

THE TAB

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ARTS & LETTERS

A Cruel Summer at Cornell

How a program designed to teach teenagers about free-thinking and communal self-determination turned into an ideological 'Lord of the Flies'

BY ANI WILCENSKI

Why do you look dirty?" asked my mom when I got in her car. In the rearview mirror, 20 other teenagers stood on the front stairs, solemnly waving goodbye. Most of them were wearing maroon sweatshirts with a white "T" on the pocket. Some of them were crying. One of them, my friend Mark, cried so hard he was doubled over, hunched in the lawn away from the group while a stern woman watched him from a distance.

I was crying too, slumped against the car window in tears for a full half hour as we drove away from Cornell. Amid my sobs, my mom reminded me that they'd barely heard from us all summer, and I never once wrote.

Eventually, I gathered myself enough to open an envelope stuffed with handwritten notes.

"I think you have a nice spirit. I worry, in your grouchiness, you won't believe me. Oh well," read one.

"You are an individual of exceptional talent and questionable character," read another.

I started crying again, though it might have been from relief.

Eight years after this car ride, in a recent article titled "A Black Professor Trapped in Anti-Racist Hell," an instructor named Vincent Lloyd detailed his summer teaching a seminar for high schoolers on "Anti-Oppressive Studies." As he tells it, the first day was sunny and full of hope. The students were curious, playful, and excited, having made it through the gauntlet of a 3% acceptance rate into the Telluride Association Summer Seminar to receive an all-expenses-paid scholarship to spend six weeks taking a college-level seminar at Cornell.

By the fourth week, the students had stopped smiling. They learned to stay silent in discussions and cede their speaking time to the least privileged classmates. They voted two other classmates out of the program. And they put the professor himself on trial for a long list of offenses, from using harmful body language to misgendering Britney Griner. A month into the program, they'd learned that participation was conditional, intellectual freedom was overrated, and the world was so broken it could never change.

In 2015, as a combat boot-wearing, poetry-writing high schooler, I was one of those students. Back then, it

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was called the Telluride Association Summer Program (TASP). TASPers would live in an intense, self-governed community devoted to democracy and discussion. The promotional materials sung of values like intellectual vitality, interpersonal awareness, and communal responsibility. Most TASPers ended up at prestigious universities, especially Ivy League schools, before fanning out into politics, academia, the sciences, and the arts. Telluride alumni included neoconservative theorist Francis Fukuyama, Democratic politician Stacey Abrams, and Nobel laureate physicist Richard Feynman.

Back then, I didn't know many people who went to Ivy League colleges. My parents cared a lot about education, but they both came from immigrant families in which fancy schools were not an aspirational priority. My father, a fierce believer in public education, enrolled my brother and me in our upstate New York public school, which had 800 kids per grade, semi-frequent heroin scandals, and hypersuccessful sports teams to which the district devoted most of its energy. I wanted to become a writer, so I joined the school newspaper, which was helmed by a 10th-grade English teacher known for refusing to assign reading and spending three-quarters of every editorial meeting displaying photos of her husband's antique sailboat. I resigned after two meetings and proceeded to run into her each week when, as president of the Environmental Club, I'd take out the cafeteria recycling and find her smoking behind the dumpsters.

I considered myself an intellectual trapped in a provincial prison, from which only an elite educational institution could liberate me. I fantasized about attending either Columbia or Yale, where I would join a progressive political group, take gender studies classes, and do all the other liberal academic things my school simply didn't offer. Reading through TASP's website, I was seduced by its promises—a thoughtful community, where, for once, I'd be surrounded by free-thinking academics and learning from leaders whom I deeply admired.

Two months after I applied, I got an email that I was a semifinalist and

needed to report for an interview with a program alumnus. My mom dropped me off at the local Panera, where the interviewer was already sitting in a booth reading a novel when I arrived. He was an older professor who still conducted interviews because he'd had such a transformative experience at TASP. He explained that he came to the seminar as a committed far-left radical, but he struck up an unlikely friendship with a staunch conservative and William F. Buckley devotee, with whom he disagreed about, and argued fervently over, everything. Proudly, he told me that the two men remained friends to this day.

"If I could give you one piece of advice," he said, "make sure you befriend someone who is entirely different from you. As many people as you can. Talk to them about everything you disagree on—you'll only be better for it."

When I opened my acceptance letter a few weeks later, I felt like I was walking on air. To me, that letter wasn't just an invitation to a fancy summer program—it was an invitation into an educational world that I thought would change my life.

The Telluride Association was founded in 1911 by Lucien Lucius (L.L.) Nunn, a diminutive electricity tycoon. A lifelong bachelor (likely because of the "homosexual problem," as his followers described it—one contemporary joked that Nunn was "forever getting crushes on pink-cheeked bellboys"), Nunn made his fortune in mining and power plants before turning his energies toward education. Like many reformers of the early 20th century, Nunn saw a correlation between social progress and education, and believed that schools should be the foundation of democracy. Inspired by the autonomous small towns of the American West, Nunn also believed that self-governance could inspire virtuous communal behavior. He wished to combine and implement his philosophies in small academic communities, training future leaders through a rigorous program of liberal arts, self-governance, and manual labor.

Lucien Lucius kicked off the first stage of this project in 1904, creating an educational institute where workers

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COMMUNITY

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at his plants would receive practical learning so they could become more than “mere automatons or commercial slaves.” His next step was the establishment of the Telluride House at Cornell, which would provide free housing to his workers undertaking secondary studies, and the creation of the self-governed Telluride Association to administer the branches of his program (the summer programs launched a few decades later, in 1954). The Nunnian capstone came in 1917, when he bought a working cattle ranch outside Death Valley and founded a small men’s school called Deep Springs College on its sun-baked soil. By design, the college is isolated from the world, ringed by mountains and shrouded by cottonwood trees. Enrollment was—and still is—limited to 25 students (all men until 2018, when enough alumni “got with the times” and the school went co-ed). Students are tasked with governing their own self-sustaining, technology-averse, and substance-free society, managing everything from the selection of each year’s incoming class to the adoption of academic policy to the committee that oversees “relations with the outside world.”

A Deep Springs education is free—you earn your keep by working on the ranch for several hours a day—and high-brow, offering a mixture of foundational classics like Plato and Kierkegaard and niche, student-determined subjects like “Activist Laywering” or “Bovine Paternity and DNA Analysis.” Nunn envisioned this school as a utopian laboratory for future leaders, living in inward-facing, democratic harmony.

So, on June 23, 2015, a week after Donald Trump announced his presidential bid, I packed two months’ worth of my customary black clothing into my father’s car and drove to L.L. Nunn’s democracy lab. We pulled up to the Telluride House, an imposing red-brick mansion atop a steep hill, and knocked on the heavy wooden door. A woman in Birkenstocks emerged to inform us that TASS (the equivalent program for rising juniors) would be using the house this year; TASPers would be living in a sorority house at the base of the hill. We followed her pointing finger downward to see a

squat gray-and-green building adorned with rusty Greek letters.

“Well, this is a bit of a downgrade,” muttered my dad as we trudged back down the hill, eyeing the broken basketball hoop in front of the house. We entered the lobby of the sorority house, where a boy in a Duke Basketball shirt was chatting to a girl in a headscarf under a sign reading “Sisters Gather Here.” A woman with a silver nose ring and a completely bald head intercepted us at the door, pointing us toward a piece of notebook paper taped on the wall, where we could find my room assignment.

My father helped me move in (“Did you really need to bring multiple pairs of combat boots? It’s almost July!” he grumbled as he lugged my suitcase up the sorority stairs), and then we said our goodbyes in the parking lot. A black woman with dreadlocks and thick, plastic-framed glasses oversaw our farewell from the front door and then ushered me back inside.

Once we unpacked and met our roommates, everyone gathered in the house’s living room, where we were instructed to form a circle. Photos of smiling sorority girls beamed down at us from the yellow walls. The college students settled into thronelike teal armchairs at the front of the room and introduced themselves as this summer’s factota, a Latin word that roughly translates to “one who does everything.”

The woman with the nose ring was Kaitlyn, a rising senior at a liberal arts college who studied feminist anthropology and told us about her travels through Mexico researching abortion. Next to her was Taylor, the bespectacled woman, who introduced herself as a graduate student in African American and African diaspora studies. The two others were Carlos, a heavily bearded aspiring elementary school teacher starting at Yale next year after a two-year stint at Deep Springs, where he woke up at 4:30 a.m. every day to milk cows. He wore a simple plaid shirt and a pair of ratty sneakers, a sharp contrast from the man on his right, who was wearing hot pink shorts and a button-down covered in tropical birds. He introduced himself as Nick, an art history and ethnicity studies major writing a thesis about the

intersection of queerness and underwater creatures.

The TASPPer on my left, a boy wearing a nearly identical pair of fuchsia shorts, oohed in amazement at the thesis. If we wished to show agreement or approval, Nick informed him, we should snap our fingers in a show of support.

After the factota finished their introductions, the students went around the circle sharing fun facts. It was clear that the TASPers lived up to the program’s promises of diversity. Sitting on my right was Amira, a Saudi Arabian oil heiress who confided in a conspiratorial voice that she’d brought a suitcase full of brand-new crop tops to wear during her time in the States. A few places down from Amira was Safa, a hijab-wearing refugee from South Sudan whose family settled in Birmingham, Alabama, where she’d become a rabid Crimson Tide fan. The guy I’d seen in the lobby earlier, who turned out to be a sarcastic New Yorker named Ben, booed loudly at the Alabama mention, grinning down at his Duke T-shirt.

Ben sat on an ottoman with Mark, a boy in a polo shirt and weirdly crisp khaki shorts. He shared that he was an advocate for the academic importance of the classics, especially spoken Latin, which he was studying at school under the tutelage of a former monk. I marveled internally at the fact that some people went to high schools where you could do stuff like study spoken Latin with monks. Kaitlyn the factotum raised an eyebrow ever so slightly as he spoke.

After Mark, we heard from an ex-Mormon, a poet from Flint, Michigan, a Kansan with an amateur marijuana growing business, and two gay Brazilians. I was the last to go, and after I shared my fun fact (which was “I like getting piercings,” a statement I still sometimes cringe about while lying awake at night), the factota underscored the program rules.

TASPers were tasked with governing ourselves through nightly house meetings, bylaw votes, and a complex web of committees regulating everything from kitchen duty to leisure. Our community would be “semi-monastic,” meaning that we were “strongly, strongly encouraged” to limit our contact with

the outside world in favor of “turning inward” and “engaging in communal reflection.” To ensure that we learned as much as possible from our peers, there was a ban on “exclusive relationships” of all platonic shades, which would be enforced through assigned seating, periodic roommate switches, minimum group-outing sizes, and good-old-fashioned cockblocking. In addition to our academic responsibilities, we would have shifts cleaning the various house kitchens, and all of us were charged with devising a 20-minute “pubspeak”—a speech on a topic of our choosing.

Some of these regulations seemed a little odd, especially the ban on exclusive relationships. But I already looked up to the factota, whose resumes and academics were like nothing I’d ever known, and, exhilarated by the newness and the diversity, I didn’t give it a second thought.

The final rule was relayed by Carlos. With a stern look on his face, he explained that while these rules might seem daunting, all the factota had done this before, and there was one mantra in particular that guided them through their time. The girl next to me opened a notebook and poised her pen eagerly over the page. “During your six weeks here, you should always remember ... *you don’t know what’s best for you.*” He intoned this mantra with such gravitas that the room briefly fell into silence. I made eye contact with Mark, the Latin-speaking private-school guy. Then quiet gave way to the scratching of pens as everyone scribbled down this illuminating saying.

Our first official house meeting concerned the subject of BIRTs. Our community was to create policy in accordance with Robert’s Rules of Order, in which one must make a motion to enact legislation. Usually, these motions begin with “Whereas ...” and lead up to the line “Be it resolved that ...” (a sample BIRT from the outings committee reads: “Whereas Ithaca is full of thousands of magical lightning bugs, Whereas TASPers have not yet been fully immersed in the beautiful nature surrounding them, Whereas Nick the factotum personally attests to the

“Amira the Saudi oil heiress had been so appalled by the squalid house conditions that she went to Walmart and bought a giant flatscreen TV to keep in her room for the six-week program.”

gloriousness of these trails, Therefore Be It Resolved that on Saturday July 11th from 9:30-11 p.m. we will go on a Firefly walk through the Cornell Arboretum”). Our inaugural BIRT would address the subject of breakfast, the contents of which would be determined through democracy.

We assembled in the sorority living room. I sat next to Ben, the New Yorker who exclusively wore sports jerseys and flip-flops, and Juan, a Bay Area loyalist who also exclusively wore sports jerseys and flip-flops. They joked about basketball, failing to hear the factota’s attempts to silence the crowd until someone tapped them meekly on the shoulder. Taylor rolled her eyes.

We opened the meeting by sharing our favorite breakfast items, then moved to a discussion of the ethical implications of these foods and how their effects could be mitigated. A dancer wearing bright blue eyeliner confessed her guilt over her lifelong love of bacon. Amira, the Saudi Arabian, pulled up the PETA website (“Isn’t she wearing leather boots?” whispered Juan) and rattled off a list of disturbing figures about animal agriculture, her voice trembling. Moved, we drafted a BIRT resolving to ban all eggs from the house, and to hold a future community conversation about veganism.

Our days quickly began unfolding in accordance with a strict schedule. We rose early, consumed our cruelty free breakfasts, and gathered in the house lobby so we could all walk together to our morning seminars, as mandated by community rules. There were two different reading-heavy seminars—mine was about American history and literature, and the other was about the historical significance of Jerusalem. My seminar was taught by a no-nonsense Cornell professor and an eccentric Yale professor who performed theatrical reenactments of our readings (to the amusement of Ben, who often needed to dive behind a binder to hide his chuckling). Each seminar was also staffed by a pair of factota. Mine were Taylor and Carlos, who made a point of lurking on the room’s periphery, scribbling notes about the class dialogue and exchanging the occasional knowing glance.

Class ran until lunchtime, which was held at the Telluride House. The factota would patrol as we sat down to make sure that we sat with different people each time. Then, we’d amble downhill for an afternoon of meetings about the tenor of class discussion (whether we were all doing the readings, whether we were present in seminar, whether we felt safe and respected in the academic setting), or for pubspeaks.

We’d then get several hours of free time before dinner, which were theoretically for doing homework but in practice for trekking to the nearby 7-Eleven, in preapproved and inclusive groups, to buy enormous bags of chips. Kaitlyn, who was into CrossFit, encouraged us to participate in her daily workouts at a cracked basketball court across the street. Sometimes I’d join her, attempting to do push-ups as Ben and Juan, who had become fast friends, shot hoops on the other side.

After dinner, we had rotating shifts cleaning the industrial kitchen, which posed a unique horror to Amira the Saudi oil heiress, who had been so appalled by the squalid house conditions that she went to Walmart and bought a giant flatscreen TV to keep in her room for the six-week program. Then we’d meet in our intrahouse committees (which governed affairs like house cleanliness and

memorabilia-making), before everyone finally began their readings.

On weekends, which were seminar-free, we had more time for leisure. I was on the outings committee, which planned several group activities, including a kayaking trip through a mosquito-infested state park and the BIRT-governed firefly walk, during which Franklin, a jazz saxophonist from Chicago, lost his balance in the dark and fell into a small pond.

Our only structured weekend responsibility was a Sunday night community meeting, in which we'd discuss the social and interpersonal dynamics of the house. In addition to the democratically determined BIRTs, our house operated under a series of predetermined community principles, which the factota passed down like ancient wisdom. We were instructed to check our privilege at every turn, including during informal social interactions. We were informed of our microaggressions (I was deemed guilty of microaggressiveness after I joked to Kaitlyn about the unfairness of TASP's placement in the decrepit sorority house while the youths in the sophomore program resided in the hallowed Telluride halls. "You might want to unpack that. Don't you think that's a little ageist?" she responded, unamused). Men were told not to take up too much space, either physically or in conversation.

Beyond these formal excursions, all other weekend gatherings were to be independently organized by TASPers. During our first weekend, Ben and Juan mobilized a group of us to take the bus to the Ithaca Walmart and purchase an arsenal of Super Soakers and Nerf guns. We lugged our supplies back to the house, where Ben stood on a chair and announced a housewide water war in the patchy back lawn. Chaos ensued as muddy, drenched TASPers chased each other through the sorority halls, leaving wet grass and slippery tiles in their wake. The war concluded only when Kaitlyn skidded on a patch of wet floor, dropped a set of readings into a puddle, and angrily burst outside to declare an end to the antics. She forced everyone to surrender their weapons into garbage bags, ignoring Ben's protests.

Halfway through the second week, the factota summoned us for an impromptu house meeting. Arranged in their usual formation at the front of the room, they informed us that they had quietly removed Michael, one of the two gay Brazilians, from the program during lunch that day. He'd violated too many of our community norms—dominating group conversations, shirking his academic responsibilities, taking up too much space and monopolizing the house's emotional energy—and they'd decided that his presence was harmful to the common good. None of us really liked Michael—he interrupted people constantly, he fell asleep in class, and he would help himself to labeled personal snacks from the communal fridge—so we didn't mind his departure, even if it came as a surprise.

Later, I headed to the library with Mark, the preppy classicist with whom I'd struck up a fast, innocent—yet by TASP standards, completely illicit—friendship. We agreed that Michael seemed ungrateful to be at TASP and that stealing snacks should be a violation punishable by death, so we were glad he was gone. Then we walked in silence for a while.

"I don't know, though, isn't it kind of weird that they can just kick us out like that?" Mark burst.

It was definitely weird, given all the emphasis on democracy and community-building, and the fact that we held communal votes for things as small as allowing milk (but not eggs) at breakfast. We didn't know what was best for us, according to TASP wisdom, but it might have been nice to at least discuss the matter of Michael before he was disappeared without a trace.

A week and a half into the program, we gathered in the living room to hear the first pubspeak from Amira, the Saudi Arabian. As she fiddled with the prehistoric sorority projector, the factota strode around making sure none of us had brought our phones. That day, however, a small part of me had flared up in sudden defiance and I smuggled my phone inside.

Finally, Amira's PowerPoint flashed onto the screen. " Hamas: A Misunderstood Organization," proclaimed bold

red letters over a green-and-white flag. The factota began snapping in encouragement from their seats at the front of the room, and soon everyone else joined in. Steeled by the support, Amira began reading from her creased script.

The widespread "narrative" in America and "other places" was that Hamas is a terrorist organization only devoted to violence, Amira said. In actuality, this narrative was wrong; she wanted to explain how Hamas was in fact not a group of terrorists, but an organization that is ultimately devoted to social good.

Amira moved through a series of slides about the necessity of Hamas' presence in the area, the importance of the social services it provides, and the injustice of criticizing the group's moral character. The factota sat in rapt attention at the front of the room, expressing periodic agreement by forcefully snapping their fingers.

I knew the usual stuff about Israel, but I didn't know much about Hamas—God knows my high school didn't offer any classes in foreign affairs. I didn't read enough news yet to understand Palestinian politics, and her information about their food banks and medical clinics seemed compelling enough. Nonetheless, as Amira moved through slide after slide of impassioned Hamas defenses, I had a weird feeling in my chest. Covertly, so as not to attract the attention of Carlos, who had an uncanny ability to detect improper cellphone usage, I removed my phone from its hiding place and Googled the Hamas Charter. After scrolling through a stern wall of text, I found what I had suspected: "*The time will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews (and kill them); until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill them.*"

Amira concluded her pubspeak to rousing applause, before we moved on to the mandatory question-and-answer period. Unsettled, I expected one of the factota to raise their hands and provide a counterargument in the spirit of Nunnian inquiry. None of them did. A TASPer asked where Amira got the inspiration for this talk. She responded that she'd learned much of this from her parents and in Saudi Arabia.

I considered voicing a question about what I'd read, but I felt too uninformed and too timid. Instead, I waited in silence through a hail of supportive snaps before the factota congratulated Amira on her presentation and we all filed together out of the room.

Despite L.L. Nunn's lofty aims for Deep Springs and its intellectual mission, when you isolate 25 college-aged men in the California high desert, stuff gets a little weird. Many Deep Springers still joke awkwardly about Nunn's keen interest in "the students' bodies" during its all-male days. In his final years, Nunn found religion and began showing up to campus in a limousine, exhorting students to follow his "Moral Order of the Universe," a set of murky Christian values that nobody really understood. Students reportedly walk screaming and crying through the desert, naked except for a pair of cowboy boots, with some regularity. An alumnus once swore to me that he developed a crush on a barn cat during his second year.

Nonetheless, most Deep Springers still cherish Nunn's mission, and fiercely believe in his core ideals—the self-governance, the inward focus, the isolation. Many of them leave Deep Springs and pay their education forward, devoting their lives to public service or joining the Telluride Association and extolling the virtues of intentional communities as summer program factota. Nunn would be proud of his continued legacy: He once wrote to his brother about his hope for the Telluride Association: "that the institution, small though it is, should grow as necessity indicates, the same as the tree, or the man, or the empire—the same as the British Empire has grown."

Discerning observers will note that doing what "necessity indicates" is a mandate dependent entirely on the values and whims of its executioners. In the case of TASP, necessity apparently indicated living in accordance with not only the Nunnian ideals but also the standards of our factota, most of whom couldn't yet legally drink but had absolute moral authority over who could take up space, who could express their politics, and who deserved to be there at

all. TASP was their world; we were just figuring out how to live in it.

A recurring topic of house conversation was the presence of exclusive relationships, which began forming within mere days. Many were platonic friendships. Others were less innocent—Louis, the Canadian hippie, and Sarah, a bubbly New Yorker who ran an independent theater collective, paired off within the first week of the program. They'd have secretive rendezvous whenever the factota were in their "facto lair," a room in the house basement where they made important decisions and pretended not to be smoking weed.

I, too, was guilty of exclusivity. For one, Sarah and I became close friends (we still joke about the time I was standing guard for the happy couple when Taylor came stalking down the hall, forcing me to barge into Sarah's room and catch them in a horribly compromising situation). I was also good friends with Mark, who was tight with Louis, and the four of us formed a fast, yet illicit, friendship.

The factota had various tactics to combat these relationships, from sober one-on-one interventions to interrupting group hangs to, notably, a roommate-switch halfway through the program because people were getting too close. This switch was aimed in no small part at Mark, who had been paired with a fellow sporty private-school guy in a cavernous room on the second floor. They bonded instantly, and their room would house all kinds of semi-exclusive hangs, from playlist-making to the occasional horny game of "Never Have I Ever."

I found Mark's preppy private-school antics comical and largely endearing. We made a good duo—he introduced me to long-form journalism (fascinating) and Kantian philosophy (insufferable), and I made fun of his navy J. Crew polos and roasted him when he spouted off too much about Latin grammar. As a white guy studying classics at a high school with a five-figure price tag, Mark regularly landed in the crosshairs of our Sunday night conversations, receiving frequent reminders to "check his privilege" when he cited too much rarefied literature in class conversations and to

"cede his time" to minorities or women during house discussions.

Accordingly, the factota disapproved of our friendship. Kaitlyn felt strongest about limiting his presence in my life and often pulled me aside to warn me against Mark, deeming his influence to be restrictive. She'd accost me to relay a supposedly insufferable remark he'd made during seminar or shoot me pointed stares whenever someone mentioned male entitlement during a house meeting, ignoring my protests that I found it difficult to distance myself from a naturally occurring friendship, and in fact enjoyed chatting with someone so different from myself. Wasn't that supposed to be the point of TASP, anyway? Instead, she made it a personal project to interrupt our conversations, wedge herself in between us at dinner, and skew our committee assignments so we couldn't so much as wash dishes at the same time.

The most communally objectionable exclusive relationship, however, was between Ben and Juan, the two jersey-wearing bros. I liked them a lot—they brought a fun, laid-back energy that was often absent from the intense house dynamic. They were much more than their Warriors jerseys and Super Soakers, having bonded over shared interests in social justice, navigating their mixed-race identities, and the ethics of rap culture. Juan introduced us to the hyphy movement and its father, Bay Area rapper Mac Dre. Ben gave a pub-speak about the intersection of Kanye West's lyrics and Michelle Alexander's theories on mass incarceration. Once, I confided in Ben that I had eye problems and struggled to see in the dark, and after that he began helping me around the house at night, dutifully lighting the way with his iPhone flashlight.

He was still a 17-year-old boy, though, prone to such obnoxious behaviors as bombarding our TASP groupchat (otherwise mostly used to confirm paper deadlines or vote on movie selections) with the lyrics of the SpongeBob theme song, or ramming into people's boats during our group kayaking trip, causing chaos when he inadvertently flipped the kayak manned by a pair of studious lesbians, who were unamused. Ben was

also in an “exclusive relationship,” with the Greek girl from Kansas, and unlike the rest of the furtive flings, the pair made only a limited effort to conceal it. They’d canoodle on the couch before disappearing until dinner, when they’d emerge looking smug, their necks studded with hickeys the size of silver dollars.

Four weeks into the program, proclaiming that he was on the verge of dying of boredom, Ben went around the house rousing people from their homework and begging them to join him for a dodgeball tournament on the lawn. Dying for a distraction, I readily agreed, but most other TASPers demurred, citing reasons ranging from workload to, as one girl put it, “hating sports with every fiber of my soul.”

Faced with a dodgeball team of three, Ben threw himself on the couch, groaning half-jokingly about how everyone was lame and everything was so serious all the time. Behind him, Kaitlyn and Taylor exchanged weary glances.

“Why do you feel the need to pressure everyone into doing things they don’t want to do?” asked Taylor.

Ben protested that he was just trying to do something fun. Who knows, people might have ended up having a good time, he insisted. “We don’t know what’s best for us, remember?” said Ben pointedly, jabbing air quotes with his fingers.

The next day, the factota arranged an impromptu afternoon meeting on the ways maleness and male entitlement manifested itself in our house dynamics. Kaitlyn reminded us how male sports culture is often hostile to female agency. Men were encouraged to remain silent during the conversation as a reminder of the power of inclusive spaces.

Later that night, I ran into Mark sitting on top of the washer, reading a book as he waited for his laundry. We couldn’t have been chatting for more than five minutes before Kaitlyn appeared in the doorway and peered disapprovingly inside.

“What’d you think of that meeting, Mark?” she asked.

Sensing immediate danger, I tried to jump in, but Kaitlyn dismissed me.

“I asked Mark, actually—”

“It was fine.”

“I think that you are a fundamentally bad person,” she said. ‘Maybe one day you’ll do something about it.’”

“That’s it? Fine? I was hoping you’d have something a little more construct—”

Mark cut her off, fed up at last. Why did Telluride choose a bunch of dudes for the program in the first place if the factota were just going to make them be quiet during every conversation, he asked. Why not allow them to contribute to the community? Wouldn’t it make for more productive discussions if people really engaged with each other?

I watched with bated breath. Not only was Mark raising a legitimate point, but he was also genuinely committed to the Nunnian project. I’d developed a reputation as a sort of likable TASP grouch—I liked all my fellow TASPers, but I refused to shake up my exclusive friendships, participated only begrudgingly in our “discussions of group dynamics,” and grouched in private about all the rules. Mark, on the other hand, felt a true sense of duty to our community, and encouraged me to do the same. He talked a lot in discussions because he cared. He asked questions because he thought they could be productive. He challenged ideas because he thought it could make our community better. Surely this was not a grave sin.

Kaitlyn stood silently for a minute, her head cocked in dangerous inertia. Finally, she pushed away from the door frame and narrowed her green eyes at Mark.

“I think that you are a fundamentally bad person,” she said. “Maybe one day

you’ll do something about it.” She turned on her bare foot and marched away.

Two days later, the factota canceled our scheduled house meeting and disappeared into their lair for the evening. There was only a week remaining in the program, so initially, I was thrilled by the reprieve from the endless dialogues. I lounged in the kitchen with a group of TASPers, eating spoonfuls of chocolate sprinkles out of the jar as Mark passionately argued with Franklin the saxophonist that Trump would never win the 2016 election, and declared that in the impossible likelihood that Trump did, he would “actually get down on his knees and suck Franklin’s dick.”

The factota emerged hours later as we were filing out of the kitchen. All of them looked grim. Jokingly, we tried to pry into the contents of their discussion, but they shooed us to bed without offering a single detail. Their seriousness left me with a tight feeling in my chest, which had come to feel familiar.

In the afternoon, Carlos announced that we needed to have a meeting. As always, we gathered in a circle, and the factota sat sternly in front of us. We sat in silence as Olivia called off names. Everyone was there, except for one person.

“We have to announce something important,” said Taylor at last. She sighed laboriously. For the umpteenth time that summer, the living room went dead quiet. I suddenly realized who hadn’t been at lunch.

“We have asked Ben to leave the program.” The room erupted into rustling. Next to me, Mark let out a sharp breath.

The factota offered a variety of justifications—freeing up essential space in the house, building a more intentional environment, making everyone feel safer. Apparently a few TASPers, annoyed by his antics and remembering what happened to the gay Brazilian, had complained. They’d given him a lot of patience and time, but Ben had failed to grasp the ideas of the TASP community. The factota were happy to talk in the circle about their decision. It would be hard for some of us, and it might not seem like it now, but they believed it was the best choice for our community.

Ben’s girlfriend started crying. Juan

bowed his head toward the carpet. I felt like I should offer a defense, but I wasn't sure what exactly I wanted to defend.

Ben was waiting on the sorority lawn to say his goodbyes. He wrapped me in a bone-crushing bear hug and, five weeks into the program, I finally burst into tears.

Carlos marched him up the hill toward the Telluride House. We watched from the steps until they disappeared. Then we went back inside, where we continued the meeting without one mention of Ben and held a vote on an outing to a hibachi restaurant in a strip mall. When the factota left the room, someone started strumming "Another One Bites the Dust" on the guitar.

TASP professes to be a place where you can figure stuff out. Engaged in thoughtful academic study and surrounded by brilliant young minds from all walks of life, you are constantly reminded how little you know—and how much you have left to learn.

Mark, the stoic prep, spent hours playing the guitar and talking quietly with Louis, the perpetually barefoot hippie. Laid-back, socks-and-sandals-wearing Juan developed an "exclusive relationship" with Amira, the princess who didn't know how to turn on a vacuum. Still rattled after the Hamas pub-speak, I wandered into the kitchen for a late-night snack and ended up in a long conversation about Israel with Safa the South Sudanese Alabaman, who informed me that I was the first Jew she'd ever met.

The prospect of living so closely with such a variety of people seemed daunting, but we TASPers pulled it off and grew fond of everyone, and for that I'd point to the fact that we were stuck with each other—the way L.L. Nunn intended all those years ago. Yet it wasn't the differences between us that posed the biggest challenge to our unity; it was the constant reminders from above of those differences, all the ways we were hierarchically organized or comparatively privileged or fundamentally limited in our views. We were challenged to transcend those limitations and build the foundations of a community, but for

that you need good faith, which was in short supply.

The other problem was that TASP lacked all the mechanisms of a functioning democracy. We had been cherry-picked to represent diversity, but actually the point was for all of us to arrive at the same conclusions—men talked too much, the world was fraught with microaggressions, dodgeball was bad, and eggs were worse. There was no framework for disagreement, no space for ideological detours, no home for structural challenges to the so-called intentional community we lived in. The only plan for dealing with 17-year-old dissidents like Ben or Mark, people who dared question the fundamentals of our community, was to silence or insult them, and finally to banish them. Nobody wanted to deal with the key annoyance of democracy—learning to tolerate our differences.

Like Carlos told us on the very first day, we didn't know what was best for us. Not because we were working to decide for ourselves, but because someone else already knew. TASP was no longer a democratic experiment—it had morphed into a factory for totalitarian instincts, and it operated like an oligarchy.

Perhaps the evaluations that my elders made of my character were right. After TASP, I got into Columbia, where I did not end up joining a progressive student group or taking a gender studies class. Instead I did Zionist activism and joined the satirical newspaper. Seven other TASPers also came to Columbia, including Ben, who ended up studying Black Atlantic history and incarceration. We ran into each other on campus now and then, but I wasn't woke enough for his new college self; having seemingly learned his lesson, we didn't hang out once. Sarah, Mark, and I are still very good friends, however. Apparently, exclusive relationships work.

As for TASP, the year after I left, necessity indicated a change to the summer program: Telluride altered its application materials to say that admissions would now prioritize students from underrepresented minority backgrounds. In 2020, in the wake of the George Floyd protests, the alumni received an email

from the new Telluride Association president—my former factota Taylor. The letter stated that, in an "obligation to combat anti-Black racism and white supremacy within our summer programs," they would be canceling the program for 2021 and launching a redesigned version the following year.

In 2022, the Telluride Association announced that they were discontinuing TASP and expanding TASS, the equivalent program for sophomores, into a program with two focus areas—"Critical Black Studies" and "Anti-Oppressive Studies." Students would no longer live all together, like we did, according to Nunn's vision. Instead, the "Critical Black Studies" community would live and study separately, creating an entirely Black space. Afternoons and evenings were no longer reserved for things like Nerf wars or eating entire jars of sprinkles, which were the activities that allowed our diverse group to come together, and which I remember much more vividly than all my seminar readings

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combined. Instead, the students would participate in anti-racism workshops created by the factota. It was this new program that became the “anti-racist Hell” that Vincent Lloyd lamented in his article.

It was easy for me to sympathize with Lloyd, who spent his summer battling with one factota, Keisha, who found him “triggering” and his readings “insufficiently radical,” was frustrated by his insistence on unspooling complex racial ideas in the slow seminar format rather than holding straightforward lectures, and frequently intervened when his discussions caused TASPers “harm.” By the end of his tenure, he was summoned into an empty classroom by the students, who read their allegations about his behavior—and demands that he change his

teaching—from sheets of paper. Every word coming out of their mouths was clearly pulled from conversations with Keisha. A white girl referred to her factota in her remarks: “Keisha speaks for me. She says everything I think better than I ever could.”

While I have little doubt that Lloyd was on the right side of reason, I also have a pretty good idea of how that girl must have felt. I remember being an eager-to-please high schooler on the first day of TASP, sitting in a circle with big aspirations but very little knowledge of the world, wanting so badly to be accepted in an elite space I assumed would give me all the answers, if I could only absorb the guiding principle: *You don't know what's best for you.* It's only now that I recognize that the truth of this

statement—after all, what 17-year-old knows what's best for them—served to justify the anti-democratic reality of a space contemptuous of every experience except for those of “oppressed groups,” as determined by the factota. It is equally alarming to see that the so-called leaders of my teenage years are now actively re-making a space once devoted to self-exploration and communal understanding in their own intellectual self-image, as a place where questioning and self-determination are being eliminated in favor of received truth. What consoles me is the thought that, if my own example is anything to go by, the effort is unlikely to always end the way they wish. ■

This article was originally published on July 25, 2023.

NEWS & POLITICS

What Happened to Robert Malley?

The downfall of the White House's favorite Iran whisperer is a mystery wrapped inside a cover-up

BY LEE SMITH

In late June, reports started circulating that White House heavy Robert Malley had been suspended from his job in the Joe Biden administration. That was surprising. Before he was pushed out, Malley had been seen as the visionary architect of the Democratic Party's Middle East policy. He'd been Barack Obama's conduit to Iran before Biden named him to do the same thing for his White House. For someone in his position to lose that job amid renewed talks with Iran was notable, but the most intriguing detail, hidden by the Biden team for months, was the reason why he was sidelined:

He had reportedly mishandled classified documents.

So what was Malley doing that compelled the Bureau of Diplomatic Security to open an investigation on him before passing it to the FBI? Security clearances are a kind of currency in Washington and it's unusual for a senior official to lose access to his colleagues' secrets, especially a policymaker of Malley's status. Had he been amassing boxes of documents in his home like former President Donald Trump? Had he taken classified documents from secure facilities and moved them to private work and residential spaces like Biden?

A large part of Malley's work was to circulate information throughout the

U.S.-based Iranian diaspora that eventually found its way to Tehran. According to Iran press reports that have foreign policy circles talking, those contacts are what got him in trouble. And the fact that the details about Malley's suspension are coming from Iranian rather than U.S. media is a big clue that something big is missing from the White House's highly minimized account.

At the beginning of July the *Tehran Times*, an Iranian regime English-language media outlet, published an article with insider details but no definite answer to the central mystery. According to the article, Malley's clearance was suspended on April 21, two months before the news went public. Since then he's met with CIA Director William Burns and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to try to resolve his situation but, according to the article, has not yet been granted an audience with Secretary of State (and high school classmate) Antony Blinken.

The story hints at a bureaucratic turf war. “The collection of opinions and news published about Robert Malley's removal indicates extensive and coordinated subterfuge at the highest levels of the U.S. government.” The *Tehran Times* doesn't identify any sources by name, but the details suggest that the

account comes from Malley's associates. Curiously, the reporter concludes that the same group likely responsible for leaking the details that appear in the article is the one that got Malley in trouble: "Malley's overly close proximity to his non-official Iranian assistants and advisers created the ground for the fall of this experienced diplomat."

A follow-up story identifies those around Malley who play the role of "broker and middleman between Iran and the Democratic administration of the U.S.": Vali Nasr, a former Obama policymaker and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies professor; Trita Parsi, founder of the National Iranian American Council and currently the executive vice president of the Quincy Institute; and Ali Vaez, Iran project director at the International Crisis Group, which Malley headed before joining the Biden administration. Also, according to the *Tehran Times*, Malley held "secret talks" with Iran's U.N. ambassador, Saeid Iravani.

Except these are exactly the people he was hired to engage to revive the JCPOA. Vaez, for instance, has relayed his former boss's insights and information to the media. Malley must have shared something really bad with his Iranian associates because otherwise the *Tehran Times* account makes no sense.

Perhaps more to the point, the White House that hired Malley doesn't care about keeping American secrets unless the failure to do so can be used as an instrument to hurt political opponents. Biden hoarded classified documents for decades and kept them in his garage. Unlike Trump, he never had the executive authority to declassify the documents he collected as senator and then vice president, but it was Trump who was indicted on charges related to holding classified materials. The Justice Department handled Biden's classified documents case

the same way it managed evidence of his son Hunter's alleged crimes—by burying it under a phony investigation.

The Biden administration's open contempt for the rule of law is just a security regime acting like a security regime. In this context, using law enforcement authorities to prosecute enemies and exculpate allies is normal. The ruling party fights to control all levers of power inside and outside the government to reward loyalists—for instance, the party's top donor, George Soros, supports Malley's work at ICG with more than \$75 million. What's not normal is sidelining the party's leading Middle East strategist with the same premise used to target Trump.

Biden appointed Malley shortly after his inauguration and made him responsible for restoring the Iran nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It was Barack Obama's signature foreign policy initiative but then Donald Trump withdrew from the agreement in 2018. Trump implemented a maximum pressure campaign that included hard-biting sanctions and the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, the terror unit attached to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). To get back into the deal, the Biden team brought back many of the officials who pushed it through the first time but none as important as Malley.

Malley has served in three Democratic administrations over the last four decades, handling high-profile, sensitive diplomacy such as the Arab-Israeli peace process and the Syrian war. After leaving the Clinton administration, he joined the International Crisis Group where, as he told me for a 2010 Tablet profile, his "mandate" was "to come up with ideas about how to prevent or resolve deadly conflict." This brought him into contact with organizations like Hamas, a relationship that forced candidate Obama to remove him from his advisory role with the 2008 presidential campaign.

But it's precisely Malley's willingness to deal with the hard men of the Middle East that sets him apart from other U.S. diplomats. Where others who work in the region prefer to engage moderates,

cultivate them with cash incentives, or invent them out of whole cloth, Malley makes no apologies for dealing with the men who really run the show. Accordingly, Obama named him lead negotiator in 2014 to bring the JCPOA home.

The fundamental untruth about the deal is that it was designed to stop Iran from getting the bomb. The agreement's so-called "sunset" clauses tell the real story. These are the provisions restricting Iran's nuclear activities that are scheduled to expire after only a few years, at which point Iran's nuclear weapons program becomes entirely legal. From the beginning, the purpose of the JCPOA was to get the world to accept a terror state's nuclear weapons program.

With Malley at the helm, the U.S. foreign policy establishment assumed he'd revive the JCPOA in short order. But his appointment signaled something else to the Iranians.

For the 2015 agreement, the U.S. side negotiated with Javad Zarif, the slick-talking diplomat lionized by the D.C.-based Iran lobby, including the Malley associates identified in the *Tehran Times* stories. It's unclear whether Zarif's U.S.-based friends project any power inside Tehran's political circles, but by tying their influence inside the Beltway to Zarif, Malley's Iranian associates earned the contempt of rival factions.

One of those factions came to power when Ebrahim Raisi was made president of Iran in June 2021. Almost immediately the new leadership started messaging against Zarif, whom they accused of giving away too much to the Americans. The Raisi crew also began attacking Zarif's U.S.-based interlocutors, in particular the International Crisis Group. The English-language vehicle of choice for those attacks was the *Tehran Times*.

In an opinion article days after Iran's presidential election, the *Tehran Times* wrote: "The Crisis Group began spreading rumors that Iran's elections will be rigged, presenting Raisi as a pre-announced winner, estimating that the participation would be very low. The high voter turnout and competitive election changed the direction of the Crisis Group. Now they have focused

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on obstructing the process of reviving the JCPOA, implying that the president-elect will throw immovable obstacles on the way of reviving the nuclear deal.”

This broadside served two purposes. First, it was meant to inculcate Zarif, whose D.C. allies, according to the *Tehran Times*, had brought talks to a standstill. Ali Vaez mocked the paper’s assessment on social media, prompting the *Tehran Times* to ask him directly if the ICG was responsible for trying to “strengthen” the JCPOA—that is, deny Iran its rightful place as a nuclear power. Because Vaez didn’t validate his interpretation of reality, the reporter assessed that he “dodged our question about the role of the Crisis Group in the negotiations.”

But the article was also a warning to Malley, without naming the U.S. negotiator, that if he expected to revive the JCPOA, he’d have to agree to all of Iran’s demands. Malley hardly needed the hint: He came to the job prepared to give the Iranians everything in his power to give.

The problem, I believe, is that the Iranians wanted what was beyond Malley’s ability to grant: a guarantee that Biden’s successors wouldn’t withdraw from the deal and reimpose sanctions as Trump had. Tehran also wanted the IRGC taken off the foreign terrorist blacklist and the U.S. agreed, provided Tehran called off the hit squads detailed to kill Trump administration officials it blamed for assassinating Soleimani: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the State Department’s Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook, and National Security Adviser John Bolton.

According to Vaez, Tehran wouldn’t budge. “It is politically impossible for the Iranians to publicly close the file on taking revenge for Soleimani.”

The Iranians would have been pleased to see accounts of how much money the Americans spent on security details to protect the three Trump aides, with Diplomatic Security watching out for Pompeo and Hook and the Secret Service guarding Bolton. Reports of Hook’s wife crying in fear for her husband’s life amused at least one former Iranian

official. If Malley couldn’t guarantee the next administration would stay in the deal, the Iranians could incentivize a future White House by threatening American diplomats who’d dared to reimpose sanctions on Tehran. On hearing that their foreign interlocutors were planning to murder Americans, other U.S. diplomats would have walked away from negotiations. But Malley didn’t flinch.

Naturally Iran’s ruling faction would be happy to advance the theory that Malley’s relationship with Zarif’s vain and careless Beltway crew led to the fall of America’s Iran whisperer. And thus the *Tehran Times* account of the Malley affair appears to be a feint to shape it as a nonstory: *Malley was talking to his friends—what’s the big deal?* It seems the real story, whatever it is, is bad enough that Malley’s Iranian associates had no choice but to use a rival Iranian faction that despises them to put Malley in the clear. ■

This article was originally published on July 24, 2023.

ARTS & LETTERS

The French Riots and the Jews

The recent chaos is not an antisemitic intifada—it’s something worse

BY MARC WEITZMANN

On June 30, three days after the killing of Nahel Merzouk, 17, by a police officer during a police check in the city of Nanterre, near Paris, and the ensuing riots all across the country, right-wing representative Meyer Habib, a French Israeli citizen and close associate of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, published an article on

Facebook titled “INTIFADA SCENES IN FRANCE,” from which I quote:

Since the last three days France is burning in its lost territories of the Republic and way beyond!

Burned French flags, burned city halls, burned police stations, burned stores, cars and schools! (...)

The Memorial of deportation in Nanterre vandalized! Antisemitic and

anti-white tags blooming! Some call for the Sharia and vengeance!

In those territories, hatred of France, hatred of whites, hatred of Jews, have been thriving for years, most often in all impunity!

Nothing justifies such chaos! Not even the tragic, abnormal passing of a 17 years old young man, who had tried to escape police several times.

When Sarah Halimi was slaughtered for 20 minutes in front of 20 policemen by an Islamist who is almost free today, nobody ransacked anything!

Every political leader worthy of the name should call to a return to calm and to the respect of the rule of law!

Sarah Halimi was a 65-year-old retired school teacher. On April, 4, 2017, she was beaten to death at home and thrown out of her window by Kobili Traoré, a 27-year-old Muslim drug

addict who had broken into her home and later claimed to have been possessed by demons.

Two days after Habib's post, on July 2, at the start of Sunday's cabinet meeting, Netanyahu himself made a statement about the riots in France. The Israeli government, he said, saw "with utmost concern the displays and waves of antisemitism sweeping over France" and the "criminal assaults against Jewish targets. We strongly condemn these attacks and we support the French government in its fight against antisemitism," he added.

Netanyahu's statement was published the same day by the *Jerusalem Post*, along with Habib's statement. As an example of the antisemitic attacks that both men had mentioned, an accompanying article quoted "the Holocaust memorial" of Nanterre, whose French flag had been destroyed, and on whose wall anti-cop tags had been discovered. On July 7, under the title "The riots in France have become antisemitic," the *J-Post* published another piece, an op-ed by a German writer named Thomas Stern, who used the same memorial incident as the sole example to support his thesis. The next day, it was the turn of the English *Telegraph* to use the same picture of the same Nanterre memorial for an article titled "France's Jewish community on high alert after nationwide riots."

There is a reason why everyone is using the Nanterre memorial as evidence of the riots' antisemitism: There is no other even vaguely plausible example. In fact, even the case of Nanterre is deceiving. First of all, the Nanterre wall is neither "a Holocaust memorial" nor a "memorial of deportation" but a monument dedicated to "The martyrs of deportation and of the Resistance." It was commissioned in the mid '90s by the former Minister of Interior Charles Pasqua, who had been a high-ranking Resistance fighter of the Gaullist movement.

After the war, Gaullists believed that the unity of the French after the war was of the utmost importance. In order to maintain it, he denied for decades the specificity of the history of the Jews and their suffering during the years of occupation. France's postwar Gaullist

governments heavily censored the first books and films on the fate of the Jews and the role played by the French police in the deportations. The accepted version of the war was that all French citizens had experienced the same suffering and oppression. As in the USSR after WWII, Jews were invisible and their experience of the Vichy regime untold. Pasqua, an old-fashioned Gaullist with ties to the far-right, shared that version of history and commissioned the Nanterre monument accordingly.

If the Nanterre memorial symbolizes anything, then, it is the ambiguity of French memory regarding WWII until the end of the 1990s, when French President Jacques Chirac finally officially admitted the Vichy government's responsibility for the fate of the Jews of France. It is *not* a tribute to the Jews and was never conceived as such. To read anti-cop graffiti inscribed on its wall as proof of a "wave" of antisemitism is therefore to misunderstand both France's tortuous relationship to its own past and today's antisemitism.

Were kosher restaurants and Jewish stores ransacked during the riots? Of course they were—but no more than nonkosher restaurants and stores that happened to be within reach of the rioters and looters. In fact, from a Jewish standpoint, if anything is remarkable, it is the almost complete lack of specificity in the choice of the businesses targeted. According to all available reports, it appears that only one business was specifically destroyed for what it was—the Happy Café, a gay-friendly bar in the city of Brest, whose owner had to close down during the riots after reading messages on Telegram calling to "burn the fags, let them die in hell by the Koran," followed by the name of the establishment.

The example of the Happy Café shows how easy it would have been to call to attack synagogues, Jewish cultural centers, and so forth. And yet, this was not done. The vast majority of the stores ransacked or destroyed were either chosen at random or because of the alleged luxury brand they represented (in city centers, Nike or Louis Vuitton were targets of choice). Given France's heavy record of antisemitism since the 2000s,

and the unprecedented intensity of the five days and nights of rioting across the country, the real news was that Jewish businesses, synagogues, and residences were not targeted *as such*.

"After the *J-Post* article was published, we had to set up a video conference with the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Aliyah in Israel to set the record straight," said Yonathan Arfi, the new, young, left-wing president of the CRIF, the (secular) institution representing the Jews of France. "We realized that Israelis were watching the riots with glasses dating from 2014—when antisemitic attacks in France rose up to 800 per year—while we were looking at these events through the lens of 2005—the year the banlieues exploded out of anger and social frustration after two teenagers were killed running from the police."

2014 marked both the peak of random antisemitic incidents across the country and the prelude to the deadly terror wave that began on Jan. 7-9, 2015, with the killings at *Charlie Hebdo* and the Hypercacher kosher supermarket in Paris. Throughout the spring of 2015, the French authorities counted nearly one attempted violent attack per week, culminating in the Bataclan massacre on Nov. 13. The tension began to fall only after the mass killing the following year in Nice, where a heavy truck attacked the crowd watching the fireworks display on Bastille Day, July 14, killing 86 people and injuring hundreds more.

Most of these attacks contained at least one antisemitic element—*Charlie Hebdo* was perceived as Zionist-controlled, the Hypercacher of course was Jewish, and the Bataclan had been on the target list of Islamist groups for years for being owned by two Jewish brothers, a fact that authorities and the media denied, but that French Jews understood only too well, especially after the decade they had been through. As a result, the number of aliyahs from France, on a constant rise since the attack on the Ozar Ha Torah school in Toulouse in 2012, reached 8,000 in 2016—an astonishing number.

Today, according to the CRIF, the number of French Jews making aliyah has fallen back to 1,500 per year,

though antisemitic aggression remains frequent. There were 436 antisemitic attacks in 2022, a level reached in the early 2000s and which has never fallen since. While Jews represent less than 1% of the French population, they are the targets of 61% of anti-religious acts against persons. These numbers, provided by the Ministry of Interior, probably underestimate the level of antisemitic aggression, since verbal attacks and insults on social media are not included.

So if right-wing pessimist Meyer Habib is wrong, is left-wing optimist Yonathan Arfi right? Should we really look at today's situation through the lens of 2005—that is to say, through an anti-racist lens, as he claims to do, and as most of the Anglo-Saxon media covering the riots have done?

It is helpful to look back to what actually happened in 2005. On Oct. 27, 2005, in the city of Clichy-sous-Bois, two kids, Zyed Benna, 17, and Bouna Traoré, 15, were electrocuted inside a substation while trying to escape the police. It is widely assumed on the left—i.e., in most of the media—that these deaths started the riots that inflamed the *cités* (the French equivalent of the American “projects”) that surround most of the urban centers in France and that are mainly populated today with migrant families.

According to a less popular opinion, however, it was a tear gas grenade shot three days later by a police unit targeting a group of rioters in Clichy-sous-Bois that accidentally hit a nearby mosque full of Ramadan worshippers that fueled the three weeks of riots that ensued, during which five people died (three by asphyxiation caused by fires, two beaten to death). In other words, the anger that triggered the 2005 events may have been religious as well as social. This theory is held by, among others, Gilles Kepel, a leading scholar of Islamist movements in France.

The truth may lie somewhere in between. According to their families, and contrary to what police reports later claimed, Traoré and Benna were not fleeing the police because they were about to commit a burglary but because they had no ID cards on them and feared

“At the heart of the present situation, then, is not just a ‘police problem’ or a ‘*laïcité*’ problem, or even an employment problem, but a crisis in what the French call ‘assimilation.’”

that they would be arrested and miss Ramadan dinner. That was back in 2005, a time when “social workers could still enter the *cités* and manage to convince parents to bring their children back home,” as a former high school teacher named Ugo Portier told me.

Portier has spent the last 40 years in Bobigny, a city near Paris that is home to some of the worst *cités* in the country. He campaigned for the radical left party LFI (La France Insoumise) until 2019, when he realized how wrong LFI—and the left in general—was about the situation of disenfranchised Muslim youth in France.

“If you look at what happened this time, he added, you see that the riots took place in two stages,” he told me. “First, let’s mark *our* territories by burning everything that represents the French state and French authorities in our neighborhood: police stations, city halls, public services of all kinds including schools and public libraries (35 of which were burned down during the riots). Second, let’s attack all *their* downtown businesses. In other words, a secessionist strategy. This is one of the reasons why the police mostly focused on the very young, occasional looters downtown. The pressure was such that the police forces simply could not get into the *cités* during these five days.”

Seen in this light, the rioters who vandalized the Nanterre wall in the hours that followed the “white march” for Nahel Merzouk the first day of the riots appear to have been looking for French symbols—not Jewish ones. They did not go after a monument, they went after the French flag, which they took down.

It is also clear that attacks on French symbols go along with attacks on Jewish symbols and Jews, at least by implication. In Sarcelles, near Paris, for instance, according to the city’s former Mayor Francis Pupponi, “when the rioters decided to go after the French luxury stores outside of their own neighborhood, the first stores they stormed were all Jewish-owned. Why? Because to them France means *riches* and because Jews are supposed to have money.” In other words, these stores were attacked because they were Jewish and because being Jewish means being French—being integrated.

At the heart of the present situation, then, is not just a “police problem” or a “*laïcité*” problem, or even an employment problem, but a crisis in what the French call “assimilation”: the process through which specific groups and communities leave much of their particularism behind in exchange for equality and political and social rights that will make them indistinguishable from the rest of the population in the public sphere. And it is a crisis that affects all sides.

Because the Jews were the first group to serve as guinea pigs for assimilation after their emancipation during the French Revolution, because they were for long its sole beneficiaries—and because assimilation is now seen by everyone from the undergraduate-level readers of Franz Fanon to the non-readers of the *cités* as a scam played on poor, dark-skinned peoples by the racist colonial system—Jews are now considered to be, at best, voluntary victims of said system, or at worst its collaborators and profiteers.

In that regard, it is therefore tempting to see the random, spontaneous, antisemitic attacks that plagued France between 2000 and 2014 and beyond—that is to say before and after the terror wave—as a non- or pre-verbal designation of the enemy: the energetic

condition, so to speak, for the subsequent terror to fall on everyone. Contrary to what Meyer Habib wrote, what was really scary in the antisemitic murder of Sarah Halimi is not that her killer was an Islamist—it's that he was not.

So has more than 20 years of rabid, often Islamist-inspired antisemitism in France exhausted itself? Or is it so ingrained now that the new generation can do without the explicit reference to the Jews in its war against assimilation? Either way, what no one wants to grasp is the complete failure of the assimilationist model, which has been abandoned not only by the kids of the *cités* but also by the society at large.

There is a long and a short story for this lack of faith. The long story, of course, is the Vichy regime. During WWII, contrary to what the right claims today, not only did the most assimilated Jews not escape persecution, but the Consistoire—the religious Jewish structure of the era—supported the collaboration, a position that has been rightly regarded as a perverse outcome of the assimilating process. As Yonathan Arfi phrases it: “if the assimilation process had succeeded, the CRIF (a secular organization born out of the Jewish Resistance) would not exist. There would be only the Consistoire. The CRIF is the result of a failure, which is why, as an institution, we are incomprehensible and why we attract antisemitism.”

But the assimilation did not only fail the Jews. It failed postwar migrants from North Africa, too. Aside from racism, one of the most underestimated reasons for why the French failed to develop any active policy to integrate migrants from their former colonies was that this would have been seen as a *casus belli* by the new nationalist Algerian and Moroccan regimes, whose oil and gas were vital to the French economy. In 1993, King Hassan II from Morocco could still state on French public television that “Moroccans would never be French, did not want to assimilate, and France would be well advised not to try.” The Algerian FLN was even more nationalist. Honor was at stake.

The former colonies made a point of directly controlling their nationals on

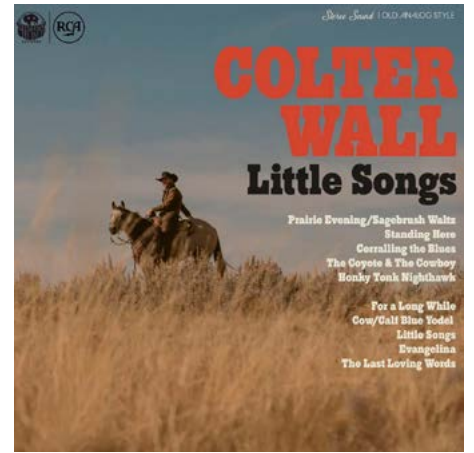
French territory, a deal to which the French state assented. As a result, the ex-colonies also controlled the mosques and migrant culture in France.

Caught between French prejudice on the one hand and the control exercised by their countries of origin on the other hand, migrants were actively prevented by both their old and new state authorities from developing their own autonomous culture inside France. This conflict of loyalties often plagued the migrants themselves, especially the fathers who in the Algerian case had fought the French during the war of independence. It is the failure of the second generation of migrants, and of the French government as well, to solve the contradictions of identity produced by this bifurcated reality during the French civil rights movements of the '80s that led to the building of the walls enclosing the *cités*, to the rise of Islamist propaganda, to the riots of 2005, and to today's crypto-secessionism.

The researcher Hugo Micheron, whose last book, *Les Démocraties face au jihadisme européen*, will be published in English soon, explains that today, social groups instrumentalize each and every incident to denounce Islamophobia. “Very serious matters like the killing of Nahel Merzouk are being put on the same level as superficial ones to trigger a feeling of permanent threat, paranoia, and emergency,” he explains. “They call this ‘micro-aggression,’ but in fact, this narrative produces a ready-made interpretative grid where Muslims and descendants of Muslims are natural permanent victims of the system. What is really scary is that far-right groups in France have started to mimic that strategy. They, too, exploit what they call anti-French ‘micro-aggressions’ in order to nurture ‘the Great Replacement theory.’ Both of these narratives are martyr-producing machines.”

How to resurrect an assimilation model that works in such a context is anybody's guess. One thing is certain: Denouncing a nonexistent French Muslim *intifada* against French Jews won't help. The problem here is much worse. ■

This article was originally published on July 24, 2023.



Album of the Week

Colter Wall, *Little Songs*

Colter Wall's new album, *Little Songs*, has a simple title. The album cover is simple, too, with Wall sitting on a horse amid the Plains. And the songs really are little: There are 10 of them, adding up to a couple minutes over half an hour, with only one over four minutes. What you see is what you get. And like his predecessor Johnny Cash, the first you notice about Colter Wall is his voice: deep and weathered, sounding much older than his 28 years.

Wall is from Saskatchewan, the Great Plains of the North. Unlike Cash, he didn't come from poverty—his father is Brad Wall, former premier of the province. But *Little Songs* is not a political album. The opening track, “Prairie Evening/Sagebrush Waltz” recalls Wall on a lovely June night sucking down the last of his courage and asking a beautiful girl to dance until there's sage on the soles of their shoes. Wall shoots for timeless in his songs, with nary a mention of a phone or anything modern. The scene is painted so sparsely that it could take place any time from 1968 to the present.

A few themes emerge on *Little Songs*, well-trodden territory for country fans: staying away from the music industry, ignoring what's hip and trendy, booze. The joy of *Little Songs* is not the exploration of the unknown, but walking down well-trodden paths with an astonishing voice.

—David Meir Grossman

THE REST

→ In September, **Israel's Supreme Court will begin its review of the contentious judicial overhaul passed this week by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government**, setting the stage for what could become a **constitutional crisis as the high court squares off against the executive branch**. The court's announcement on Wednesday comes after the passage of a judicial overhaul bill on Monday and the resulting widespread unrest and protest demonstrations. As a proxy battle over Israel's character in general, the dispute over the judicial reforms has led banks and rating agencies to issue new warnings about a decline in the Israeli economy. Despite requests by various petitioners to issue an injunction against the new law, the Supreme Court said, in a statement on its website, that it would hear two of the petitions sometime in September.

→ **A plea between federal prosecutors and attorneys for President Joe Biden's son Hunter seemed to be coming apart** in a court hearing on Wednesday as prosecutors told the judge that even if Hunter pled guilty to misdemeanor tax charges to avoid a more serious penalty on a gun charge, Hunter could still face future criminal liability on foreign lobbying charges. Chris Clark, Hunter's attorney, was not pleased with the prosecutor's characterization of the deal, telling the district court judge, "As far as I'm concerned, the plea agreement is null and void." Analysts noted it is unusual for a deal to blow up in court after the two sides have gone through extensive negotiations to hammer out specifics. After a brief recess, and after the judge said she would need additional time to review briefs from both parties over the terms of the plea agreement, Hunter Biden pleaded not guilty to the tax charges.

→ **Floats deployed by Texas authorities to try to stem the flow of migrants crossing over the Rio Grande from Mexico were allegedly installed illegally**, according to U.S. attorneys, who've taken Texas to court to have them removed. The 1,000-foot-long barrier of orange buoys required sign-off with Mexican officials to adhere to international treaties, says the Justice Department, who was asked by Mexico's secretary of state to intervene. In his letter to President Joe Biden on Monday defending Texas' right to erect the barricade, Gov. Greg Abbott said the lack of deterrence along the border was putting at risk the migrants who take the dangerous journey north. "Texas will see you in court, Mr. President," Abbott wrote.

→ **Number of the Week: 14%**. That's the **total drop in circulation for the largest newspapers in the United States over a one-year period ending March 2023**, according to new data reported by Press Gazette. The 25 largest print papers counted a 2023 total circulation of 2.6 million, a drop from the 2022 figure of 3 million, a decline that's been in the making for years but which accelerated during the pandemic, with this year's figure a 36% drop from 2019 circulation numbers. At the moment, *The Wall Street Journal* (609,654) and *The New York Times* (296,329) count the largest print subscribers. Unlike several smaller operations, WSJ and Times readers on the digital side continue to grow, with 9 million digital-only Times subscribers and 3.3 million for WSJ.

THE BIG STORY

They keep calling them unidentified aerial phenomena, but we'll just refer to them as UFOs—and according to the highly anticipated testimony from retired Maj. David Grusch before a House Oversight subcommittee on Wednesday, the government has spent decades covering up a program that captures and dissects these mysterious flying objects. "I was informed in the course of my official duties of a multidecade UAP crash retrieval and reverse engineering program to which I was denied access," said the former Air Force intelligence officer, who'd become a whistleblower after being tapped by a government task force on UFOs to review classified government files.

The hearing was the latest congressional effort to publicize the federal government's knowledge of potential UFO activity. Last year defense officials released previously unseen videos before a congressional panel, including one clip taken from an airplane cockpit that showed a flying spherical object that the military could not identify. "These sightings are not rare or isolated," said former U.S. Navy fighter pilot Ryan Graves, another witness at Wednesday's hearing. "Military aircrews and commercial pilots, trained observers whose lives depend on accurate identification, are frequently witnessing these phenomena."

—Sean Cooper

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Back to the Borscht Belt

A string of new projects pay homage to the Jewish history in the Catskills—and the area’s Jewish revival

BY JAMIE BETESH CARTER

This summer in the Catskills, everything that’s old is new again—and some things are just plain new. It’s not quite a revival of the old Borscht Belt, where hundreds of thousands of Jews used to spend their summers decades ago. But it’s a step toward a new Jewish culture in the mountains of New York State, which builds on and commemorates what came before.

The area’s iconic hotels from bygone days—Grossinger’s, The Pines—may be gone, but new historical markers are being placed throughout Sullivan and Ulster Counties to mark where they stood; these days, visitors can stay at newer boutique hotels like Kenoza Hall and Scribner’s Catskills Lodge that pay homage to what once was. Comic legends like Jerry Seinfeld and Mel Brooks may not be performing at the Nevele anymore, but this month’s Borscht Belt Fest will bring new comedians, musical performers, and food purveyors to Ellenville, New York, during a weekend festival that pays tribute to the old days while focusing on a new generation of entertainment. And while the physical institutions that once housed all of these memories and memorabilia have been dismantled, The Borscht Belt Museum will host exhibits that bring us right back in time to the golden age of the Catskills.

It’s been more than 30 years since even the last of the Catskills’ resorts was a popular destination. They’ve been talked about and represented in movies and stories for years, but why are people only now putting a stake in the ground

to remember and reflect on what once was? “Many of the people who lived in this golden age of the Catskills are growing old,” said Andrew Jacobs, president of the Borscht Belt Museum’s board of trustees. “And at this moment, there’s a *zeitgeist* thing I feel happening with *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, and younger people really fascinated by mid-century modern nostalgia.”

And while many members of younger generations may have gotten a glimpse of the golden age of the Catskills from *Dirty Dancing*, never before has there been such an established effort from so many organizations and individuals to truly, physically honor the history of the Borscht Belt.

“While the topic is abundant, it doesn’t really have that much existence in the region,” said Marisa Scheinfeld, founder and director of The Borscht Belt Historical Marker Project. “I do believe people want to look back at the past now because they see remnants of it. So while we hope the markers teach about history, we also hope they encourage tourism throughout all the counties.”

Momentum has been building for the past few years.

“The renaissance started happening up here around 2018,” said Scheinfeld. “And then, 2020 really brought an influx of people who left the city, which created a new need for more restaurants and stores to accommodate all of the people moving further and further away from the pandemic. Every summer, the Catskills just seem busier and busier.”

The area is definitely experiencing a rejuvenation. It may look completely different, but the area is still a retreat for

visitors to relax, indulge, connect with nature, and just take a break from life.

“I look at it like it’s a smorgasbord,” said Scheinfeld. “There is the Orthodox Jewish group going up there, creating their own Jewish vacation land, and you have people that go up there for the yoga and meditation retreats, some of which are old hotels. And you have the Brooklyn hipsters, people going up for the breweries. I find that it’s the same reasons why people have always gone.”

The Catskills—or “the Mountains” or “the Jewish Alps,” as some visitors called it—were originally created as a refuge for American Jews looking to escape the heat of urban summers (before air-conditioning) who weren’t allowed at other resorts, due to antisemitism. At the area’s height in the 1950s, there were over 500 hotels, and 50,000 bungalow colonies in Sullivan and Ulster Counties, a few hours outside New York City by car or train. The range was vast: Fancier hotels hosted guests like Elizabeth Taylor and Barbra Streisand. Other accommodations were known as *kuchaleyns*, more rustic and affordable summer family bungalows or cabins with shared kitchens.

The Borscht Belt—this Jewish world in the Catskills—had its heyday from the 1920s through the ’60s, though some institutions tried to remain relevant into the ’90s. Among the most popular hotels were the Nevele, Grossinger’s, Kutsher’s, and The Pines. Some say this was where Jewish comedy originated and where many now-famous comedians and musicians got their start, from Joan Rivers to Jackie Mason and the Four Tops to Buddy Hackett.

Non-Jews vacationed in the Catskills, too, but the Jewish scene had its own distinct infrastructure and culture. These destinations became institutions that had long-term impacts on Jewish culture today. “These enormous hotels with all of these leisure activities helped teach several generations of Jews what to actually do with leisure time,” said Deborah Dash Moore, an author and the former director of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan. “This was a new thing for Jews in America. If you were on slack

season in the garment industry, you weren't just out of work, but you could actually have vacation time." The larger Catskills hotels marketed just that: appetizing food, fabulous entertainment, all-season sports activities and, most important, a feeling of belonging among those returning year after year. The bungalow colonies and *kuch-aleyms*, while not as fancy, allowed for a different type of leisure: a reprieve for those simply looking to escape the city's heat.

Then it all seemed to vanish.

"How did an area that was so focused and successful in a matter of a very short period just completely disappear?" said Sims Foster, co-founder—with his wife, Kirsten Harlow Foster—of Foster Supply Hospitality, which operates numerous hotels and restaurants in Sullivan County, from Nine River Road in Callicoon to The Arnold House in Livingston Manor.

Due to a confluence of factors—the decline of antisemitism and wider acceptance of Jews, the increase in air and auto travel and air-conditioning becoming more widespread—most of the once sought-after destinations in the Catskills were forced to close. While some were abandoned, dilapidated, or burned down, some have been converted into camps for Hasidic children or yoga retreat centers, and some have even been reinvented as modern-day bungalow resorts.

While the infamous Borscht Belt era was long gone by the time Sims Foster was growing up in Livingston Manor, he heard whisperings of what once was from his family. "The demise actually laid a new foundation for where we are now," said Foster. "This is not the Borscht Belt anymore. But those vestiges of what was allowed us to build on this incredible heritage of tourism and hospitality. We got to reinterpret the area in a way that made sense for our generation."

Looking back at the old Jewish Catskills, the Borscht Belt Museum will be housed in the former Home National Bank in Ellenville. Slated to open fully in 2025 after the building is completely remodeled, the museum will both bring visitors back in time to the Borscht Belt's prime and open their eyes to the impact

the Catskills has had on today's culture. Organizers plan to include film, audio, visual, and immersive experiences.

"It's not going to be a museum with only glass cases full of old postcards," said Jacobs. "It's going to be much more of an interpretive, experiential museum." Jacobs is a long-time *New York Times* reporter who divides his time between Manhattan and the Catskills hamlet of Napanoch. In 2009, he directed *Four Seasons Lodge*, a documentary about a community of Holocaust survivors who shared a bungalow colony in Ellenville.

Elliott Auerbach, former mayor of Ellenville, grew up in the town, working for many years in the Borscht Belt hotels: He mucked stalls at the Nevele, worked as a busboy at The Fallsview Hotel, and taught skiing at The Pines. "As a kid, I used to go into the back of the hotel nightclubs when the entertainment was on," he said. "I probably saw every comedian, every singer, from that genre, and it was just amazing." Now he's on the museum's board of trustees. "When people ask me about the museum, I say it's where *Mrs. Maisel* meets *Dirty Dancing*," he said. "That's probably the best way to describe that era."

The museum launched a pop-up exhibit in the space this month called "Vacationland! Catskills Resort Culture 1900-1980," which features a glimpse into what the full museum will offer. Much of the memorabilia will be borrowed from the private collection of Allen Frishman, an author, preservationist, and Catskills local. As the former building inspector for the town of Fallsburg, New York, Frishman rescued and collected tons of objects from hotels and bungalow colonies after they closed for good—such as a phone booth from The Aladdin Hotel in Woodbourne, New York, the sign from The Eldorado Hotel in Fallsburg, and the only remaining seat from The Lyceum Theatre in Woodbridge, New York, as well as smaller items like bungalow keychains. His home in Mountain Dale, New York, could be a museum itself. "The stuff that's going in the pop-up museum is only a taste of what I have," said Frishman. "It's way too much stuff that I've been collecting. It's in drawers, it's in cabinets. I've got two sheds."

Frishman has been inspecting the sites of former hotels and bungalow colonies in the Catskills since the late 1980s. "I just knew these places were historic, and it was going to disappear if I didn't save it," said Frishman. "Everything has a story, and I'm so happy that there's finally going to be a place to display them all." He hopes his years of collecting literally tons of Catskills memorabilia will draw old and young visitors to the museum and the festival. "It's going to bring back the memories, but it's also going to teach younger people this is the way we lived. It was a certain time in history that people had to make their own fun."

A tour of Frishman's home collection of old Catskills memorabilia will be part of the lineup of Borscht Belt Fest, organized by the people behind the museum, taking place July 29 and 30. (Disclaimer: Tablet is a media sponsor of the Borscht Belt Fest, and Tablet's Executive Editor Wayne Hoffman is on the advisory board.) Combining comedy, live music, film, food, and art, organizers hope to give guests a taste of what visitors would get from the original Borscht Belt back in the day. Through all of this, Jacobs hopes to help people realize the impact the Borscht Belt has had on our society today. "I think our role is to help preserve, perpetuate, and celebrate this very seminal moment in history," he said. "Stand-up comedy was really incubated up here. And so, in a way, the essence of American humor is really Jewish humor, and Borscht Belt humor."

Comedy writer and performer Bill Scheft performed at hotels like The Pines, and will be taking the stage again at this summer's festival. "The Catskills is where you would go to see the huge shows," said Scheft. "You'd go to the Concord and see Sammy Davis Jr., or to the Nevele and see Shecky Greene. They were huge, huge shows."

While the festival will honor the past with events like "Stars of the Borscht Belt: The Entertainment Legacy of the Catskills," "If You're Having a Good Time, Tell Your Face!: Writing and Performing Stand-up in the Catskills," and of course a viewing of *Dirty Dancing*, it will also bring new voices and faces of music, comedy, art, and food into

the mix—not all of them Jewish. “Lucie Pohl’s Immigrant Jam” will feature first-generation comics celebrating the beauty of diversity, and a comedy show titled “New Faces in Stand-up,” curated by Ellenville native and stand-up comic Alejandro Morales, will feature up-and-coming comedians, many of them not directly connected to the Borscht Belt.

“The traditional style of stand-up comedy really evolved because of the Borscht Belt,” said Morales. “It used to be unheard of for one person to just go out and talk to people. But those classic Borscht Belt comedians, and that art form, grew into what became modern stand-up comedy, which is what I’m in love with doing. So even though I did miss the heyday of Borscht Belt comedy, I feel very plugged into that tradition.”

The larger-than-life theme of the Borscht Belt didn’t just apply to the entertainment activities; the food at the Catskills resorts was abundant as well. Visitors developed many hobbies like skiing, skating, and swimming at the resorts, and eating became a hobby in and of itself. Known for offering a wide variety of traditional Jewish foods, these resorts actually created the all-inclusive model, forcing some to loosen their belts after meals. Some hotels tried keeping up with the times by diversifying their menus and offering more contemporary cuisine. Much to their surprise, they failed—visitors just wanted the Jewish foods they knew and either loved to eat or loved to complain about. “Eating was a way of performing the everyday Jewish culture,” said Jeffrey Yoskowitz, food entrepreneur and Borscht Belt Museum advisory board member. “The Catskills was really a container for Jewish culinary tradition.” Yoskowitz will be speaking at a panel titled “From Pushcarts to Poolside: An Immigrant History of Food,” as well as judging a babka-eating contest.

“A lot of the Catskills stories being told don’t speak to the catering and all of the work in the food ecosystem to make it all happen,” said Yoskowitz. “The festival will honor the food history of the Catskills. If we can learn the origins of these food traditions, it allows for new stories to be written that can have even more meaning.”

While the museum and the festival are celebrating the unique history of the Catskills, organizers and historians also see this as a celebration of Jewish tradition and culture. “I like to say that this is the happy Jewish museum,” said Jacobs. “As opposed to most Jewish museums that have a larger section about persecution, this is happy because it shines a light on the triumphs of Jews in America and the successes and the achievements. There isn’t enough celebration of Judaism as a positive force in the American experience.”

Once connected to the museum and festival and now operating as a separate project, The Borscht Belt Historical Marker Project will place plaques at places of interest around the region. “The markers project will hopefully achieve something that doesn’t exist, which is the historic declaration that all of this history happened here,” said Scheinfeld. While the museum will live in one place, aggregating many stories, memories, and artifacts, the marker project will be more like a traveling exhibit that honors the locations where these institutions once lived. “The physical spaces of where the Borscht Belt really transpired are truly coming to an end,” said Scheinfeld. “The marker project is even more timely than ever because you can drive by where The Palms hotel was—and where we’re going to put a marker nearby. That used to be an unbelievable, huge, futuristic, mid-century modern hotel where great acts played, and if you drive by there now, you would never know.”

Scheinfeld considers herself a local, having grown up in the Catskills. As a documentary photographer by trade, she was always interested in capturing the beauty of her ever-changing surroundings. And while she’s published a book about the area, she’s excited to help create a project that will help others explore the history of the Catskills.

The first marker was unveiled on May 25, 2023, outside the Ethelbert B. Crawford Library in Monticello, New York. It gives an overview of the Borscht Belt, explaining the historical significance of the area, and goes into detail about what once existed in Monticello: about 65 hotels and 133 bungalow colonies in

the town alone. “Kutsher’s Country Club was known for its sports and entertainment scene,” the marker reads. “Wilt Chamberlain worked as a bellhop while playing on the hotel’s basketball team before rising to NBA fame.”

More than 100 people attended the first marker celebration, including locals to the area, historians, family members of hoteliers, and people who used to frequent the hotels and bungalow colonies being honored. “The Borscht Belt—either you love it or you hate it,” said John Conway, Sullivan County historian. “For decades, hotel owners tried to escape from that nickname, and yet today it survives. Over the last six months, my phone and emails have lit up by inquiries from around the world wanting to know about the Borscht Belt.”

With funding from The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, a total of 20 markers are slated to go up in the next few years. Being designed in a cohesive system, the markers will go from one end of Sullivan County all the way into Ulster County. The next marker to be unveiled is slated for Aug. 13, in Mountain Dale, where hotels such as The Evergreen Hotel and Rashkin’s Little Falls Hotel once stood. Other markers will debut in Swan Lake, South Fallsburg, Woodridge, and more.

“The way we’re approaching it is really experiencing the Borscht Belt,” said Scheinfeld. “You’re really going to drive through every town where documented hotels and bungalows existed. It’s going to be something that you can listen to with friends or family.” Each marker that’s put up will be accompanied by public programming.

These resorts that mainly catered to Jewish New Yorkers were truly a sign of the times. Many flocked to the mountains because they simply weren’t welcome elsewhere due to the fact that they

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were Jewish. “Even though it was born of bigotry, it ended up producing this cultural flourishing that had a real impact on American culture,” said Jacobs. “We hope to document that, celebrate that, and help younger generations understand that.”

Dash Moore said there’s “nothing like it” today: “It makes you feel old, which is part of what you want history to do. You don’t want it to feel like ‘I know this because I’m living it.’ You want it to feel like you’re not living it and you’re going to discover it.”

These days, air-conditioning is widespread, and air and automobile travel are more available. There is no doubt that the culture of the Borscht Belt has influenced what we watch, how we laugh, what we eat, and how we spend our leisure time today. And even though the peak of the Catskills seems to have passed eons ago, visitors keep coming back. “What made the region so special back in the day when it was a premier resort destination is what makes it so attractive again now,” said Keith

Rubenstein, founder of Somerset Partners, the firm that has purchased the once-famous Nevele Hotel. “It’s beautiful, it’s proximate, but at the same time, it’s far enough to make you feel like you’re really away.” For Rubenstein, purchasing the hotel isn’t just a real-estate transaction. He feels close ties to the area, having visited the Nevele every year for more than 15 years as a child. His plans are to create a new destination that speaks to today’s generation while honoring the nostalgia of the hotel. “It’s exciting to see that there’s going to be a place where people can appreciate the history and the memories that were made here in the olden days and look forward to what’s going to happen now.”

How do you truly celebrate nostalgia while creating something new? How do you expose a new generation of people to their history while encouraging them to make their own new memories? “I don’t think anyone’s trying to re-create the Borscht Belt,” said Scheinfeld. “I think we’re just trying to sprinkle some of the history and nostalgia back in so

that while people are moving forward and celebrating the future, they can also take a nod to the past and understand the magnitude of what happened here.”

What happened here was uniquely American.

“I think the big takeaway of these efforts is a recognition by American Jews that they actually have an American Jewish history, and that Jewish history is not only located in Europe,” said Dash Moore. “And therefore, it’s worth trying to understand that history and physically going to places and marking them.”

That Jewish culture isn’t just a part of the Catskills’ history—it is coming alive again.

“The symbolism to me is that there was a raging fire that got put out when the big hotels went under, but the embers remained and just needed oxygen,” said Foster. “And I think what we’ve really seen in the last five years is that there’s a nice fire to cook on again.” ■

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HOLIDAYS

Finding Light in the Darkness

On Tisha B’Av, mourning the person I was—before an assault

BY AMALYA VOLZ

In 2015, I was 20, living in Jerusalem, and studying at the Conservative Yeshiva. On the day before Tisha B’Av, while walking home from a Shabbat dinner, I was stalked and sexually assaulted by a stranger. My entire life changed in an instant. I felt disgusting and violated in every way it is possible to feel violated. This man invaded my life and body and forced me to become a victim to an unimaginable

crime. He forced me to grapple with the fact that I am not the sole person in control of what happens to my body.

The assault itself was obviously extremely traumatic, but the fact that it occurred the day before Tisha B’Av magnified the level of trauma to an unmanageable degree: Having grown up in a very secular Jewish context, this would be the first time I had ever heard of or celebrated Tisha B’Av. The very day after the assault, I was thrown into a

holiday whose practices almost exactly mirrored the hell I was going through.

At every level of Tisha B’Av, there is pain and personal resonance for me. The only word I know to call the experience, both of the assault itself and of Tisha B’Av, is “horror.” The first challenge is *Eicha*—the Book of Lamentations, which we read on the holiday—particularly the first two chapters. When we read the text, we see the story of an anthropomorphized female Jerusalem, who has been sexually brutalized and stands alone and humiliated. What is worse is the fact that the text positions this all as her fault, as a punishment from God. The words that she is called—*nidah* (impure), *davah* (anguished), *ervah* (shameful)—felt like taunts repeating the words that I already felt about myself in the aftermath of the assault. I felt like those words had been branded on my chest and represented what I was to the world now. The refrain “*ein menachem li*”—“there is no one to comfort me”—is an echo of how alone I felt.

I suppose that some people would find it comforting to read a text that mirrors a personal experience of theirs, but for me it is too painful to listen to *Eicha* chanted. Rabbi Alan Lew wrote that “the Great Temple of Jerusalem was the navel of the universe, the earthly locus where Israel felt its connection to the Divine Presence in a palpable way. So Tisha B’Av is primarily about the loss of this connection and the calamity that comes in the wake of this loss.” The experience of being assaulted tore away the sense of security that I had felt in my body; it made the walls come crumbling down. This was only reinforced by the fact that on Tisha B’Av, we commemorate the exact same thing happening to the Temple.

And then there are all of the physical practices of Tisha B’Av. Pretty much everything we are expected to do (or not do) to our bodies on the holiday is an exact mirror of how I treated myself in the few days after the assault. I couldn’t eat, I didn’t change my clothing, I didn’t shower or dare to look at myself at all. What I am doing right now is a retelling of my story, which puts me in a position of power and control, but undertaking these practices actually makes me relive the experience.

Obviously, there is no good day on which to be assaulted, but I believe that Tisha B’Av is the worst possible day that it could have happened. I will never be able to escape this forced reliving of one the worst moments of my life. And it’s not as if Tisha B’Av is really only one day—it’s a weeklong process of mourning and afflictive rituals. Up until recently, I have always felt alone on this day; the fact that people aren’t even supposed to greet each other on Tisha B’Av has made me feel like I and my experience don’t exist. The existence of Tisha B’Av has made it nearly impossible to move forward in the way I have learned. Tisha B’Av for me is really a *yahrzeit*, and it’s a *yahrzeit* that is so many times more difficult than my own father’s actual *yahrzeit*.

On Tisha B’Av, I mourn the person I was before the assault took place.

It took me so long to use the term “mourning” to describe my feelings, because I didn’t want to admit I would

never be who I once was—but that is the nature of sexual assault: You will never be the person you were before. I had to call this “grief” and learn to befriend my grief. I mourn my innocence, and the feeling of security in the world.

For a few years, I observed Tisha B’Av as normal, but everything came crashing down around me in the summer of 2018, when I was a student at the Drisha Institute. I realized that I couldn’t do any of this anymore, and I finally accepted how totally not OK I was. I remember logging onto Facebook on Tisha B’Av and writing a post about everything that was going on. Ever since then, I’ve made a yearly practice of writing a post on this day and sharing it to a limited audience on Facebook. Sometimes I wonder why I do this to myself, when it is so hard to do.

Last year was the first time I decided to light a *yahrzeit* candle to commemorate this experience. I also took the step of asking for a formal *heter* (rabbinic dispensation) from my rav, Eliora Peretz. I did this not because I need permission to take care of myself or because I can’t make my own halachic decisions, but because of the symbolism. To me, a *heter* is a formal acknowledgement from my tradition that what happened to me was real and significant. It feels similar to the recent apology that Pope Francis issued to the First Nations of Canada. When I received the *heter* in my email, I was overcome with emotion. To read the words—in all caps—“you have a HIYUV [obligation] to eat” made me swell with gratitude and vindication.

I saw the musical *Hadestown*, which starts and ends with the same song and dialogue, last year. The story does not have a happy ending, but at the end of the show the characters start telling it again anyhow. The narrator says, “It’s a sad song, but we sing it anyway / cause here’s the thing / to know how it ends / and still begin to sing it again / as if it might turn out this time.” I know that no amount of retelling will change the events that happened eight years ago, but I do feel that in the recitation I am able to reach new levels of peace and acceptance, and that something shifts internally each time I retell the story.

On Tisha B’Av, we recall not only the destruction of both Temples, but also all calamities that occurred to the Jewish people on and around this date. Lew calls this “the way our tradition has collapsed history on this day.” We have a tradition of *kinnot* (elegies) that we read, because *Eicha* itself is not enough to narrate the various tragedies that took place on this day. Of course, I am writing about something that happened personally to me and not to the Jewish people as a whole, but I still feel that what I am doing here is a type of personal *kinnah*.

Lia Purpura, an author and poet, has an essay in her book *On Looking* in which she watches an autopsy take place. Standing next to the man she will soon see opened, she writes: “Have I thought of the body as a sanctuary? A safe, closed place like the ark from which the Torah is taken and laid out on a table to be unscrolled. The two sides parted, opened like, soon I’d know, a rib cage, that a hand with a sharp-tipped pointer might lead the way over, reading toward depth.” As I write about this story, I think of this visual that Purpura creates. I think of someone carrying my body around the synagogue and placing me on the *bimah*, cutting down my sternum, and opening my chest to reveal my beating heart. This is exactly what we do to the *sefer Torah* every week. I think of how much vulnerability we ask of the Torah scroll when we read her, and how the *klaf* is as vulnerable and internal as the human heart. By opening and unrolling the Torah scroll, we put it at risk of damage, but we’d never be able to read the stories inside without doing so. To tell a story is inherently to open to a place of intense vulnerability and risk, but without doing so we’d never arrive at the heart of the matter—whether our own physical hearts or the beating heart of our people (the Torah).

At the end of last school year, my teacher, my rebbe, the aforementioned Eliora, gave me a leather-bound Tisha B’Av *machzor*. That whole year I was able to work with her, both in our *mus-sar* class and individually, on so much of the theological pain I’ve carried around. It’s because of how she taught me and *saw* me that I’m able to have the

courage and wisdom to be here today. When she gave me this book, she told me that Tisha B'Av would be a day that she'd think about me for the rest of her life, but since she won't be able to be there with me in person, she wants me to have this piece of her on this day. The other thing about the siddur is that it is hardcover. Recently, my friend Rabbi Tanya Farber was telling me about how there's a *chumra* (stringency) only to print *kinnot* in paperback, so there's an extra meaning to the fact that this siddur is hardcover and leather-bound. It's a way of stating that my pain is real and permanent, something that tangibly exists in this world.

In a *d'var Torah* on Parashat Yitro, Rabba Tamar Elad-Appelbaum says that the word *anochi* (“I” or “I am”) is foundational to an authentic Torah-based life. She says: “*anochi* is the story that I bring with me when I experience the law.” Laws don't hold any meaning unless someone is brave enough to come forward and say *anochi*, to say that something difficult happened to me. This is also what Hashem does, and did. The *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael* teaches that when God stood and said “*anochi*,” the mountains and hills shook and collapsed. In the Zohar, Rabbi Yosi says that “*anochi*” is the name of the *Shekhina*. Rabba Tamar uses these texts to teach that the purpose of Jewish law is to uncover injustices that might be hidden from us, and that the existence of these laws is testament to the ways that humans have hurt each other. By telling my story today, I am saying *anochi*, I am saying #MeToo, and I am bringing this experience from a place of darkness out into the light. *Oraita*—the Aramaic word for the Torah—has at its root the word *or*, light, and I am using Torah as a vehicle for shedding light on what happened to me.

The question of where to locate God in all of this has eaten away at me for years. Being assaulted completely shattered my theology. I couldn't understand how God could have done this to me, or how I could even be able to believe in God in the face of what I'd gone through. I wanted to know why this happened and for years was unwilling

“There were times I wanted nothing to do with observance or religion. One of the things I've recently realized, though, is that to blame God is to say that the fault does not lie with my assailant.”

to accept that there would never be a legitimate answer found. There were times I wanted nothing to do with observance or religion. One of the things I've recently realized, though, is that to blame God is to say that the fault does not lie with my assailant.

The past two years have brought so much healing and peace to how I relate to my assault. I had healed mentally from the experience, but I found myself needing to heal theologically. One piece that was transformative for me is from Rabbi David Weiss Halivni's book *The Book and the Sword*. Halivni was a Holocaust survivor, and talks about how God detests people who try to theologically justify the Shoah, or to even ask the question of why God let it happen. To ask this question is to assert that an answer exists, to imply that there is a justification for the Holocaust. He argues that even asking this question increases the suffering of the victims and survivors, and also removes due blame from the actual perpetrators, the Nazis—his exact words are, “The very question reduces the innocence of the victims and the culpability of the perpetrators.” There are certain events that exist without any explanation—Halivni argues that both Revelation and the Shoah are examples. I feel comfortable putting my assault in this

category as well: It simply happened, and I don't need to ask why. I love this idea that God hates that I would even ask myself why it happened, and I'm in a place where I feel confident that God also hates the fact that I was assaulted.

This brings me back to Rabba Tamar's *d'var Torah*. She says that the Ten Commandments show that the *Shekhina* was hurt by human misdeeds, but chose to stay in this world and give us the Torah anyhow. God saw humans hurting each other, and spoke out to say *anochi* and give us laws to teach us how not to treat each other. The *Shekhina* didn't have to stay in this world with us, but she did. This idea feels very close to my own experience: I could have easily chosen not to stay in the world of Torah, of God, and of observance, but I did. Even though it's been very hard for me. Listening to people's stories is making room for the *Shekhina* to say *anochi*, to tell us that she is hurting. When I hurt, I know that God hurts along with me.

Tisha B'Av ushers in the theme of *teshuvah* that will carry us through the High Holidays. I've always struggled with this on Tisha B'Av, because I was primarily thinking about the concept of *teshuvah* through the translation of “repentance.” Obviously, I can't accept the thought that I have anything to repent for in this situation. However, I'm now thinking about *teshuvah* through the translation of “returning.” My *teshuvah* here is that over time, I have been able to return to God, to return to the pure core of my soul that even my assailant couldn't touch.

In a conversation I had with Eliora before leaving Jerusalem, she told me how proud she was of me and all the spiritual work I had done that year. She was proud because I showed that healing can be found through the Torah, and that it is now my gift and purpose to help other people by showing them this. The writer Amy Berkowitz, in her book of poetry about experiencing rape, writes: “And in order to understand the impact of rape, we need more images on how rape stays with us—i.e., it's not just something that happens one night.” I want to take it a step further: We need more stories about what

recovery after sexual violence looks like, not just psychologically but also theologically and spiritually. Of course, no two stories of post-survival will look identical, but my understanding of how badly I could have used a story like this eight years ago fuels my drive to be here today.

My great-grandfather, who was a Holocaust survivor, left an archive of nearly 2,000 pages, which he donated to the Leo Baeck Institute. While reading through these thousands of pages, I came across a family story that he had written out. He wrote about how his mother-in-law (who would later be killed in Sobibor) was in possession of a treasured siddur that had been in the family for several generations. The Nazis burned this book on the night of Kristallnacht when they broke into the family home. My great-grandfather Karl was the one who had to tell my great-great grandmother of the fate of the book. His words exactly: “She cried.

Then, calmly, she said: *gam zu l'tova* (*this too, is for the good*).” I was floored, almost to the point of anger, the first time I read this. How could she have possibly thought or said that this was all for the good?

My great-grandfather and I have both made our personal stories of pain into *kinnot*. I actually read this story right before I made a painting for a class final project as an undergrad. I painted myself standing next to Ahalya, a character from the Mahabharata who experiences sexual violence and is punished by being made invisible. I wrote “*gam zu l'tova*” with a question mark, questioning the limits of the phrase and whether or not its use is normalizing the trauma of women.

Now, four years after first reading the story and making the painting, I have a new appreciation for this phrase. *Gam zu l'tova* is *not* saying that this experience is good or that it was good that I was assaulted. Previously, this is what I thought it had to mean. I think the

key to understanding the phrase lies in the *lamed*—my assault isn't *tov*, but it can be used *le'tov*—for the good. Obviously, what I went through was and still is terrible, and I wish that I had the power to prevent any other woman from experiencing something similar. However, I can find good in this experience. I can use it *for* the good, and I can draw good out of it.

My assault happened in the dark, but by talking openly about it I've taken in so much light. I know that I can also use what I went through as a light to other people. Even in the darkest and most horrible of times, there is still abundant light and abundance of God's presence. I feel that finally, I am in a place where I can pick up the pieces of what happened to me on this day, hold them in my hands, stand in line behind my great-great grandmother, and utter: *gam zu l'tova*. ■

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BELIEF

Spiritual Fitness

How SoulCycle led me to the rabbinate

BY SAMMY KANTER

The 2020 Pew study of American Jews found that a large proportion don't identify with the religious aspects of Judaism; 27% of all respondents—including 40% of those ages 18-29—consider themselves Jewish by cultural, ethnic, or familial background, but describe their religion as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” as opposed to Jewish. However, this does not tell the whole story. High numbers of Jews (and other Americans) of no religion report belief in a higher power. According to the Pew study,

three-quarters of U.S. Jews report that they believe in God or some spiritual force in the universe; even among Jews “of no religion,” 66% reported that they believe in a higher power.

These numbers tell a radical story about American society and religion, one that renowned theology scholar and Presbyterian minister Linda Mercadante calls the rise of the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). In her research, she plainly states that most people look for meaning in their life, and they also try to make sense of faith and hope. Mercadante wrote in her book *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds*

of the Spiritual but Not Religious that movement to spirituality outside of organized religion “is a way to get out from under the external constraints of authorities, traditions, or institutional bonds, and personalize one's spiritual quest.” This movement, she believes, is sparking a new level of spiritual interest among Americans.

That spirituality shows up, according to scholars, as the unbundling of religious identities. In today's internet-defined generation, many people are more willing to mix and match religious ideas and practices than ever before. The “Religiously Remixed,” as Tara Isabella Burton calls them in her book *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, might get their sense of community from one place, their sense of meaning from another, and practice wellness culture rituals, and see their purpose as political. These “new religions” have the “Remixed” person demanding agency and creative ownership of their spiritual lives, valuing authenticity and one's emotional experience as key indicators

for interpreting the meaning and purpose a practice might offer. One of the most popular outlets for the Remixed, currently a \$4.2 trillion industry in the U.S., is health and wellness culture.

In other words, a lot of American Jews are finding their spiritual fulfillment through places like SoulCycle. I should know. I'm one of them. And I can attest that these aren't simply paths away from Jewish religious practice. In my case, SoulCycle led me all the way to the rabbinate.

I am deeply invested in the learning and teaching of Jewish text and tradition, and yet, there are many days when SoulCycle is where I learn, connect, and pray. For instance, a viral TikTok video this past March featured Mady Maio, a Los Angeles podcast host and entrepreneur, sitting in her car in workout clothes. She begins by saying, "I just got out of synagogue. It's this small Reform synagogue called SoulCycle West Hollywood. The rabbi's name is David, and he had the most eye-opening, third-eye-opening teaching I want to share with you." Maio proceeds to share the words of LA SoulCycle senior master instructor David Zint as if it is Torah. While many liked the video for its comedy, as a rabbi, I connected to this video for the resonant Torah that Zint shared, which also resonated with me.

Maio and I, as Jewish millennials, are not alone in finding spiritual fulfillment in workout classes. According to Amanda Montell, author of the 2021 book *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, the ancient practice of yoga became part of mainstream American culture toward the end of the 20th century, beginning the trend of spirituality in American fitness classes. Yoga, according to Montell, is a practice concerned with one's "emotional well-being and spiritual enlightenment" alongside the well-being of one's body, which was a radical change to the fitness-centered American exercise culture of the '90s.

Yoga is a term that characterizes a variety of physical, mental, and spiritual practices from ancient India, with many schools of yoga tied to Buddhism and Hinduism. For the most part, the yoga studios we see in the U.S. today

"The spiritual methodology and teaching from SoulCycle helped me understand Jewish texts in a new way."

are unmoored from specific religion, yet they borrow poses, sacred text, and breathing practices from different yoga strains. While yoga is a fitness trend that started in a religious context and became separate from one in the American framework, its practice inspired a rise in what Montell calls "cult fitness" in the early 2000s.

With the promise of inspirational mantras and communities of new friends, fitness brands like CrossFit, SoulCycle, and later Peloton began to take the spirituality mindset from yoga and apply it to their workout. These companies use broad but relatable language and mantras in their marketing and classes that imply the class is a place for the client to have a spiritual experience that fits their needs that day. While not based in any particular religion, these brands see an opportunity to use their companies to meet the spiritual needs of the Remixed spiritual seeker. "The most important thing you own is your story," Zint often says in his SoulCycle classes, "and you are the author of that story." Studios are often deemed sacred and, implicitly or explicitly, the instructors preach a powerful ideology that creates a deeply personal experience for many clients. Using religiously infused language with biblical undertones, Montell said this language

on repeat in each class convinced listeners to believe they were on a path to the "perfect" life.

Founded in 2006 with one small studio on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, SoulCycle is an indoor cycling company that revolutionized the fitness industry with its style of workout, emphasis on community building, and spiritually focused brand. In a one-on-one interview with me, Jewish co-founder Julie Rice said, "Every SoulCycle journey has a similar arc, which peaks during a hill ballad when riders turn up the resistance dial on their stationary bike and climb uphill in the dark." Rice describes the transformational experience as a moving meditation that creates a transcendent connection. "Where I've worshipped, it's always been that God believes in you and wants you to be the best version of yourself," Rice said in a Zoom interview. That ideology is presented to riders from the moment they walk into the studio, with the words "find your soul" at the entrance. With arguably a similar goal of a davening experience, many SoulCycle instructors use songs or language that helps to guide riders to reflect on and become the best version of themselves when they walk out of the SoulSanctuary (the name for the spin studio).

For me, SoulCycle has been a place where I seek to discover the best version of myself as a rider since 2013. The SoulSanctuary has held me through times of joy (birthday rides, my bachelor party) and through a lot of tears (heartbreak over lost love and other life transitions). I am drawn to SoulCycle for the way the workout can help me access my true self by relaxing my mind, allowing space for me to think critically about who I am in the world, and sharpen the idea of who I want to be. In a recent class, in the midst of challenging routines on the spin bike, Zint said, "You are not just a reflection in the mirror. You are a connection to your source. A connection to your future." I walk out of each class having completed a workout, worked through my thoughts, and connected to myself and the world around me in a way that feels transcendent, and often, divinely inspired.

While SoulCycle's spirituality can

appear broad and flimsy to critical eyes, this vague and broad language is what makes SoulCycle's teaching resonant to so many people. Situated alongside New Thought and contemporary wellness culture, SoulCycle's theology creates that "apex of spiritual individualism," according to Burton, that leads each rider to easily take a teaching and apply it to themselves in the way they see fit.

While SoulCycle is powerful for me, other brands like Peloton and CrossFit are reaching many worldwide with their own brand of spirituality. Peloton revolutionized the fitness industry by offering a workout class experience from the privacy of one's own home. For Peloton riders, there is an intimacy in the riding experience. Some report feeling as if the instructor is speaking directly to them. At the end of a class with instructor Ally Love, she explained that riding a Peloton can help make the person whole so one can give back to the world. "All it takes is one person to change the world," she said. CrossFit's spirituality is about finding a state that's natural. In a CrossFit video, founder Greg Glassman said CrossFit strives to "collectively advance the art and science of optimizing human performance," by returning humans to our natural state. Scholar Cody Muselman describes this philosophy as the path CrossFit takes to promote the natural state of the human body in the present so that human bodies will be more able to face the unknown of the future.

I began to consider becoming a rabbi when I felt spiritually transformed by SoulCycle, and from there, I wanted to create those spiritual experiences for others through Judaism. Growing up in an active Reform Jewish family, I always felt deeply connected to the community and family aspects of Judaism. While we went to temple often, I never understood how Judaism was a spiritual address for me to connect with God, or any higher power, to make sense of my existence in the world. SoulCycle was the first place where I wrestled with these existential questions, which in turn helped me connect to myself and God in a deeper way. That spiritual connection on the spin bike pushed me to take a closer look at what meaning Judaism could offer me,

which led to my path to the rabbinate. As I studied at Hebrew Union College over the past five years, I realized that the spiritual methodology and teaching from SoulCycle helped me understand Jewish texts in a new way. Alternatively, Jewish thought helped me have a more spiritually grounded and connected experience when I rode on the bike.

For example, I found parallels between New Thought philosophy of the early 19th century in the U.S. that impacted health and wellness culture and the teachings of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in the 1970s. In an essay titled "God Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown," Schachter-Shalomi writes: "God has become so immanent, so indwelling, that the way to God was no longer via prayer directed 'upward' but by going to the core of the core, inside of us." He emphasized that the path to accessing the divine is located within each person, and the role of prayer is to help everyone of us access that God within oneself. This idea helped me see the act of going within in a SoulCycle class as a way of connecting with God, and it changed the way I approached each ride to consider each class as if I'm bringing the *kavanah* (intention) to davening.

Jewish Science also offered me another way to deepen my understanding of the divine within. "[Power] is not outside of you, it is all there within, an endless fount, and endless capacity, infinite and endless since it is part of God; you have only to recognize it as such and realize its outward expression." In a blind guessing game, these words might seem to belong to a SoulCycle instructor. Yet, these words belong to Tehilla Lichtenstein, longtime spiritual leader of the Society of Jewish Science, from 1961. Alongside her husband, Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, a major figure in the Jewish Science movement, the Lichtensteins created a platform in the mid-20th century for Jewish New Thought. In the *Jewish Science Interpreter* in 1923, he wrote:

God's presence within man is manifested by the very life that is in him, by the presence of thought, feeling, emotions. For while it is ours to utilize those powers within us, it is not we who have brought them into

existence. Their existence is due to the divine within us. It is the divine in us that we call on to express itself in perfection when we offer these prayers or affirmations. And these prayers are always answered. END

In this theology, part of the work of finding the divine within is a self-acceptance of the divine in our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Knowing God involves a deep sense of trust in oneself that we are good, beautiful, and holy. While these messages might seem simplistic, I believe this sort of positivity is sorely missing in today's American obsession with materialism and comparison. Through its branding and teaching, SoulCycle provides an outlet for seekers to visualize the inward journey by embodying the challenges of life in a workout. While pushing oneself physically, riders become more open to receiving the philosophy of SoulCycle that is delivered in a simple, direct, and buzzy way that is easily digestible.

It is my hope that the organized Jewish community pays attention to these trends and turns to communities created by SoulCycle, CrossFit, and Peloton to understand how to draw the "Remixed" generation in. What does it look like to elevate the texts in our tradition that promote the idea of finding the divine within? Are our spiritual leaders using language that feels relevant, intimate, and meaningful to today's seekers? Is our prayer practice embodied in a way that unites the body and mind in the effort to connect to transcendence? I believe these questions and others sparked by this research are key to creating a Jewish community that meets the needs of today and future young Jews. It was only when I paired my SoulCycle practices alongside Jewish prayer and my own theology that the meaning of both systems became greater in my life. It is my hope that health and wellness culture in today's society will continue to enrich, strengthen, and empower American Jews, and our organized Jewish world will use these ideas to shape American Judaism for generations to come. ■

This article was originally published on July 24, 2023.

Salade Juive

Moroccan Cooked Tomato and Pepper Salad

BY JOAN NATHAN, ADAPTED FROM SUZANNE AZRAN KATZ

INGREDIENTS

- ¼ cup canola oil
- 5-6 long hot peppers, such as yellow wax or Anaheim, diced small or pulsed in food processor
- 2-3 cloves garlic
- ½ 6-ounce can tomato paste
- 2-3 tomatoes, diced and peeled (about 2 pounds)
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1 teaspoon sugar (optional)

PREPARATION

Step 1

Heat the canola oil in a heavy frying pan and cook the peppers and the garlic, uncovered, until the peppers are soft, adding ½ to ¾ cup water as needed.

Step 2

Dilute the tomato paste with a few tablespoons of water. Add the tomato paste mixture and the tomatoes to the peppers and cook down for about 20 minutes, or until it reaches the consistency of jam. Add salt and pepper to taste and if needed a sprinkling of sugar.

Yield: About 3 cups.

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