establishment wokeness on Substack and a growing number of dissident leftists, conservatives, and populists, some of whom have come together in new publications like American Affairs, Compact, and The Bellows, and in quirkier couture shops like Tablet.

Having watched from up close over the last four decades as cliques of foundation program officers, individual billionaires, and their nonprofit retainers lobotomized first the American right and then the American left, I hope that I may live to see the American center-left free itself from top-down orthodoxy and welcome dissension, discussion, and debate once again. But I doubt I will live that long.

This article was originally published on April 12, 2022.
On March 30, Rabbi Brant Rosen of Tzedek Chicago, a synagogue on the heimish North Side of the city, made the unusual announcement that his congregation had “just voted to adopt anti-Zionism as a core value.” The proclamation arrived within days of 11 murders in a wave of terrorist attacks across Israel.

On April 7, three more Israelis were killed on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv. It’s not often that an established synagogue declares its antipathy against the Jewish state as a core part of its identity—but then again, this wasn’t out of step for Rabbi Rosen, who’d been working himself up to this for a decade.

I’ve known Rabbi Rosen since before “I was a man.” I grew up in Skokie, Illinois, and attended the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in neighboring Evanston, where Rosen held the rabbinate. Back then, he was, I suppose, a kind of liberal Zionist. I didn’t have much of an impression of him, other than that he seemed kind and Jewish. In 2002, when I became a bar mitzvah, Rabbi Rosen led the service. In his notes on my d’var, he seems reasonably sympathetic to Israel.

By the time Rosen left JRC in 2014, my father and I had heard that he’d become a radical pro-Palestinian activist, and in our family, “Rabbi Brant” became a catchall for a certain kind of Jew we simply could not understand.

—Clayton Fox
Israel’s Minister of the Hyphen

Matan Kahana’s lonely battle to build a religious-Zionist-labor-Orthodox-democratic Jewish state

BY MATTI FRIEDMAN

It’s impossible to understand Matan Kahana, the surprise star of the current Israeli government, or to grasp the spirit of the coalition that has governed here for the past year, without the idea of the hyphen. The hyphen lies at the heart of the worldview of Kahana, a blunt ex-military officer who has stirred up more controversy, and has been called more awful names, than any other figure in the embattled government where he serves in what is usually a political backwater, the Ministry of Religious Services. The hyphen is at the heart of the crisis currently threatening to split the government, and will play a role in whatever political constellation ends up taking shape.

When Kahana, who is 49, was growing up in the 1980s, “be the hyphen” was an educational message drilled into religious-Zionist kids. The hyphen referred to what connected terms like “religious-Zionist,” for example, or “Jewish-democratic,” or “Israeli-Jewish,” or the community’s triangle of values: Torah of Israel-Land of Israel-People of Israel. These are all ideas with inherent tensions, sometimes just barely held together by bars of horizontal ink. Kahana’s generation was going to embody the connection.

They were going to excel at Talmud and at physics. They were going to be outdoorsy, salt-of-the-earth Israelis like the atheist kibbutzniks, and they were going to pray three times a day. They’d be right wing in their outlook but would serve in the army with the most left-wing Israelis, dying with them and for them if necessary. They’d take part in democratic politics, and they’d build settlements in the Land of Israel, demography be damned. The country’s contradictions would yield to their willpower and grit. That’s what they meant by “being the hyphen.”

As Kahana, speaking of his generation, put it in a recent speech to an audience of religious Zionists, “We showed that it’s possible to do two things at once—to learn Torah and serve in the army. To excel and lead in the world of action, and to fear God. To disagree, but to fight to stay brothers.” The speech was delivered with the characteristic force of someone used to leading soldiers, and with a sense that all of this is coming apart. “Our rabbis, the great men of our generation,” he said, addressing the rabbinic leadership present in the auditorium, “you told us that our job was to be the hyphen—to connect the people of Israel to a life of Torah and labor.”

But now that he and his friends had done just that, rising through the ranks of the army and the civil service and taking their place in the center of Israeli society, they were being vilified by some of the same rabbis and political leaders for forming a government with the Israeli center and left. “The extremism afflicting religious Zionism,” he said, “is splitting the Jewish people.” Last week, pressure from the hard right succeeded in peeling off a member of his own party, Idit Silman, who shocked her colleagues by abandoning the unity coalition and defected to the rightist opposition led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Another member had already jumped ship months before. Silman’s move has left the Knesset deadlocked and the coalition with just 60 votes, not enough to pass legislation.

It’s difficult to think of someone who embodies the hyphen more than Matan Kahana. The oldest of five siblings in a family with roots in Germany, the son of an electrical engineer who was badly wounded in battle in 1967 but fought in two subsequent wars as an officer in the reserves, Kahana attended high school at Netiv Meir, a competitive yeshiva in Jerusalem that educated several generations of the religious-Zionist elite. The school’s fortunes faded in the late 1990s when the principal, Zeev Kopolovitch, went to jail for sexually abusing pupils.

The crimes on the charge sheet happened after Kahana graduated, and he wasn’t among the victims. But the affair was an earthquake for the sector known to Israelis as the “knitted kippahs,” undermining the faith of many in their leadership and institutions. It contributed to the current disarray among religious Zionists, who today are hardly a coherent group at all, but a loose affiliation of Israelis who vote for different political parties and don’t listen to the same rabbis, or listen to rabbis at all. “This is the privatization generation in the religious Zionist world,” the journalist Yair Ettinger, one of the best observers of religion in Israel, wrote in a book called Prumim, or “frayed,” published in Hebrew in 2019 and due out in English later this year. (The title is a play on “knitted,” as in “knitted kippahs.”)

“It is stronger, more diverse, more extreme, more moderate, more divided, more sectarian, and more nonsectarian all at once,” he wrote. “It is no longer united around a common focal point, but neither is it split into two coherent camps with their own centralized leaderships. It spans the vast space between conservatism and modernity.” That’s Kahana’s world.

Setting off for the army in the summer of 1990, Kahana was accepted by the commando unit Sayeret Matkal, one of the military’s toughest and most selective outfits, the same one that produced Prime Ministers Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, among many other famous Israelis. The unit had long been dominated by secular kibbutzniks, the country’s old elite, but when Kahana arrived
things were already changing. Of 12 soldiers who managed to make it through training, four were observant, a number the unit hadn’t seen before and didn’t really know how to swallow. Their officer initially thought his orders superseded religious commandments, like prayer.

I met Kahana at the Ministry of Religious Services, which looks like the office of a small insurance company, complete with couches of fake black leather that have known better days and the backsides of many clerks and rabbis. I asked him what he thought happened to the kibbutzniks, or their secularist descendants, who’d once dominated the country’s institutions and politics. Why, in so many influential positions, are you now far more likely to find someone shaped by religious Zionism?

“In the end, there has to be a spirit behind the action,” he answered. “Sometimes, when something is difficult, you need to be able to come up with an explanation for why you should do it anyway, even though it may be uncomfortable and against your instincts. We have those explanations. We believe in God and the State of Israel, the first flowering of our redemption, and we embody what I believe to be the right connection between a life of Torah and a life of work. That’s why our young people are still full of energy.”

Whatever the reason, his army squad illustrated the trend. One of the four other kippah-wearing soldiers with him from basic training was Emmanuel Moreno, later a legendary war hero who died as a lieutenant-colonel leading a raid inside Lebanon in 2006. Another was Naftali Bennett, currently the prime minister.

Serving in Sayeret Matkal is a stamp of accomplishment and can be a ticket into the top of Israeli society, but when he reached the end of his service, Kahana didn’t join Bennett and his other comrades back in civilian life. Instead he tried out for flight school, the only military branch more illustrious than the one where he’d just served. He got in, and spent the next 25 years flying F-16s, commanding a squadron and finally retiring a colonel in 2018. After that, he joined Bennett in his new political party Yamina (“Rightward”), just as Netanyahu was beginning to lose his grip and leading Israel into a spiral of inconclusive elections. He was an anonymous member of the party at the time of the big bang of Israeli politics last summer, when Bennett led “Rightward” leftward, abandoning Netanyahu and forming a coalition that included not just the left-wing parties Meretz and Labor but also a party of conservative Muslims. Although Rightward had only six Knesset seats, Bennett became prime minister in a rotation deal with the centrist Yair Lapid, and suddenly Kahana was at the center of power.

No one sane dreams of being the minister of religious services, which has always mostly entailed channeling funding and patronage to an Ottoman religious bureaucracy in charge of things like religious courts and ritual baths. But Kahana claims this was the only job he wanted. He felt the Jewish-democratic state splintering and identified this office as the fulcrum. “I wanted this ministry,” he told me, “because I think someone like me can be the connecting hyphen.”

Kahana came to the attention of many Israelis for the first time last June, after the formation of the new government, amid a furious day in the Knesset during which the Likud and the ultra-Orthodox parties, shocked to find themselves removed from power after 12 years, shouted down the coalition’s speakers and disrupted attempts by the new government to present its platform. Lawmakers representing the ultra-Orthodox, a 10% minority that has long controlled the religious bureaucracy, were ripping into the new coalition as anti-religious—even though it was headed by Bennett, the country’s first observant prime minister. The ultra-Orthodox MKs had been shouting at Bennett and Kahana to “take off their kippahs.”

At the podium, a furious Kahana directed a startling attack at one of the most vociferous of those lawmakers, Moshe Gafni. It wasn’t one of the usual critiques you hear coming from the left in the Knesset, but a deeply religious one. “I ask you, MK Gafni—when did you ever lie in the rain in an ambush, in terrible cold, and recite the shemonah esreh prayer while lying down? Has that ever happened to you?” Kahana roared. (The shemonah esreh must be recited standing up, and doing so lying down—in this case, to avoid enemy detection—is highly unusual.) Of course the ultra-Orthodox politician, like most of his voters, had never been anywhere near military service. “And when did you and Deri pray to God before going into battle? When did that happen?” he continued, mentioning another ultra-Orthodox politician. “Who on earth are you to teach us about the sanctification of God’s name?” By the end of the exchange Gafni seemed deflated, and the new minister had gained admirers among Israelis watching him on TV.

The religious-secular fight has been going on since the creation of the state and is familiar to everyone here, but Kahana was saying something different. He wasn’t speaking against religion—he was saying that he was religion, that his religious Zionism was as authentic as the non-Zionist stringency of the ultra-Orthodox, if not more so. He wasn’t throwing out the rabbinic bureaucracy. He was saying the wrong rabbis were in charge.

It wasn’t long before Kahana’s ambitious legislative agenda became clear: a revolution that would end the ultra-Orthodox monopoly on the country’s religious officialdom. The rabbinate’s notoriously corrupt hold on kashruth supervision would be shattered and privatized. This was successfully done. Record numbers of women have already been appointed heads of local religious councils. His next goal, now complicated by the coalition crisis, is to move Jewish conversion from the auspices of the chief rabbinate, which is controlled by the ultra-Orthodox, to city rabbis, who are at least potentially more flexible, and more Zionist, and thus more sympathetic to the idea that conversion should be made more inviting in the interest of national cohesion. That move is designed to make it easier for Israelis who aren’t Jewish according to Jewish law to opt into Judaism. There are hundreds of thousands such citizens, mainly immigrants from the Soviet Union, some of them Kahana’s former comrades-in-arms.

All of this was fought out in the
These guys are standing up to the rabbis as no one has in the history of the state.”

Orthodox law and who need an easier path to conversion, he's not imagining an abstraction—he's thinking about specific people like a woman from the air force squadron he commanded, Daria Leonteev, a bomb-loader of Soviet extraction who's as good an Israeli as they come, but whose kids won't be Jewish according to Jewish law. This upsets him personally, and he often mentions her in interviews.

For years, many on the Israeli left warned that the religious Zionists of the settlement movement were taking over the army, and that they took orders from rabbis, not from their commanders. One essay from 2014, by the sociologist Yagil Levy, was titled “The Theocratization of the Israeli Military.” A moment of truth arrived last spring, when the titanic political struggle that had dragged Israel through four elections came to a head, and the balance of power turned out to lie with Bennett and Kahana, the kind of people who were supposedly theocratizing the army. Not only did they not take power from Israeli liberals, but they actually put liberals back in power for the first time in years. And not only do they not blindly obey rabbis, as the journalist Yair Ettinger told me: “These guys are standing up to the rabbis as no one has in the history of the state. That's wild, and it's the heart of the story.” The process turned out to be a lot more complicated than the critics had thought, if not precisely the opposite.

Whatever the course of Israeli politics in the next few years, and whatever the personal fortunes of Matan Kahana and his comrades, old designations like “settlers,” “right wing,” and “knitted kippahs” aren’t going to be particularly helpful in understanding what’s going on, because those generalizations no longer predict political behavior. The people who believe that the unity of Israel, its people, and institutions is a religious value as important as any other will be key to events, whether they’re in power or out. As the country is subjected to forces of political disintegration, the people of the hyphen will try to hold things together.

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Was Slavery in Egypt So Bad?

It's tempting to draw parallels to American slavery, but the Bible paints a very different picture

BY CURT LEVIANT

C

an you imagine a European rabbinic court telling the Jews in June 1945, one month after the Germans were defeated and with the Holocaust just barely ended, something like, “Do not hate the Germans, for you were sojourners in their land for many hundreds of years?”

It's unthinkable, right? Now, backtrack to biblical times: Read the story of the exodus, and you’ll see that the Israelites had barely left Egypt when the Torah instructs, in Deuteronomy 23:8, “You shall not abhor an Egyptian for you were a sojourner in his land.”

Notice, the word “slave” or “slavery” is starkly absent here; accented only is the Israelites’ residing in the land of the Egyptians.

One would think that, considering their long bondage, the Israelites would hold Egypt and the Egyptians in contempt and never set foot in their land again, which is the attitude some Jews today still have toward Germany, including many who had never experienced the Holocaust. Even more astonishing is the Torah’s lax attitude regarding socializing with the Egyptians: Given their experience, it would have been natural to tell the former slaves not to associate with the nation, and the people, that had kept the Israelites in servitude for several centuries. But in the very next verse, Deuteronomy states that “children born unto them [the Egyptians] may be admitted into the congregation of the Lord in three generations,” a rather liberal attitude toward the enslavers. Contrast this to how more stringent is the Torah to the Ammonites and Moabites (Deuteronomy 23:4-5), who may not “be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, none of their descendants, even unto the tenth generation, for they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt…”

An odd stance, indeed. For the one time the Ammonites did not welcome the Israelites leaving Egypt, their descendants cannot come into the Israelite congregation. Yet the Egyptians, who had enslaved the Israelites for 430 years, are granted special exemption. Why?

In Exploring Exodus, the noted Bible scholar Nahum Sarna posits that the Israelite bondage was more like a day slavery, where men left their homes for work during the day and returned in the evening. “There is no evidence,” he wrote, “that the Israelite women were enslaved or that slavery involved the dissolution of the family unit.” Sarna then cites the famous verse in Exodus 3:22, where the women “borrowed” jewelry from their neighbors and the “lodger in her house” as proof that the “Hebrew slaves” and the Egyptians actually lived side by side. The fact that an Israelite woman actually had an Egyptian woman residing in her home, perhaps even paying rent, gives another surprising twist to the economic side of avdut, or servitude.

This proximity of Israelites and Egyptians is further accented in Exodus 11:2, with God saying: “Tell the people that each man shall borrow from his neighbors, and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold.” Whereas earlier in the story only women were mentioned, here men are also introduced. This borrowing is repeated for the third time in Exodus 12:35-36: “The Israelites had done Moses’ bidding and borrowed from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, and clothing. And the Lord had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus, they stripped [in Hebrew: va-tenatzlu] the Egyptians.” (Other translations of va-tenatzlu include “stripped bare,” “exploited,” and “took advantage of!”)

Added to the Israelites’ rather unique bondage are their possessions: property and plenty of sheep and cattle. When Moses demands of Pharaoh that the Israelites leave, he states, “we will all go, young and old … sons and daughters, our flocks and herds…” In other words, the people will depart Egypt with all their wealth—for at that time, in that part of the world, sheep and cattle were considered wealth.

The Israelites’ wealth must have been impressive, for a cunning Pharaoh, suspecting that they might depart altogether and not just go out into the wilderness to worship, tells Moses that the people can go, even the children, “Only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind.” To maintain flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, grazing land is needed and caretakers for the animals. The women might have been shepherdesses, as was Rachel; or, quite likely, with the burden of family, the men, along...
with youngsters, also took care of their flocks and herds upon returning home from work.

And so, despite the burdens of bondage, the Israelites did not lack food; they had meat and dairy products from cows, sheep and goats. Later, in Numbers 11:5, we get a small catalog of the nonmeat foods that rounded out the Israelites’ diet. When they complain about the vitamin-pill like manna, we hear them longing for the real foods they used to have: “... the fish we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leek, the onions and the garlic.” Quite a well-balanced diet for slaves, unlike the 18th- and 19th-century Black slaves in the United States, who were poorly fed.

Nowhere does the Torah state that the Israelites were the property of the Egyptians; nor do we read of any Israelite slave being sold. In the United States, the Black slaves were the property of the owners and could be sold, bought, and traded. Unlike the Israelite slaves with their flocks and herds, the slaves in America were not allowed to own property.

What, then, do we know about the precise nature of the Israelites’ bondage? “So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor,” Exodus 1:11 tells us, and verse 13 adds that “The Egyptians imposed tasks upon the Israelites ruthlessly; they embittered their lives with harsh labor at mortar and brick and in all sorts of work in the fields, with all the tasks that they ruthlessly imposed upon them.” The only definitive citations of cruelty we’re given are the Egyptian taskmasters beating the Israelite foremen, and that an Egyptian beating a Hebrew prompts Moses to kill the Egyptian and rise to become the Israelite leader. The word “slave” is not mentioned in this specific verse; Exodus 2:23 does state that the Hebrews were “groaning under the bondage and cried out,” but there are no specific depictions of this mistreatment. And in Exodus 3:7-9, when God calls Moses and sends him to Pharaoh, He mentions “the plight of My people, the suffering, the taskmasters, the cry of the Israelites, the oppression...” But here, too, no instances of oppression are offered.

Yet, with all the hard labor, once the Israelites are liberated from bondage and have departed Egypt and have grown thirsty in Rephidim, they “grumbled against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’” And further, after hearing the negative report of the scouts who have returned from touring the Land of Canaan, the land promised to the People of Israel, the Israelites clamor to return to Egypt (Numbers 14:1-4), with the telling words, “If only we had died in Egypt... It would be better for us to go back to Egypt... Let us appoint a chief and return to Egypt.” And when Korah and his followers complain to Moses (Numbers, Chapter 16), Dathan and Abiram declare: “Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die here in the wilderness, that you should also lord it over us?” In their complaint, the Hebrews ironically use for Egypt the very phrase, “land flowing with milk and honey,” that is synonymous with the promised Land of Israel.

Presumably, after themselves enduring bondage, the enslavement of others, and especially of fellow Hebrews, should have been anathema to the People of Israel. Nevertheless, like other nations in the Middle East, they did own slaves. In fact, many Torah laws deal with this. For instance, in Deuteronomy 15:12-17, if a man is eligible for release after six years of bondage and wants to stay with his master, his ear is pierced with an awl—to show everyone that he is a slave and is indentured to his master in perpetuity. If during his servitude he changes his mind and leaves, the branding no doubt marks him as an escaped slave. Over the centuries, Jews continued to own slaves, even up to and during the Talmudic period, from about 200 CE to 500 CE. Ironically, on the Passover Festival of Freedom, when Jews celebrate their liberation from slavery, we read about the famed Rabban Gamaliel ordering his slave, Tebi, to “Go roast the Passover-offering for us on the grill.”

None of these observations is meant to lessen the significance of Passover or the story of the exodus. But if we somewhat loosen our attitude to the bonds of bondage, a more nuanced understanding of our history might emerge, one that gives us a more intricate understanding of our forefathers’ anxieties, hopes and motivations, and, perhaps, ours as well.

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Eating matzo is an exceedingly fragile endeavor.

The matzo that my family eats during Passover comes in two varieties: machine-made and handmade. Machine-made matzo—you can find boxes of it in the kosher aisle of many supermarkets, even when it is not Passover—is mass produced. As such, it raises some halachic questions, which leads some of the more legislatively rigorous to exclusively eat handmade matzo. Machine-made matzo is square, dependable, and reliable. Handmade matzo has a more textured personality, more misshapen, uneven, interesting. Like a snowflake, each handmade matzo is a rough approximation of a circle, unique, ugly, beautiful, and special in its own way, with lumps, nooks, and crannies. It is also shockingly vulnerable, fragile, breakable.

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

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

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

I believe that there is another angle to the fragility of matzo. If matzo is faith, and matzo is fragile, then it is no far jump to say that our faiths too are fragile. Perhaps matzo suggests to us that faith can be, and has always been, a vulnerable endeavor. We speak of the doctrines of faith, of the 13 ikkarim, as having a sort of durability that disallows fragility, but perhaps these grand faiths are as vulnerable as we are on the long road of life, and they too can break in the many matzo boxes in the back of Mother Courage’s wagon.

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

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

It started with Camus’ notebooks, which felt right in the early days of the plague. That was followed by Kafka’s notebooks and then later Sontag’s notebooks, with stops on the way for the aphorisms of Rouchefold, and the deeply redemptive despair of Cioran and Weil. The poetic fragments of Roethke and Sappho, Pascal’s Pensees, and the books of Annie Dillard and Mary Ruefle, along with an assortment of other masters of the disjointed consciousness. How else could I rectify the thousand broken moments of awareness of each day, the mental servitude of my neck, bowed to my phone?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Viktor Frankl says:

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

Or Merton, in his Seeds of Contemplation:

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

Best yet, Rav Kook’s sparse formulation:

Faith in its purity, through the possibility of heresy.

The traditional formula for the statement of belief begins “I believe with a full faith,” ani ma’amin b’emunah shleimah. These words echo throughout the Jewish temple of time, words that have died on lips and lived past their sayers. In saying this statement, the sayer aligns themself with generations of believers who have lived in the shade of these great hopes. But what would it mean to believe with a faith that is less than full, an unfull faith?

There’s a lot of talk these days about the so-called people of no faith, the none, those who are perceived to have absconded from religious faith communities, either by conscious effort or the slow passing of time. In the popular imagination, the none are a stand-in for a broader set of questions about religion, community, and tradition in the postmodern era, for the challenges of meaning-seeking in contemporary life, and we often forget to consider the remnant faiths left in the wake of religious identity, the stained glass from the dregs after all the wine is gone, elsewhere, moved on. We forget that the presence of absence need not bespeak the absence of presence, but rather the presence of something other, something changed, transmuted and repurposed, more often than not.

Some beliefs do shatter, break, and yet so many others remain, lurking in a fragmented form in the corner of the heart. But people bear the echoes, scars, and lines of what was. I make no judgment about these marks, and I stand with all those whose footprints are the only road, but I reflect on these traces, the fragments of faith, that which remains when one's belief in the Belief is broken, when one's faith in Faith is no longer feasible.

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

ארטס & לטרטס

Books, culture, and more at tabletmag.com/sections/
arts-letters
An enigmatic dream:

The Skolya Rebbe, in the middle of the 20th century, once dreamed that he stood on the edge of a great cliff, in a valley, with the Baal Shem Tov, the Besht. The Besht turned to him and asked: “Do you want to know how to be a true eved hashem, a servant of God?” “Of course,” the rebebe responded. The Besht jumped from the edge, landing and shattering in a million little pieces. The Skolya Rebbe ran down to collect all the fragments of the Besht, and when he arrived at the bottom, he was astounded to see that each fragment was a komah shleimah, a full-bodied miniature of the Besht.

A comment:

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

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

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

ON SEEING SALANTER

From The Seforim Blog

What did the founder of the Musar Movement Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883) look like? One admirer described him as a “stately figure” with “an unusually wide forehead” and “a handsome beard.” As wanting in detail as this description may be, it is a more reliable picture than the photographs that many authoritative sources claim to be of Salanter, according to the scholar Shnayer Leiman (“The Recently Published Photographs of Ray Yisrael Salanter: Real or Imaginary?”, Apr. 5, 2022). After evaluating them, Leiman deems each photograph to be a photo of someone else. For the number of such false photographs now in circulation, it is clear that something in us wants to see Salanter. In Salanter’s own words: “Man is a drop of intellect drowning in a sea of instincts.”
I remember the day they came to tell my mom that Dad was dead. I was 7. Someone who was in Dad’s unit came alone, wearing dirty fatigues with bulging pockets. I was sure he was hiding lots of presents in them. Soldiers always have lots of surprises in their pockets. He didn’t prepare my mom at all, didn’t even ask to send me out of the room. He just sat down on the couch sheepishly and started to talk. He didn’t look at my mom while he talked and his voice was barely audible. He looked like a kid apologizing for doing something wrong. “We were in the jeep together, and Michael asked if we could pull over because he had to urinate.” He actually whispered the word “urinate.” “I pulled over and Michael walked off the road. He took four steps, I counted. One, two, three, boom. He stepped on a mine.” He stood up from the couch and looked at Mom’s face for a minute. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled, and the door closed quietly behind him. He didn’t hug Mom, didn’t say, “It’ll be all right,” he didn’t even look at her, nothing. I was very disappointed that he didn’t give me a present. The ones in his pockets were probably for another kid. Mom was looking at the mud stains on the living room rug. “He brought all that dirt into the house,” she said angrily. “Is it really so hard to wipe your feet outside?”

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

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

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

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

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

We started the evening by reading the Haggadah. Grandpa only read the nice-sounding words out loud. “Rabban Gamliel ... cleft the sea ... the brick and the mortar.” Yair and I listened quietly because Mom promised us that if we acted nice to Grandpa, she’d let us go to summer camp. We sang the songs and found the hidden matzo and Yair asked the Four Questions. After that, Yair asked Grandpa Gershon why we can’t see Dad when he comes to drink from Elijah’s cup. Grandpa looked surprised and his eyes glistened. “You’re a very funny grandchild, Yair. You say sad things, but you never cry, just like your mother. Oh well, my tears instead of yours.” He put his fingers into his mouth, placed a saliva-soaked finger under each of Yair’s eyes and drew two wet lines down his cheekbones. Scared, Yair jumped up and shouted, “Grandpa’s crazy!” and ran out of the apartment.

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

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

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

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

Translated by Miriam Shlesinger. This article was originally published on April 14, 2022.
Matzo Caramel Buttercrunch

BY MARCY GOLDMAN

FOR THE MATZO CARAMEL BUTTERCRUNCH

4-6 unsalted matzo boards or sheets
1 cup unsalted butter or unsalted Passover margarine
1 cup light brown sugar, packed firmly
¾ cup chocolate chips or semi-sweet chocolate, coarsely chopped

PREPARATION

Step 1
Preheat oven to 350. Line doubled up, rimmed cookie sheets completely with foil. Cover bottom of pan with baking parchment, on top of foil. This is very important as mixture becomes sticky during baking. Line bottom of pan evenly with matzo boards, cutting extra pieces of matzo, as required, to fit any spaces on the cookie sheet as evenly as possible.

Step 2
Combine margarine or butter and brown sugar in a 3 quart, heavy-bottomed, saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until mixture comes to a boil. Continue cooking 3 more minutes, stirring constantly. Remove from heat and spoon or pour over matzo.

Step 3
Bake 15 minutes, checking every few minutes to make sure mixture is not burning. If it seems to be browning too quickly, remove from oven, lower heat to 325, and replace.

Step 4
Remove from oven and sprinkle matzo boards immediately with chopped chocolate or chips. Let stand 5 minutes then spread melted chocolate over matzo. While still warm cut into squares or odd shapes. Chill in refrigerator until set. This makes a good gift. You can also serve it in confectioners’ paper cups as a candy.

TO MAKE THE VARIATIONS

White Chocolate: use white chocolate only (there is kosher/Passover white chocolate) and swirl it on and/or with dark chocolate as well.

Pecan or Toasted Almond: Add chopped pecans or almonds to the brown sugar butter base and spread it on and/or add the pecans on top of the melting chocolate.

Raspberry White Chocolate: Use white or dark chocolate; as it is melted on matzo boards, swirl on a few tablespoons of raspberry jam. Marbleize the jam into the chocolate. Freeze well before serving.

You can also use white chocolate, coarsely chopped (or both white and dark) and
chopped, toasted almonds (sprinkle on top as chocolate sets).

**White sugar:** If you prefer white sugar, or if you can’t find kosher brown sugar (i.e., for Passover) follow these directions: Place 2 cups of white sugar in a heavy bottomed saucepan with 2 tablespoons of water. Heat on low to medium until sugar dissolves. Continue cooking until mixture turns medium amber. Pour over matzo, which is laid out on baking sheets. Spread and sprinkle on chocolate chips. No baking for this version.