

THE TAB

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NEWS & POLITICS

The Nanny vs. The Nanny State

Only one thing can save us from predatory AIs: our own data

BY JOHN ROBB AND JACOB SIEGEL

As Hollywood recycles comic book remakes with funding from China, the once-great cultural capital appears to be in a state of steep decline. But in one area, at least, the movie industry is offering a bold and inspiring vision for the future. The writers and actors who went on strike to prevent studio owners from using artificial intelligence (AI) to exploit and expropriate their work are on the front lines of a new data war triggered by the explosive growth of AI. This past July, Fran Drescher, former star of the popular sitcom *The Nanny*, and now president of the SAG-AFTRA union, described the stakes: “If we don’t stand tall right now, we are all going to be in trouble, we are all going to be in jeopardy of being replaced by machines.”

Drescher is right. Across the U.S. and the global economy, corporations are strip mining people’s data and then using it to train the AI systems that will put those very people out of work. Two days before this article was published, the Writers Guild of America reached a tentative agreement with the studios for a new three-year deal. According to *Variety*, “details of language around the use of generative AI in content

production was one of the last items that the sides worked on before closing the pact.” With the writers bringing their five-month strike to a close, the actors guild could soon reach its own deal. While the Hollywood shutdown has undoubtedly been painful for many of the people involved, we believe that workers who do not manage to secure protections against AI will be in for far

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Norman Manea's Exiled Shadow

Freed from the dreary, nauseating oppression of Ceausescu's communist surveillance state, the great Romanian author is thrown back on himself, books, and the Jews

BY DAVID MIKICS



worse outcomes. Doomsday scenarios about fully sentient AI—aside from being good marketing gimmicks for the tech industry—distract from the real and immediate danger posed by the technology: Not the rise of terminator robots but that tens or hundreds of millions of people will suddenly lose their jobs.

Though AI technologies have been around for a while, they have only recently begun to work in a way that everyday people can understand. ChatGPT isn't the super intelligence of science fiction, but it delivers results on par with the capabilities of a well-educated or skilled human being across various tasks. As a result, thousands of new AI companies launched over the last couple

of years have collectively generated billions of unique monthly visitors to their sites. And as the immense power of Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites has shown, platforms capable of generating billions of visitors are extraordinarily valuable.

Both stand-alone AIs like ChatGPT, and those built into other applications where they can do everything from automate medical screenings to “socialize” with lonely people, are poised to become the most valuable technological artifacts ever built—potentially worth tens of trillions of dollars over the next decades. The problem is that AIs are data gluttons. Because there's a strong correlation between the amount of data used to train an AI and the quality of its outputs (large quantities of data even allow you to ignore many quality issues), the companies running them need access to vast sums that are constantly replenished.

Until recently, it was relatively easy to acquire vast quantities of data. AI developers and platforms acted like prospectors in an unregulated frontier, hauling publicly available information from the open internet with abandon. Untold reams of data were simply screen-scraped, downloaded from questionable sources, or acquired under academic access. Now that AIs have proven their commercial worth, however, with trillions in potential revenue on the line, gates are being put up at a rapid clip.

Already, Twitter, Reddit, and other big sites are restricting access to the information collected from their users to prevent companies from harvesting and then monetizing that data. Twitter introduced a rate limit, setting a cap on the number of posts that users can see per day. These moves have triggered a backlash from users who view such policies as intrusive and shortsighted. However, the truth is that sites that don't build such barriers are inviting other companies to treat them as a free resource and training ground. Even the AI sites themselves, from OpenAI to Midjourney, are putting limits in place to prevent their products from being used to train other AIs. Tech companies are also signing small data licensing deals as part of a strategy to build a

legal case showing that the unlicensed use of their data damages their business. Finally, there has been a growing number of copyright suits made against the larger AI companies by copyright holders, from big firms like Getty Images to individuals like comedian Sarah Silverman. In her lawsuit, Silverman's attorneys contend that OpenAI and Meta acquired her book—along with countless others—through illegal torrenting sites and then used her intellectual property to train their AI models.

The abruptness of technological change and the reluctance to prepare for this eventuality (one of the authors of this article testified before the U.S. Senate a few years ago on ways to avoid this mess) is creating a slow-moving disaster with cascading downsides for America's social and economic order. Especially given that past methods of protecting intellectual property, such as copyrights, no longer offer effective protection. The problem is that the large language learning model (LLM) AIs like ChatGPT and its competitors aren't making a copy; they are “learning” from preexisting data in much the same way that humans learn from reading a book, listening to music, or seeing a picture. Furthermore, it's not considered a copyright infringement even if the AI uses a temporary copy of copyrighted data (image, video, text, voice, etc.) to train an AI. It's precisely because copyright and licensing claims are rendered so weak by this new technology that firms are turning to crude access restrictions (blocking APIs and rate limits) and licensing agreements (if you access this data, you will abide by our rules on its use and pay us) to protect data obtained from their users.

Raising the drawbridge on data access will make it increasingly difficult for new AI firms to acquire the data needed to train high-quality AIs. Such a scenario will only concentrate more power and wealth in the hands of the current information barons. Early entrants to the AI field, already trained on what the open web had on offer, will find themselves well-protected against competition, allowing them to charge monopoly rents. As the web becomes sclerotic, AI developers will turn to

niche applications and sources, paying to acquire the data people produce at work or cutting deals to extract it from people when they enter public spaces.

If current trends continue, the tension between AI's insatiable demand for data and the proprietary interests of current data businesses will turn the internet into a feudal landscape. Every site and network with the power to do so will put up walls to prevent bots from "looting" their estates, and will only grant access through licensing agreements. Finding and reporting on the abuses in these walled gardens will become harder as sites cut off public access.

The biggest losers in this new data grab won't be the companies involved. It will be the individuals who produce the data that make AIs valuable and yet will be cut off from its profits. While the big social networks can erect barriers around their platforms, the average internet user lacks the technical means to prevent their public behaviors from being collected and fed to AIs. Without some kind of data ownership rights, nearly all of us online will be put into the business of selling ourselves. Only a small number will receive any economic compensation while, for the great majority of people, "payment" from the AI companies will come in the form of access to their platforms. You won't really own anything but you'll get the privilege of squatting in the metaverse.

In this future, which actors like Silverman and Drescher correctly recognize as a looming reality, every good or service you buy or job you work might *require* you to contribute data and relinquish all claims to it. Individuals whose jobs are not fully outsourced to the AIs they helped train will be turned into "Mechanical Turks." The original Mechanical Turk was a chess machine built in the 18th century and an elaborate

"If current trends continue, the tension between AI's insatiable demand for data and the proprietary interests of current data businesses will turn the internet into a feudal landscape."

ruse built to hide human agency behind technological artifice. Touted as a fully automated robot, the machine's chess-playing ability was the result of a hidden human operator. More recently, Amazon adopted the name "Mechanical Turk" for its "crowdsourcing marketplace" that uses remote workers to perform tasks, including the training of AIs. Today, the term "Turk" also refers to human workers who provide data that is used to train or fix the outputs generated by AIs.

What would a "Turking" economy look like? Here's one potential scenario: Employees at a large firm are forced to contribute data on everything they do that's classified as work, whether it takes place in the office or, for remote workers, in their homes. Video. Text. Voice. Metadata gathered from sensors monitoring their peak working hours, heart rate, and other biomarkers, and frequency of bathroom breaks. Workers who refuse those terms discover that, with AIs already being trained to automate their entire industry, the few alternative jobs available would be even worse. With the employees now brought in line with their new "workplace," the information collected from them is used to train AIs that will replicate the skills and even mimic the workers' mannerisms, for instance by incorporating

vocal inflections and facial expressions into customer service bots programmed to display "human" emotions. A human worker might then be paid, at a reduced rate, to provide feedback to their new AI replacement, in order to perfect its performance or fill in when it falls short.

Luckily, this scenario is not inevitable. One model of an effective response is being provided by the Hollywood strikers. To protect their work, the screenwriters and actors guilds issued a set of demands.

They want to control when or if they use AI at work. They don't want a studio to use an AI to produce a script or copy an actor's likeness for use in a production without their permission.

They want protection for their data. They don't want the studios to use their scripts to train AIs, which could allow the studios to use them to replicate their work inexpensively. (A workaround for this, not currently in discussion, is that if scripts are used to train the AIs, they could generate a generous and perpetual royalty for those who wrote them.)

They want to ban "Turking." In this case, the studio will be blocked from hiring writers at a greatly reduced rate to come in and "fix" a script quickly generated by an AI. The same prohibition would likely be applied to actors being brought in at a reduced rate to "fix" some of the gestures and expressions used by an AI-generated character.

In short, the guilds' demands offer a strategy for preserving the value of human work in the age of AI. The same pressures affecting writers and actors are going to sweep over virtually every other kind of work. These are the types of protections we should all be seeking, and we should be seeking them now. Soon it will be too late.

AI presents an immense problem for people concerned about the future of free societies, but there is at least one simple solution available—data ownership rights for everyone. Every individual should have an ownership stake in the data they produce, regardless of where it is stored or how it is captured. Data generated from writing (posts, tweets, essays, etc.), images (whether drawings or photos posted to sites like Instagram), sounds (from music to

SPORTS

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voice), and video should belong to the human beings who create them.

The first step is to mandate that companies secure the positive consent of the person whose data they are scraping and harvesting from the web. This will require some changes to the internet's current infrastructure, but tracing data back to their originator may be easier than many people imagine, given that big tech companies already employ pervasive surveillance systems to track their users every keystroke. Any AI system developed before the new requirement was put in place or where it isn't possible to acquire consent, must be released as an open-source product.

In a system based on ownership instead of extraction and rent-seeking, individuals can pool their data for licensing in exchange for a royalty. This works well for big sites already aggregating vast pools of data. Standardized royalty rates for data contributions, based on the value generated by the AI, would minimize the abuse of employees unable to negotiate market rates. Royalties would incentivize the development of a dynamic market for data and open the web again, reversing the damage currently underway.

The proposal is less radical than it seems at first glance. Your data is *already* valuable. But now the only people who see the benefits of that value are the tiny number of corporations in the data harvesting business. To prevent the total obliteration of the middle class and preserve the possibility for America to be a free and democratic country, the necessary next step is to let individuals in on the profits generated by their labor.

In time, a data ownership system could foster the development of an industry akin to what we see in the financial world. Data brokers and banks would work for individuals with a fiduciary duty to get the best returns and protections possible. As AIs improve, and are folded into every product and service, this royalty payment should become substantial over time.

Rather than granting individuals ownership of their data, some people have argued that a better solution

would be to nationalize AI, treating it as something like a public utility. We see many problems with this approach, but to cite only the most obvious: The government is already involved in AI and has used it not to promote the common good but as a political weapon. A co-author of this article addressed that dynamic earlier this year in testimony given before the U.S. Senate: "We seem to be caught in a trap. There is a vital national interest to promote the advancement of AI. Yet, at present, the government's primary use of AI has been as a political weapon to censor information that it or its third-party partners deem harmful."

There is no panacea that can prevent the inevitable volatility and harsh tradeoffs that AI will bring. But in moments of dramatic uncertainty, it is helpful to consider the lessons of the past. Between a future that resembles feudal collectivism and one that emulates the early liberal model of property rights, we believe the latter will be better both for the vast majority of individuals and for the social fabric of American society. Making people owners of the data they create would improve privacy protections without sacrificing scientific and technological innovation. Some individuals would still choose to hide or anonymize their presence online. But many others would be financially rewarded for bundling and packaging their data in useful forms that would make it more reliable and increase its value. More and better data being available would in turn create a highly competitive AI industry, with a large number of new entrants. This would lower the costs of AI services across the board, and drive up the royalties provided to data owners.

Participatory equity through data ownership in the growing AI-fueled economy is a judo move that would change the dynamic of our society for the better. We would flip from seeing the future and technological innovation as a threat to an opportunity for advancement in which we all have a stake. ■

This article was originally published on September 25, 2023.



Album of the Week

Mark Linkous, *Bird Machine*

For Mark Linkous, who recorded under the name Sparklehorse and killed himself in 2010, a world of hurt and pain never seemed far away. What was so incredible was his ability to channel that pain into a unique mixture of lo-fi beauty and rage. A new posthumous album, *Bird Machine*, shows that his gifts never left him.

Bird Machine opens with an explosion of propulsive energy, a fuzzed-out pop banger titled—optimistically or forebodingly?—"It Will Never Stop." What is the titular "it"? "The crows with their arrows and their little bows," Linkous says. "The rabbits with their carrots and their piccolos." It's a mixture of cutesy and focused, with the sound of a '90s DIY band verging onto the philosophical.

After Sparklehorse's first album, *Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot*, Radiohead named them as their favorite new band and brought them on their OK Computer tour across Europe. Barely turned into pop culture at all, Linkous only knew the English band from "Creep," but the tour presented tremendous possibilities. It turned into a nightmare when he overdosed in his hotel room.

It calls to mind Elliot Smith and David Berman, two other sad, dead, geniuses.

—David Meir Grossman

The Man Amazon Erased

Where do you go when your smart home decides you're not welcome?

BY JAROD FACUNDO

On Thursday, May 25, Brandon Jackson, a software engineer in Baltimore County, Maryland, discovered that he was locked out of his Amazon account. Jackson couldn't get packages delivered to his home by the retail giant. He couldn't access any files and data he had stored with Amazon Web Services, the company's powerful cloud computing wing. It also meant that Jackson, a self-described home automation enthusiast, could no longer use Alexa for his smart home devices. He could turn on his lights manually, but only in the knowledge that Amazon could still operate them remotely.

Jackson soon discovered that Amazon suspended his account because a Black delivery driver who'd come to his house the previous day had reported hearing racist remarks from his video doorbell. In a brief email sent to Jackson at 3 a.m., the company explained how it unilaterally placed all of his linked devices and services on hold as it commenced an internal investigation.

The accusations baffled Jackson. He and his family are Black. When he reviewed the doorbell's footage, he saw that nobody was home at the time of the delivery. At a loss for what could have prompted the accusation of racism, he suspected the driver had misinterpreted the doorbell's automated response: "Excuse me, can I help you?"

Submitting the surveillance video "appeared to have little impact on [Amazon's] decision to disable my account," Jackson explained on his blog on June 4. "In the end, my account was unlocked on Wednesday [May 31, six days later],

with no follow-up to inform me of the resolution." By now, many months later, Amazon's investigation into the matter appears to have concluded though the issue remains far from resolved. Contacted for a response, the company wrote: "In this case, we learned through our investigation that the customer did not act inappropriately, and we're working directly with the customer to resolve their concerns while also looking at ways to prevent a similar situation from happening again."

It was only Jackson's technical skills and particular automated home setup that saved him from what could have been a larger lockout. "My home was fine as I just used Siri or [a] locally hosted dashboard if I wanted to change a light's color or something of that nature," he explained. His week of digital exile amounted to a frustrating inconvenience only because, as a tech-savvy user and professional software engineer, he had the ability to set up his own locally hosted network that acted as a failsafe. But Jackson's experience is a warning to the vast majority of Alexa users and smart home dwellers who, lacking his particular skills and foresight, are increasingly at the mercy of the tech they have embedded into their lives and bedrooms.

"I came forward," Jackson told Tablet, "because I don't think it's right that Amazon could say, 'I know you bought all these devices, but we think you are racist. So we're going to take [you] offline.'" On one side, critics lambasted Jackson as a dupe for having smart devices in the first place; others said his criticisms of Amazon implied that he didn't support a company protecting its employees. "People missed the main

point," he said. "I don't really care who you are, what you do, or what you believe in. If you bought something, you should own it."

Jackson's story of being temporarily canceled by the tech behemoth spread across the internet after it was discussed in a YouTube video by Louis Rossman, a right-to-repair activist, independent technician, and popular YouTube personality. Right to repair, or fair repair, is a consumer-focused movement advocating for the public to be able to repair the equipment they own instead of being forced to use the manufacturer's repair services or upgrade products that have been arbitrarily made obsolete. In the early 20th century, fair-repair advocacy began with automobiles and heavy machinery, but its tenets have spread as computer chips have come to undergird contemporary life.

Following Rossman's initial video about Jackson's case, Amazon alleged that Rossman had abused its affiliate marketing program and placed restrictions on the YouTuber's business account, leading him to speculate in a follow-up video that the corporate giant was retaliating against him for covering Jackson's travails. Rossman alleges that this was the first time Amazon made any allegation against him of abusing its affiliate marketing program since he enrolled in the marketing program 7.5 years ago.

The number of households adopting smart home devices in the United States is expected to reach 93 million by 2027 and most consumers rely on cloud services for their daily online use. But the cloud is not just a metaphor to explain a connected network; it describes the complete reorganization of digital life under the power of remote centralized databases. Light switches, lightbulbs, locks, thermostats, coffee makers, air conditioners, speakers, exercise equipment, and virtually every other piece of equipment you can find in the average home can now all be operated as interconnected pieces of a single digital network, run by an outside host, such as Amazon, which operates the massive server banks that make up "the cloud." For consumers, this arrangement offers convenience and optimization. You can turn on the heat in your house from another state, or reorder a

household good with a simple voice command. But the cost of that convenience is that consumers no longer independently control how their tech—or their homes, since the two are increasingly integrated—is operated. As Kyle Wiens, CEO of iFixit and another right-to-repair activist put it, “Who really owns our things? It used to be us.”

Alexa’s terms of use includes a clause stating that Amazon is permitted to terminate “access” to Alexa at the company’s discretion without notice. Jackson was told by a customer relations executive over the phone that he needed to assure the company that he would not ridicule or put future delivery drivers in harm’s way. Nearly a month later, Amazon admitted no wrongdoing, only apologizing for “inconveniences.” Given absolute power over its users, there is no pressure on Amazon to explain its decision. Indeed, the company used the same statement Tablet received for an earlier June *Newsweek* article regarding Jackson’s lockout.

Amazon’s claims of being concerned about the safety of blue-collar workers strain credibility. According to a 2021 article published in *Vice*, when minority delivery drivers faced violent threats and racial harassment, the company’s penchant for efficiency took priority over worker safety. Unsustainable demands from delivery drivers have translated to drivers peeing in bottles and defecating in garbage bags, a problem Amazon internally acknowledged even as it publicly denies the allegations. Inside its “fulfillment centers”—the term the company uses for its warehouses—workers suffer 5.9 serious injuries for every 100 workers, an 80% greater injury rate than competitors. Indeed employee turnover is so high in these facilities that a leaked company memo from 2022 warned that the company was on track to deplete its number of available workers by 2024.

Amazon’s intrusion into Jackson’s life, then, should not be understood within the context of protecting workers—which might begin by giving them adequate time to use the restroom—but rather as part of an emergent regime of technological control. The culmination of years of debate about political and civic norm moderation on social

media and in public discourse has created a new normative standard in which “innocent until proven guilty” is now viewed as an oppressive and antiquated relic. As the new unelected masters of public discourse, tech giants like Amazon, Google, Twitter, and Facebook, have been encouraged to execute summary punishments of users for mere accusations of racism or “disinformation.”

Amazon’s enormous power in the global economy and ubiquitous presence in the U.S. supply chain and cloud computing sectors allows the company to take the power of surveillance and cancellation even further. Unlike purely social media companies like X (formerly known as Twitter), Amazon’s suite of smart home gadgets and services gives it a direct physical presence inside of people’s homes. That means that when Amazon wades into cultural issues, or decides to punish people based on offensive speech, its political values are mapped onto objects and processes used in the real world.

In Jackson’s case, in order to regain access to things he had already paid for, he was forced to submit the surveillance video from his home to Amazon to prove his innocence. Somehow, in the new cloud-based networked world these corporations are building for us, the solution to every problem always involves individuals handing over more of their private data.

Debates over censorship, free speech and its limits typically revolve around social media use. But Hayley Tsukayama, a senior legislative activist for Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights group, suggested to Tablet that Jackson’s case shared a similar architecture to conversations around content moderation. Companies can choose not to allow certain forms of speech, but in doing so they can no longer be treated as neutral platforms. Tsukayama argues that social media users are offered a recourse, even if the process is stacked against them. “If [Amazon] is going to look at customer behavior as being part of the terms of service,” she said, “they [should] make that clear and set up a process that’s perhaps not unlike what we see at Facebook, YouTube or others who deal with content takedown.”

But, of course, we now know that millions of social media users had their accounts censored or banned without explanation or recourse for posts, including many that were classified as “disinformation” at the time of the alleged offense but contained statements that authorities later acknowledged as true. In that light, placing more trust in a content moderation model seems like a dangerous gamble. It could also lead to even more surveillance online as companies like Amazon claim a need to monitor their customers’ every move so they can judge them “fairly.”

Like many digital technologies, the smart home offers connectivity at a steep price—it makes individuals passive subjects of the products that surround them, including the things they own. Few of us have any real understanding of the “terms of service” on the devices and services that we rely on. Consider how streaming services replaced physical media and how the arrival of smartphones, with all their wonders, also meant that the owners of such phones became incapable of replacing their own batteries, SIM cards, and physical storage. If we ponder that relationship for a moment, we might conclude that many of the things that we believe we control are really on loan as a means of controlling us. ■

This article was originally published on September 21, 2023.

COLLECTION

The Iran Deal

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action regulating the development of Iran’s nuclear program remains the most consequential and high-stakes piece of foreign policy in the geopolitics of the Middle East, and Tablet has covered the treaty from before its inception under Obama, through the Trump years, and now into Iran Deal 2.0 under the Biden/Blinken Administration.

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Avi Shlaim's Fantasy Land

In 'Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab-Jew,' his autobiography-cum-history of Iraqi Jewry, historian Avi Shlaim's life unfolds like a fairy tale

BY BENNY MORRIS

Paradise

The pampered princeling toddles from age zero to 4 around his palatial home—featuring seven toilets, three bathrooms, vast living rooms with “precious Persian rugs,” a lush garden—watching his beautiful mother, Saida, while away her evenings at poker with Iraq's high and mighty as hubby Joseph, a rich businessman, parties into the night in downtown Baghdad. Otherwise, the family reclines on the shores of the Tigris feasting on sumptuous picnics as nannies shoo away the flies (and, presumably, the local riffraff). The Shlaims “were well-integrated into Iraqi society,” he tells us.

Paradise Lost

Iraq turns anti-Jewish and xenophobic and the Shlaim family—including 5-year-old Avi—flies to the impoverished State of Israel, where they eventually wash up in a cramped apartment in a gray tenement, their wealth and status left behind in Baghdad. Joseph, after serial heart attacks, is unemployed, lost, and broken, while Saida, to keep starvation at bay, becomes a telephonist. The dominant, absorbing Ashkenazi society regards the incoming immigrants from Arab lands (*mizrahim*, easterners) as inferior semibarbarians. In school, Avi is taken for a dimwit (though at one point he writes, “I did not experience direct discrimination and I did not encounter overt racism”). Nonetheless, he develops an inferiority complex and underperforms academically (“I was indolent, introverted, cut-off, phlegmatic to a rare degree”).

Paradise Regained

But “Nana” and Uncle Isaac ride to the rescue. Now 15, Shlaim is sent off to London, where he gradually blooms and even acquires a girlfriend. He briefly returns to Israel to serve in the IDF (“[It was] the high point of my identification with ... Israel,” he writes). Then he returns to England, where he soars: Jesus College, Cambridge, and the University of Reading, where he matures as a historian, ascends to an Oxford professorship and, along the way, publishes half a dozen well-received books, including *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine*, and *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. He even marries the great-granddaughter of a British prime minister.

Three Worlds tells us what makes Avi run. His *mizrahi* roots and experience produce a raw nerve, the emotional and psychological wellspring of his later oeuvre and politics.

He interweaves his personal story (until the age of 20) with the history of Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict. His personal story is moving, and it is told with atypical, engrossing candor. He describes his mother's forced marriage, at 17, to 41-year-old Joseph; rebelling, she briefly ventures on a hunger strike and is raped on her wedding night. Relations with his sisters are rocky and overclouded with misogyny (“Abi [Avi] is the honey, and you are the peels of the onion,” says Grandma). There is a cold, distant relationship with his father. Saida and Joseph divorce. A would-be Mossad recruiter fondles Saida. Uncle Isaac the benefactor purloins a

sixpenny tip left by a customer for a waiter, etc.

Shlaim comes to define himself as an “Arab-Jew,” like some of Israel's *mizrahi* intelligentsia—Yehuda Shenhav, Sammy Shalom Shitrit—who sired the *Keshet Hamizrahit* (the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition) movement. Trying to better the social and economic condition of the second- and third-generation *mizrahim*, they believe that the (alleged) maltreatment of their parents when they arrived in Israel was merely one facet of the Ashkenazi contempt for the Arabs in general.

It was the *mizrahim*'s bitter sense of grievance that propelled Menachem Begin and the Right to power in 1977—and, passed down the generations, continues to maintain the Right (and Netanyahu) in power and, in part, underwrites their current effort to subvert Israel's liberal culture and infrastructure. In Shlaim's case, the personal affront and alienation ultimately morphed into anti-Zionism and sympathy for the Palestinians, who in his repeated tellings can do no wrong.

But given Shlaim's antipathy to Israel, which repeatedly and unmistakably surfaces through *Three Worlds*, as it has done, increasingly, through the rest of his oeuvre, one point needs clarification—Shlaim's name. Not the “Shlaim,” which apparently derives from an unidentified German ancestor, but the “Avi.” Why does he persist in using this common Israeli name, usually an abbreviation of Avraham? As a self-styled “Arab-Jew,” perhaps “Ibrahim,” as he is designated in Saida's old British passport, or “Ibri,” or “Abi,” as he was called as a child, would be more fitting? And why does *Three Worlds* sport a full-page photo of the young Shlaim in IDF uniform standing proudly next to Grandma Mouzli Obadiah? Is it that Shlaim is reluctant to completely part with his Israeli identity, perhaps because it usefully underlines his status as a Zionist apostate within academe, or is it because he however grudgingly continues to discern something positive in the Israeli experience?

Shlaim writes that he has placed his family's story “within the broader context ...

[of] the history of the Jewish community in Iraq.” Indeed, at various points in *Three Worlds* he seems to say that he is relating the story of all the Arab world’s Jewish communities, not just Baghdad’s or Iraq’s.

But he isn’t. *Three Worlds* tells the story only of a wafer-thin layer of rich Baghdadi Jewish families. There is almost nothing in the book about the majority of Baghdad’s 80,000-100,000-strong Jewish population, the middle or lower middle classes and the poor. And it tells us nothing at all about the tens of thousands of Jews who lived in the Iraqi hinterland, especially in the Kurdish north.

How did Iraq’s Jews fare? In a gross understatement, Shlaim concedes that “the status of the Jews of Islam could be contentious at times.” He hardly mentions the bloody pogroms, the bouts of oppression and the permanent subordinate status and humiliation of the Jewish communities that lived between Morocco and Persia in the 14 centuries since the rise of Islam.

While it does appear that the Jews of Mesopotamia fared better than most of their sister communities, Shlaim exaggerates to the point of distortion: “Iraq was a land of pluralism and co-existence.” Unlike Europe, “in Iraq ... there was an old tradition of religious tolerance ... The overall picture ... was one of religious tolerance, cosmopolitanism, peaceful coexistence and fruitful interaction.”

It is true that the Jews of Iraq—or Islam in general—did not suffer genocide. But in Iraq, as in all the Muslim lands, Jews (and Christians) were *dhimmi*, second-class subjects. So it was in Baghdad during Arab, Mongol, and Persian rule in the Middle Ages and so it was in the following centuries. Periodically Jews were persecuted (as under the caliphs Omar II ibn ‘Abd al ‘Aziz, Harun al Rashid, al Mutawakkil and al Muqtadi), forced to pay special taxes, and wear identifying (usually yellow) tags or garb.

In 1333 and 1344 Baghdad’s synagogues were destroyed. By the 15th century, almost no Jews remained in the city. Under the Ottomans, who ruled Iraq from the 16th century until 1917, the picture was mixed, and during the

19th century the Jews came to dominate Iraq’s economy. In the years of British mandate rule (1921-32) the Jews prospered, with a Jew—Sasson Effendi—even serving as finance minister. But Iraqi independence brought a swift and permanent decline in their status. Anti-Jewish laws were enacted and Jews were dismissed from government posts. During 48 hours in June 1941 in Baghdad, some 200 Jews were slaughtered and hundreds raped by Muslim mobs and soldiers, as police and government officials looked on, in what became known as the *Farhud*—an event for which Shlaim incredibly blames the British.

Thereafter, the Iraqis generally regarded their Jews with suspicion, against the backdrop of the growing conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Eli Amir, an Iraqi Israeli writer of Shlaim’s generation, has described how Muslim children regularly beat and chased him and his friends down Baghdad’s alleyways as they made their way home from school. During the 1948 war and its immediate aftermath, many hundreds of Jews were arrested and sent to detention camps, Jews were systematically harassed (including Shlaim’s family), robbed of their assets and businesses, and thrown out of jobs, schools, and university. A handful were tortured and hanged. Jews were then barred from leaving Iraq.

But in March 1950 the government changed policy and announced that Jews could leave if they gave up their Iraqi citizenship. This was followed up in March 1951 with a regulation freezing—meaning confiscating—the assets of all Jews who had renounced Iraqi citizenship or left the country since 1948. Israel semiclandestinely organized the community’s mass departure, and 123,500 Iraqi Jews resettled in the Promised Land by the end of 1951, while a few thousand more made their way to the West.

The Shlaims—why is not adequately explained—headed for Israel. Not adequately, because the family was non-Zionist, perhaps anti-Zionist. “Zion had little allure,” Avi tells us. “Zionism was an Ashkenazi thing. It had nothing to do with us,” he quotes his mother as

saying. (Later, he writes: “The Zionist movement was a colonial-settler movement”; “Zionism aimed to build a Jewish Sparta in the Middle East.” Aimed?) For his grandmothers, Shlaim tells us, Iraq was “the Garden of Eden,” “the beloved homeland”—and the Land of Israel was “a place of exile.” They could well have said: “By the waters of Zion, there we sat down, and there we wept, when we remembered Babylon.” One can only wonder at what would have happened to Iraq’s Jews, had they stayed, under the Baathist colonels and Saddam Hussein.

Shlaim writes that it was “the push of Iraqi xenophobia and the pull of the newly born Jewish state” that resulted in the mass exodus of 1950-51. But throughout the book he paints a less balanced, more lurid picture that in effect attributes the mass departure to Zionist lies, manipulation, and terrorism, with the Iraqis playing only a secondary role.

In particular, Shlaim zeroes in on five explosions in Iraq during 1950-51 directed against Jewish or Jewish-related targets, one of which, at the Mas’uda Shemtob Synagogue, caused four fatalities. The Iraqi government quickly blamed the Zionist underground, set up after the *Farhud* by local Zionists and guided by agents from Israel/Palestine. The bombings, said the government, were designed to encourage the Jews to leave. The Iraqis subsequently tried and hanged two underground operatives, Yusef Ibrahim Basri and Shalom Salih Shalom. Many Iraqi Jews, including the Shlaims, believed the government’s explanation, and some continue to believe it today. Israel consistently denied any involvement by its agents and said the bombers were probably Iraqi government agents or Muslim extremists.

Shlaim claims to have solved the mystery. Three of the bombings “were the work of the Zionist underground,” he concludes. But in effect he goes further and blames Israel for the fourth, the lethal Mas’uda Shemtob bombing, as well. Basri and Shalom were controlled by an Israeli intelligence officer based in Iran named Meir Max Binnet, Shlaim writes. And the lethal attack at the synagogue was carried out (separately) by a Syrian criminal who was

dispatched by an Iraqi police officer who had been bribed to mount the attack by the Zionist underground, he writes. Shlaim bases these findings on statements made by an Iraqi Jew some 60 years after the event, on Iraqi journalistic reports, and on an unheaded, undated, unsigned page in Arabic purportedly purloined from an Iraqi police report on the bombings.

It all sounds pretty convincing (if repetitive), but this historical documentation is inconclusive at best. One apparent error in Shlaim's narrative stands out. In trying to pin Israel's colors to the bombings, he writes that Binnet in 1954 was "in charge" of a subsequent (proven) Israeli sabotage operation using a cell of local Egyptian Jews, in which U.S. cultural centers and other targets in Cairo and Alexandria were bombed with the purpose of causing bad blood between Egypt and the West (the episode known in Israel as *essek habish*—the unfortunate business). The cell was caught and its members were jailed or executed. Binnet was also picked up and committed suicide. The problem with Shlaim's account is that Binnet was apparently not involved in the sabotage operation in Egypt. He was an independent spy. The bombing was organized and run by someone else but Binnet was picked up incidentally due to a compartmentalization failure.

"Having lived as a young child in an Arab country, I was aware of the possibility of peaceful Arab-Jewish coexistence ... My Iraqi background thus helped me, as I grew up, to develop a more nuanced view, based on empathy for all parties locked into this tragic conflict," writes Shlaim. Unfortunately, he continues, the idea of a two-state peace settlement, based on partitioning Palestine, is dead. Shlaim attributes this death solely to Israel and Israeli policies, particularly the settlement enterprise, which, over the past 50 years, has planted more than half a million Jews, some of them messianic fanatics, in the midst of the 3 million-strong Palestinian Arab population of the West Bank. Israel has, and will likely have in the future, neither the will nor the power to uproot the settlers.

I agree with Shlaim that the two-state solution model is dead. What he fails to mention is the initial and even more compelling cause of the death of the two-state solution: Palestinian Arab rejectionism. The Palestinians have displayed remarkable consistency in rejecting the two-state solution: They said "no" to the Peel Commission partition proposal in 1937 (which awarded the Arabs 70% of Palestine) when Haj Amin al-Husseini ruled the roost; they said "no" to the U.N. General Assembly's partition resolution of November 1947 (which proposed Palestinian statehood on 45% of the land); PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat said "no" to the partition proposals of the year 2000 (the "Clinton Parameters") that awarded the Palestinians a state on 21%-22% of Palestine; and current Palestinian Authority "President" Mahmoud Abbas failed to respond (i.e., said "no") to Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert's partition proposals, which were akin to Clinton's, in 2007-08.

The fundamentalist wing of the Palestinian national movement, Hamas, which won the Palestinian elections in 2006 and is still the most popular Palestinian party, rejects out of hand any talk of partition. It aims, so says its charter, clearly, to eradicate Israel and replace it with a Sharia-ruled state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. And while the Palestinian Authority, dominated by the Fatah party, occasionally pays lip service to the two-state idea, it, too, covets all of Palestine (why else insist on the refugees' "right of return," which, if realized, would create an Arab majority?). Partition is not on the Palestinian agenda today, if it ever really was.

So what does Shlaim propose? A one-state solution—a democratic binational state, ruled jointly by Palestine's Arabs and Jews. The problem is that neither Palestine's Arabs nor its Jews support this unworkable idea, especially given the 120-year history of war, terrorism, and repression. For a model of this kind of solution, Israelis, Palestinians, and helpful foreign interlocutors need look no further than the internally fractured Lebanese state on Israel's northern border, which is dominated by Hezbollah.

There is too much blood, and bad blood, between the two peoples, not to mention abysmal religious, cultural, and social differences—and yes, racism, on both sides—to produce a version of Belgium on the Mediterranean.

Shlaim's idyllic vision, based on the social and economic mingling of upper crust Arabs and Jews in Baghdad during a brief period of time in the 1930s, is not a precedent or pointer to anything. My prediction? Were a one-state solution ever tried, it would collapse in anarchy and drown in rivers of blood, compared to which today's violence is a mere trickle.

Three Worlds is very readable, like everything that Shlaim writes. A good editor would have deleted its innumerable repetitions—and he or she may also have caught some of its outlandish factual errors: "seven Arab armies invaded" Palestine in 1948 (in fact, it was four); "at the end of 1948" Israel's population was "650,000 of whom 150,000 were Arabs," (in fact, there were 700,000 Jews and somewhat more than 100,000 Arabs), to give just a few examples.

Early on in *Three Worlds*, Shlaim recalls that his "elders" viewed Israel, before the family left Iraq, as "a small, faraway country of which we knew little." The words echo the appeaser Neville Chamberlain's dismissive designation during the 1938 Munich crisis of Czechoslovakia, which he was about to sell down the river, as "a far-away country ... [inhabited by] people of whom we know nothing." Is it possible that subconsciously Shlaim is here signaling his desire, or what he assumes is or will be the West's desire, to sell Israel down the river? ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

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The Art of Humblebrag

Ben Lerner's 'The Lights' is a collection of auto-fictional poems from a master of self-validating ambiguity

BY MARCO ROTH

Let's get this out of the way: As my own literary ambitions stalled—mostly due to poorly handled and occasionally crippling episodes of depression and anxiety, along with a poor aptitude for managing my career—I became increasingly jealous of Ben Lerner's success. At the kind of hangouts in the Brooklyn literary demimonde, where youngish, aspiring writers and critics gather over drinks with older scenester types like me, whenever asked my opinion of his work, I'd say something like, "How many writers my age had to die just so Ben Lerner could write thinly disguised autobiographical fiction about looking at paintings and guilt about eating perfectly tenderized, grilled octopus with his agent?" As soon as the words would leave my mouth, I'd feel ashamed. Rather than attending to the work, I was surrendering to the pseudo-culture of personality that largely consists in coming up with spurious ad hominem reasons to vent valueless opinions. I was doing my bit to feed the cycle of resentment, hype, hyperbole, and backlash that I'd once experienced from the other side. Wasn't my real problem that my agent had politely washed her hands of me in 2013, while taking me out for the \$24.95 sashimi lunch special at Japonica? There were two thin slices of raw octopus, firm and not too chewy, but no second book contract.

What I really felt about Ben Lerner—when people asked me that question at parties—was that he lived in a world free of shadows, somehow—almost inexplicably—marked out for glory. My remark, petty as it was, was crafted out of several beliefs that kick around

in the basement of our current cultural unconscious about what makes writers successful or unsuccessful. The first of these is that timing matters as much if not more than hard work, self-belief, thoughtfulness, or the qualities of one's prose.

There's an element of truth about the lotterylike nature of book publishing and artistic success in general that can effectively blind a person to their own limitations: At the turn of the millennium, a young writer trying to fashion himself as an American version of W.G. Sebald, (complete with photographic illustrations)—the way Lerner appeared to do with his first novel about the ironic complexities of a young American poet in Madrid on a Fulbright fellowship (we'll return to this question of awards later) who then witnesses the aftermath of the March 11, 2004, al-Qaida attack on the Spanish commuter rail system—would have struggled to find the kind of critical reception that greeted his 2010 book *Leaving the Atocha Station*. The field in the late 1990s for young, secular, Jewish male writers interested in Europeans, aesthetics, and European history—both intellectual and not—had been narrowly defined by Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, a work of high kitsch.

I wasn't wrong that my peers and I had suffered under this anti-intellectual climate of our late 20s, a period when many of the most talented and thoughtful fiction writers I knew abandoned their work for Ph.D. programs in the humanities or law school, or gravitated toward scriptwriting or journalism. Lerner, five years younger than my cohort, was then an undergraduate, at free-thinking Brown University, no less! By the time he was ready to deliver his

antidote to Foer's existential Drama-mine into the hands of those who make and break the hopes of promising young writers, tastes had shifted in a more skeptical direction. The parent-pleasing faux-naivete of the callow young person's debut novel had made way for something closer to knowing decadence.

No fan of Foer's, the critic James Wood favorably compared Lerner's narrator to Alexander Herzen and a litany of great 19th- and early-20th-century "superfluous men." America was no longer "post-historical," or "post-tragic." Many of its youth were serving again in wars in foreign lands, brought there by the eruptions of grievances in the form of bombs that ripped apart lives. American mainstream publishing, too, seemed at least momentarily open to works of greater complexity.

The culture that was ready for Lerner had not been ready for certain other writers and tendencies that prefigured him, and his success is to some extent their redemption as well. In the deep background, there's one of Lerner's great influences, Allen Grossman: "We used to call him *Ursa Minor*, as opposed to *Ursa Major*—Harold Bloom," the poetry scholar and critic William Flesch recalls. The minoriness wasn't sought or cultivated, it was just an aspect of a certain steadiness and commitment to things being elemental in an age that favored more grandiose pronouncements and movements—Grossman, who wrote and taught poetry at Brandeis and Johns Hopkins was, after all, only six years younger than Ginsberg. Although he always had fans and appreciators, Grossman's late redemption has come about through his students and devotees from my generation, who include one of its most thoughtful public intellectual literary critics (Michael Clune), its best literary editor (Lorin Stein), and Lerner himself.

There were also honorable failures, more rough-edged precursors to Lerner's interest in a kind of shared, collective consciousness that runs alongside his more recognizable autobiographical writing. The outsider novelist Evan Dara's *The Lost Scrapbook* (1995) used a pirate-radio inflected stream of consciousness style to portray experiences

that are both felt individually and shared across a commons in the aftermath of a Midwestern town's destruction by an industrial accident. Like *Leaving the Atocha Station*, it was published by a reputable small press—having won a prize judged by William Vollmann, Mark Leyner, and Jonathan Baumbach. But for a host of reasons—coastal bias, Dara's total commitment to authorial impersonality (Dara is a pseudonym and the real person has never been identified) and sheer length and unevenness of prose—the novel did not catch on.

In a more general vein, Lerner's clipped, abstracted, yet at the same time highly personal style offered a neat update to the much greater length and more cumbersome apparatus of the systems novels—in which individual characters come to understand the breadth and depth of large impersonal forces arrayed against them—that had dominated quality American lit since the early 1970s. Above all, Lerner was both alienated and at the same time refreshingly normal. He offered DeLillo without the paranoia, David Foster Wallace without clinical depression, wrapped in the more accessible, easily consumable package of an apparently stable, high-functioning first-person narrator.

So timing certainly matters but is far from the only factor in determining which writers are anointed generational talents, borne aloft from book to book by prizes, genius grant awards, and plum appointments in university departments, enjoying the eager attentions of agents, editors, and publishers while others toil through versions of ye olde "silence, cunning, and exile," midlist obscurity, adjunct MFA appointments, and unanswered emails in the hopes that some future *New York Review of Books* Classics series will rediscover them after they're dead.

Another factor worth considering in Lerner's case is parentage, or rather parenting. Readers of Lerner's autobiographical novel *The Topeka School* (2019) will be familiar with some of the best (perhaps only) "good enough" parents in Jewish literary history: Harriet and Steve Lerner, both clinical psychologists, Harriet known for *The Dance of Anger*, a

"Lerner was both alienated and at the same time refreshingly normal. He offered DeLillo without the paranoia, David Foster Wallace without clinical depression."

bestselling contribution to relationships dynamic theory that mostly urged women (though men too) to attend to their anger and figure out how to use it productively within and outside their marriages. Her son was clearly a beneficiary of this technique: More than any other "white male" writer of recent vintage, Lerner has found a way to keep a spark of incandescent rage alive in his work without appearing to do so. He wields his anger well, never against himself, and almost always toward the right objects. No small accomplishment and a subject really deserving of its own essay.

Lerner's parents figure in other ways throughout his work. In *The Hatred of Poetry*—a slim but powerful contemporary riff on the classic "defense of poetry" genre (published by FSG as a standalone volume, almost a chapbook)—Lerner, as many poets before him, locates the poetic impulse in early childhood acts of naming or creative misnaming:

If you are five and you point to a sycamore or an idle backhoe ... or to images of these things on a television set and utter "vanish" or utter "varnish" you will never be only incorrect; if your parent or guardian is curious she can find a meaning that makes you almost eerily prescient—the backhoe has helped a structure disappear or is

glazed with rainwater or the sheen of spectacle lends to whatever appears onscreen a strange finish. To derive your understanding of a word by watching others adjust to your use of it ... I think that's poetry.

The second-person pronoun along with the hypothetical syntax casts a nice penumbra of doubt over any autobiographical provenance, but even if Lerner was not this exact child, he was someone very like this child.

The last clause I find especially fascinating, partly because Lerner just leaves it there, believing it requires no additional explanation or commentary. "To derive your understanding of a word by watching others adjust ..." implies a relationship between language and power that subtly, but neatly restates a core tenet of avant-garde literary modernism—"The Poet is a little god" is Peruvian modernist Cesar Vallejo's memorable epigram. But here, the little god arrives swaddled in the softer, subtler guise of a half-century of American psychotherapeutic culture. Crucially we learn to be poets not by imitating others, or imitating nature, but by attuning ourselves to the reactions of others as we, the child at the center of the world, produce sounds. The poet comes into being when he understands that he may occupy just such a center of benevolent attention.

We should all be so lucky. "Entitlement," which our culture has taught us to believe to be a disadvantage to overcome, synonymous with "privilege," is in fact the birthright of the well-parented. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson reminds us that "the nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner ... is the healthy attitude of human nature." For "dinner" substitute "loving attention" and you will understand the comparable rarity of this state of health.

Parental attention is central, too, in "The Chorus," a prose poem in Lerner's new poetry collection, *The Lights* (someone really needs to properly theorize Lerner's love of the definite article). Importantly, the piece marks one of Lerner's few explicit acknowledgments of his Jewishness. More personal essay than poem, "The Chorus" begins with an anecdote about young Ben, as the lone

Jew in his elementary school class, being tasked with introducing the single Hanukkah song in the winter “holiday” concert, “I wasn’t a shy kid, but this task absolutely terrified me, and I worried about it for weeks in advance.” The terror derives from separating from a crowd, the chorus. When he tries to beg off, his parents encourage him, “Benner ... you always do great ... it’s important to participate.”

The essay then swerves abruptly—something you can do when you call your essays poetry—to a scene from Lerner’s Little League baseball team: “incredibly competitive, overserious. Our games were rituals in which sons were reduced to tears by fathers ... But not me, my dad would applaud no matter what.” This sounds great, but Lerner is quick to explain that this public display of unconditional love in a competitive context “humiliated me, marked me as different.” Instead, it’s the pitching coach who comes to Lerner’s aid as he melts down before an audience of his wildly cheering, supersupportive extended family, in town for his brother’s bar mitzvah. “Benner, I am going the way of the earth and you should strengthen yourself and become a man.” One suspects that these might not have been the coach’s exact words, the sage advice prefigures a shift in the poem’s register, as Lerner layers the experience of singing, both alone and in chorus, with baseball as a rite of passage, the pitching mound as bima, and with an intergenerational conversation among this family of ambivalent, assimilated mid-American Jews.

It’s worth pausing over this poem because, like all good poems (and, definite articles aside, this is a good poem) “The Chorus” teaches you how to read it as well as shedding light on other works by the author. In its small way, it contains an entire poetics. The moves here are complicated and also self-contradicting: Lerner both speaks about his anxiety at stepping out from the choral group and at taking the mound as the center of attention in a team sport, being marked as different or just marked as Jewish (not the same! And yet, how similar!). The poem, however, repeats the original anxiety-causing scenario. Itself, it makes yet another such step into the limelight.

Lerner invites our gaze; he asks us to adjust to his use of words; and he also does everything possible to evade, complicate, and distort the attention we bestow.

Extremely confessional or pseudo-confessional—the poem also informs us that Lerner’s kids tease him about his childhood nickname, “Benner,” and that because he can’t remember song lyrics he has “taught false songs to my children” that they will one day discover to be counterfeit cultural currency, marking them too as alienated and different—it then dives midsentence into a collective plural and more mystical mode, “That was ‘Joy to the World’ and this a Torah portion about parallel mirrors sung in the perfect pitch our fathers withheld from us, not because they didn’t want us to have it, but because they didn’t think we could handle it.”

This dissonant mood switch, from the personal—what poets and essayists like to call “the lyric”—to a collective impersonal or “depersonalized” voice that is no longer called “epic,” (because we no longer believe in epics) but nonetheless signifies a register of more general social (one might say “choral”) participation, has indeed become Lerner’s signature move, both in fiction and poetry. This is true both at the microstructural level of paragraph or “line” as well as in broader subject, content and theme. Most of the poems in *The Lights* enact some version of this intermixing—a sampling or layering most explicit in the poem “Autotune”—that yields an impersonal first person singular, or a depersonalized, disconcertingly plural “I,” that is—at the same time—plausibly Lerner and at the same time plausibly not Lerner. The misremembered song lyrics line is the perfect distillation: Is Lerner hinting that his recall is unreliable and laced with fictions, that he is speaking “in character,” or is he confessing to a particular personal foible? Both, neither. All of us Cretans, all of us liars, and this too is the truth.

Lerner has mastered an art of misdirection, standing at a crossroads and pointing us down the road away from him only for us to find that all roads lead back to him. In “The Circuit” the poem’s speaker sounds like a victim of the mysterious

Cuban embassy electromagnetic energy attacks. “I was at the embassy without my knowledge, I came forward with my symptoms/light sensitivity, malaise ... and was dismissed until they saw the scans,” he proclaims. He then becomes someone like Lerner on something like the Brooklyn F train, “I heard hail on the roof of the train at Ninth and Carroll.” Does Lerner know that there’s no such station and that Ninth Street and Carroll Street are, in life, parallel? Is this an intended glitch? The poems plunge you into this kind of haze of uncertainty that only sometimes pays off. The mistake at least is humanizing. The titular “Lights” poem mingles UFO enthusiasts and mourners seeking ghosts with another first-person step outside the poem “I think it’s ok to want that/that wrong desire must have its place in your art.”

Lerner can hardly get off the train at that particular stop, though. The second sequence of “The Circuit” begins with another teasing sequence that is yet one more metagesture toward poetics and a disaffected, self-distancing semirevision.

I am trying to remember what it felt like to believe disjunction, non sequitur, injection

 **PODCAST**



unorthodox

UNORTHODOX
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This week, we’re celebrating Sukkot in style. We head to the Malina sukkah, where we hear from Joshua’s parents, Fran and Robert, about their family traditions.

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between sentences might constitute meaningful struggle against the empire

This is Lerner's version of "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive," which was Wordsworth's way of trying to remember what it felt like to struggle against empire. It's also a little roadside wave at John Ashbery, about whom Lerner has written on many occasions and credits as a foundational precursor. Here's one of Ashbery's attempts at that disjunction, and, in the way of influence, you can now hear Lerner struggling to be born from it,

The system was breaking down. The one who had wandered alone past so many happenings and events began to feel, backing up along the primal vein that led to his center, the beginning of a hiccup that would, if left to gather, explode the center to the extremities of life, the suburbs through which one makes one's way to where the country is.

Lerner's fiction also follows this pattern of deliberate ambiguity about the personal-impersonal within the individual-collective. Is *The Topeka School* really a novel about "toxic masculinity," "white male rage," and the expression of our "MAGA moment," which was how various critics and media outlets perceived and presented it? Or does the undercooked plot involving the angry, inarticulate young white kid from a broken home and the presence of the "God Hates Fags," Westboro Baptist Church enable a polymorphous, loose-hanging family novel which lets Lerner deal with his parents' marriage and the turbulence (and considerable triumphs, he's sure to tell us) of his senior year of high school? Or is it about the promise of the charismatic group of psychologists that brought Lerner's parents to Topeka and the secret springs of an Adamic tongue that speaks through all of us in unique yet similar ways, the voices that his father painstakingly records and transcribes, of patients, of strangers, the living and dead in his head? All of these, none of these, not entirely, not completely. It's like a master chef challenge of

intriguing ingredients put together with a collagist's indifference to outcome and the supreme confidence that if it doesn't quite fit together, well, Benner, we are all going the way of the earth.

All of which returns us to the question of success and also "The Chorus" poem, and Lerner's late place in the history of Jewish American literature. "The Chorus" ends with Lerner, as a father, speaking in the voice of his own father, about his father's father. "My dad would have given me some speech about representing the family, honoring the family, being a man, getting in the game, which for him meant withholding." Again, it's dramatically unclear whether Lerner is actually quoting his father speaking about his grandfather or just revising him, with additional insight, in the manner of contemporary role-play therapy. Lerner becomes his father in order to undo the circumcisionlike ritual of being singled out from one group on the basis of his Jewishness—i.e., his belonging to another group about which he feels equally or more ambivalent. This time, in the poem, the outcome will be different. Instead of being encouraged to overcome his childhood anxiety and go through with introducing the song, Lerner imagines his father presenting him with a say in the matter, "But I understand that while the introduction takes a few seconds to deliver, while Hanukkah isn't even a major holiday—the worry can last ten thousand years, that's the miracle. Your mom and I are fine with whatever you choose, we'll be proud of you either way. But you do have to choose."

This last line hits with great pathos, but also stunning irony. What choice has Lerner in fact made? He is still terminally uncomfortable when he has to step out from a crowd or when he's "marked as different," and yet he won't stop talking about the things that set him apart from the run-of-the-mill choristers. Lerner has perfected the humblebrag as auto-fictional style: starting pitcher of his ruthlessly competitive Little League baseball team, the top tier debater who goes to the national finals (*Topeka School*), the writer with a big book contract (*10:04*) the young

poet on a Fulbright (*Leaving the Atocha Station*), the freestyle rap champion of his high school peer group in Topeka! (*Topeka School* again). "A powerful institution approached a friend of mine about curating an exhibit based on their permanent collection" is a typical Lerner sentence that appears in the poem "The Rose." Some of these are real accomplishments, others are more of big-fish-in-small-pond variety—no white kid from New York, Atlanta, Detroit, or LA would ever admit to being freestyle rap champion of anything.

It takes a certain chutzpah to complain about rewards and talents, but also, yes, competition is an important part of life, and Lerner is too cool and well-adjusted either to brag or complain baldfacedly about how good he is at competing. He will beat you and feel bad about it, which brings me to a certain peace with my jealousy. He wants you to know that he's suffered for his talents, but also that he is doing so as a kind of Everyman who also happens to be Jewish but who prefers not to be identified as such, at least in public. His children "aren't really Jewish—their mother is a non-practicing Catholic—but we celebrate Hanukkah." The ultimate falseness at the finale of "The Chorus" poem—ending with "You have to choose" and yet refusing to make a choice at all—choosing not to choose is one non-way out of this particular entanglement.

A performed refusal of identity at this moment in American letters might, in other hands, have become a daring and controversial gesture, but Lerner is too polished and politic. There is no broader critique. Identities are fine—necessary even—for others. Lerner has made himself at ease in this anti-Zion. His "I choose not to," different from Bartleby's nonparticipatory "preferring not to," reveals another element to a literary life that has gone only from strength to strength. Lerner has proved he knows how to write beautifully about the discontents of American meritocracy while also taking pains to show how completely he has earned and deserves his place in it. ■

This article was originally published on September 26, 2023.

THE REST

→ Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly on Friday, **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasized the significance of the possible normalization of diplomatic relations between his nation and Saudi Arabia while urging other leaders to increase vigilance against the threat of Iran.**

"We are at the cusp of an even more dramatic breakthrough [than the Abraham Accords]," Netanyahu said, "a historic peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia." Though Netanyahu has tussled with the Biden administration in the past, he was quick to credit the White House for pushing forward the talks with Saudi Arabia, adding, "Just as we achieved the Abraham Accords with the leadership of President Trump, I believe we can achieve peace with Saudi Arabia with the leadership of President Biden."

→ Clashes broke out during Yom Kippur services in Tel Aviv's famed Dizengoff Square on Monday when **secular activists arrived to protest the gender-segregated prayer groups, which violated a court order allowing the Tel Aviv municipality to ban such gender divisions in public spaces.** As reported by The Times of Israel, secular activists were heard calling the worshippers "Nazi!" and saying "I hate you" and "I hate paying for you and your children" while telling French Jews of Mizrahi descent to "Go home!" In return, at least one religious member of the crowd shouted back, "Stinking Kibbutznik," at one of the protestors.

→ **Number of the Day: \$25 billion. That's the amount of non-military aid that the United States has sent to Ukraine since the beginning of the war with Russia,** according to a new report in 60 Minutes. While the reporting on where American money has ended up was one of the most overt pieces of pro-war propaganda that The Scroll has ever seen, 60 Minutes' Holly Williams did reveal that some of that \$25 billion has gone to pay for Ukrainian farmers' seeds and fertilizer and that U.S. taxpayers are funding the salaries of Ukrainian police, firefighters, and paramedics and even subsidizing small business owners to keep them going. While on assignment, Williams managed to snag an interview with Sens. Lindsey Graham, Elizabeth Warren, and Richard Blumenthal, who happened to be in Kyiv as well. Graham told her that the Ukrainian army was "on track to break the Russian army, and the only way they could possibly lose is if we pull the plug on them."

→ **President Joe Biden nabbed the endorsement of the United Farm Workers just as he landed in Detroit to join the United Auto Workers strike against the big three automakers.** Co-founded by Cesar Chavez, the late grandfather of Julie Chavez Rodriguez, who's currently running Biden's 2024 campaign, the farm workers' union will likely provide a boost for the president as it mobilizes large groups of organizers who target Spanish-speaking voters in key swing states such as Georgia, Texas, Nevada, and Michigan. Biden told autoworkers at the strike that they "deserve the significant raise you need." His appearance at the picket line is one of the first by a modern president, which demonstrates the value of the UAW's endorsement, which it has not yet given to a 2024 presidential hopeful.

THE BIG STORY

The fight over Nagorno-Karabakh came to a close yesterday the way wars usually have across 4,600 years of recorded armed conflict: at the end of a weapon. U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken had insisted this wasn't possible, having told Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan's president, on Tuesday that "there is no military solution" to the conflict over the self-declared ethnic Armenian republic, which resided within Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders. Aliyev and his deputies had heard the "no military solution" mantra at every one of the past year's U.S.-organized summits and meetings aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement to a war that's snarled global politics and killed as many as 30,000 people since 1989.

On Tuesday, with the U.N. General Assembly underway and 175 U.S. troops stationed in the neighboring Republic of Armenia for an unprecedented military exercise, the Azeris breached the fragile front line left over from the last major round of fighting in 2020. Russian peacekeepers, another legacy of the 2020 war, didn't try to stop them. Armenia stayed out of the fighting, even with 120,000 of its ethnic compatriots under bombardment. It took less than 24 hours for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh to conclude they had no real choice but to disband their 30-year-old republic and surrender to the fervent nationalists who rule Azerbaijan.

—Armin Rosen

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The Return of the Cousins

Despite the proliferation of anti- and post-Zionist rhetoric in Britain, Israel remains a central pillar of Anglo-Jewish identity

BY ZOE STRIMPEL AND TOM STAMMERS

About half way through *Jews Don't Count*, the most influential recent book about Jewish representation in Great Britain, British comedian David Baddiel writes, "I kind of think 'Fuck Israel'. ... I don't care about it more than any other country, and to assume that I have to have a strong position either way on Israel is racist." Baddiel cites the biggest influences on his own identity as the American Jews Jerry Seinfeld, Saul Bellow, Groucho Marx, and Philip Roth. He concludes, "None of that has anything to do with a Middle Eastern country 3,000 miles away."

Amid generally glowing reviews, some critics raised an eyebrow at Baddiel's insistence that Israel had nothing to do with him—or even, by extension, British Jews more broadly. "Baddiel's affinitylessness with Israel ... severely weakens his analysis of antisemitism," wrote Booker Prize-winning novelist Howard Jacobson. "One cannot claim to grasp the nettle of Jew-hating if the psychology of its most potent contemporary expression ... doesn't interest you."

Baddiel's "affinitylessness" can easily be seen as wishful thinking or as evasive: It's hard to see how Israel, as the world's only Jewish state and as a magnet for antisemitism, can truly be irrelevant. But his sentiment, so casually delivered, begs the question of whether it is part of a bigger culture of denial, disavowal, and even disinterest where Israel is concerned, and where that culture comes from.

The numbers do not point to widespread disinterest in Israel among British Jews: While 70 percent are critical of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and two-thirds feel a sense of "despair" every time settlements are expanded, according to a U.K. pro-peace organization called Yachad, the number of those who still see Israel as central to their identity has remained high. In 2010, a Pears Institute study found that 82 percent of Jews in Britain say Israel is central to their identity; another survey from Jewish Policy Research, conducted between 2010 and 2022, reinforced this finding. Moreover, the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in 2015 forced a nationwide conversation about when, and how, anti-Zionism could shade into antisemitism. The controversy has not died down; this month saw the publication of *Israelophobia: The Newest Version of the Oldest Hatred and What to Do About It* by Jake Wallis Simons, the editor of *The Jewish Chronicle*.

Baddiel's "chill, man" approach to Israel is the polar opposite of the polemics and division stirred up in recent years, in part by Corbyn. The far-left anti-Zionist group Jewdas, founded in 2005, hosted a seder attended by Corbyn and branded Israel "a steaming pile of sewage which needs to be properly disposed of." Speaking to the media collectively as "Geoffrey Cohen," it has organized Birthwrong tours to Andalucia to parody the Birthright movement. Yet at the time of the Corbyn seder, Baddiel downplayed the malignancy of this political outfit: "They're just Jews who disagree with other Jews".

In some ways, the extremism of Jewdas is more familiar, and better understood, than Baddiel's quiet disavowal. That's because we associate the defenders and critics of Israel with strong expressions of feeling: The modern history of antisemitism has often been written through descriptions of those on the fringe, including the anti-Israel extremist fringe. In his new book, Harvard professor Derek Penslar refers to Zionism as an "emotional state." If on the level of ideology Zionism remains highly protean and subject to competing definitions, its animating power comes from "bundles of feeling, whose elements have varied in volume, intensity, and durability across space and time." The same applies to anti-Zionism, says Penslar: Even those who most loudly decry the state of Israel can't help but show how much they care about it, often to the point of singular obsession.

What to make, then, of those individuals who take an "affinityless" stance? How is the public distance from Israel related to other denials of Jewishness, such as the psychological type described by Isaac Deutscher as the "non-Jewish Jew," and the pursuit of assimilation into wider British society? In a 1980s interview with chronicler of Anglo-Jewish culture Stephen Brook, the acclaimed director Jonathan Miller confessed candidly, "I don't feel the Jews are my people. The whole idea of a people is totally repulsive to me." He continued, "I have no interest in Israel at all. I mean, I'm interested in not seeing it obliterated, not because of the Jews, but because I don't want to see any civilized country go by the board. On the other hand, I wish it were a little more civilized." On visiting the country, he claimed that he only felt at home at an atheistic kibbutz (his wife surmised this was because it resembled Bedales, the liberal boarding school of Miller's youth).

The growth of anti-Zionist sentiment on the British left was especially acute in the early 1980s, shaped by the condemnation of Zionism as a form of racism in the United Nations General Assembly in 1975, the victory of Likud in 1977, and the fall-out from the first Lebanon War. For the New Left, it became more common to conceive of

Israel less in terms of the anticolonial struggle for independence and more as an embodiment of settler colonialism. But there was nothing predetermined about this political realignment. According to historian David Feldman, it was difficult for many on the left to let go of the belief that Israel embodied the victory of the same democratic and progressive values cherished in Western Europe. Although he had resigned from Labour Friends of Israel two years previously, in an interview in 1984, the socialist politician and activist Tony Benn still refused to equate Zionism with imperialism. “I am in favor of a Jewish state,” he told one interviewer, “and I believe the Jews are entitled to have security in Israel.” (By the mid-2000s, Benn was vocally scathing Israel, and he was a prominent patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign).

Anti-Israel sentiment also took a long time to surface within the postwar Anglo-Jewish community. Identification with the fledgling state had reached its peak in the late 1960s, after the Six Day War had raised the prospect that Israel might be wiped off the map. For a generation that had lived through the Holocaust, the threat of annihilation, even “a second Auschwitz,” as historian Bernard Wasserstein put it, was a spur to action: There was an outpouring of public meetings, demonstrations in solidarity, and charitable donations (the emergency committee raised £11 million). “Only in 1967 did concern for and identification with Israel’s fate become central to what it meant to be a Jew in Britain,” writes historian Todd Endelman. “It then became the most potent force for keeping Jews within the communal fold, as well as bringing back the estranged and apathetic.” Supporting Israel in its hour of peril mobilized the increasing number of Jews who no longer felt religious identification.

From a longer historical perspective, the cooling of feelings toward Zionism in the 1970s and 1980s returned Anglo-Jewish public opinion to its prewar mixture of passion and ambivalence. While Zionist leader Theodor Herzl received a warm reception among migrants in the East End, the British communal elites on whom he pinned his

hopes for funding his grand schemes proved to be uninterested in his appeal. Following a meeting with Alfred de Rothschild in 1902, Herzl wrote in his diary, “How is one to negotiate with this collection of idiots?” Although London was the birthplace of the Zionist Federation and hosted the Fourth Zionist Congress in 1900, the idea of a Jewish home in Palestine remained marginal and divisive among the British Jewish leadership in the years before the First World War.

For the interconnected elite of Anglo-Jewish families known as the Cousinhood, who had dominated communal institutions for decades, Herzl’s proposals seemed at once impractical and dangerously subversive. These representatives of old British Jewish families were immensely proud of the progress made by Jews in Victorian Britain over the decades since emancipation. They were loath to jeopardize these gains by backing a policy that would suggest that Jews were something other than loyal British subjects.

Equally, for the Anglo-Jewish intelligentsia, like historian Lucien Wolf and theologian Claude Montefiore, what was at stake in the debate was the destiny of the Jewish people. Rather than a political nation, the Jews were primarily a spiritual nation whose mission was universal and committed to the emancipation of all mankind. To substitute this for a narrow form of territorial and ethnocentric nationalism could only seem regressive. To Israel Abrahams, a key thinker in liberal Judaism, the very idea of a Jewish, territorial nation-state smacked of a return to the ghetto.

With the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the creation of the British Mandate for Palestine, the geopolitical situation changed: A new alignment was formed between Zionism and British imperial patriotism. Many, however, were left unpersuaded. Non-Jews fretted over how to square the promises to Chaim Weizmann with promises made to the Arabs, while the administration of the mandate frantically tried to put the brakes on Jewish immigration into the colony. Many of the old Jewish elites continued to view Zionism as a serious

threat to their place in Britain—especially in the wake of anti-communist paranoia. The League of British Jews, which they founded in 1917, poured vitriol on the Zionists, but it ultimately folded in 1929.

It is true that on an institutional level, the ideological hold of the Cousinhood was broken in the 1920s and 1930s, as a new cohort of wealthy Jews, the children of migrants from Eastern Europe, seized control of communal institutions. Still, for much of the interwar period, Zionism remained marginal to many British Jews’ sense of identity. In the East End, the growth of socialism directed attention more to bread-and-butter issues, and to the looming threat of fascism, rather than to what was happening in the Middle East. The inroads made by Zionists were largely among newly suburban middle-class Jews and were related to a way of maintaining a Jewish identity against the pressures of assimilation. Although in geopolitical terms they saw their hopes realized, this did not mean that they won the argument. In 1948, when the state of Israel was created after an insurgency against British rule, only approximately 3 to 4 percent of the Jewish population in Britain opted to make Aliyah. The Board of Deputies of British Jews was still so ambivalent that as late as June of that year it averred in a letter in the *Times*, “We as citizens of this country can have no political relationship with the state of Israel.”

British 20th-century history tells a story of how Zionism passed from the

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margins to the center of Anglo-Jewish consciousness, only to return to a more uncertain position today.

But the impact of that long period of skepticism, or indifference, in Anglo-Jewish opinion still resonates. For some, a state forged through arms and realpolitik and maintained by security systems seems a far cry from the old dream of Jewish universalism, or a mission to all the gentiles. Another of Stephen Brook's interviewees in the 1980s, historian Colin Shindler, insisted, "I firmly believe in the old-fashioned idea that Israel, meaning the Jewish people, should be a light unto the nations. It's part of our history, our heritage, our experience." He cited approvingly the ideas of Ahad Ha'am—himself an unhappy resident of Edwardian Britain—that Israel should be a Jewish state, in the full cultural and spiritual meaning of the word, not just a state full of Jews.

Today, in a political climate on the left that prioritizes the extraterritorial, the cultural and the identitarian, the very idea of the nation is regarded with suspicion. At a moment in which Israel versus Palestine has become a defining issue for so-called progressives, it is not surprising that some British Jews are looking to escape its grip. Perhaps it has become harder to believe that any nation-state, including a Jewish state, can be a vehicle of redemption, as a preoccupation with the universal overrides attachments to Jewish particularity.

If in the mid-20th century the struggle between Zionists and anti-Zionists was waged within communal hierarchies, it is now being fought on social media and in the alternative spaces of civil society. A new generation of egalitarians and spiritualists seek alternative forms of association, such as

Grassroots Jews and Kolot Ha'Kahal, the Sephardic Egalitarian Minyan, and Kehillah (founded 2002), which features community leaders defined as Mizrahi, Latinx Jews, Asian Jews, Jews of color, non-Jewish family members, and "Jews by choice." Such groups embody a turn away from Jewish particularity toward the more universalist notions contained in "inclusivity"—of being "a light unto nations"; even if it's all happening in the kitchens of north London. Along with, and in some sense because of, the resurgence of anti-Zionism, post-Zionism, and non-Zionism, Zionism remains a central pillar of Anglo-British identity, though 75 years after Israel's founding, perhaps the biggest problem with that term is the lack of clarity about what it means. ■

This article was originally published on September 22, 2023.

HOLIDAYS

Need Help Building Your Sukkah?

For residents of Melbourne, Australia, help is on the way

BY NOMI KALTMANN

Everyone on the block knows I'm a handy guy," said Billy Klein, 30. "For years, in the lead-up to Sukkot I used to receive calls from friends and neighbors asking for my help building their sukkahs."

One year, inundated with the number of calls from neighbors flummoxed by the challenges of building a sukkah, Klein decided to recruit his good friend, 28-year-old Zuzz Rapp, a carpenter by trade, to help him out with all the requests for help. Rapp was delighted to assist, and together the

pair built and fixed around a dozen sukkahs, mainly for Klein's neighbors.

The following year, in 2014, the two of them founded the Sukkah Boys—a no-frills service that constructs and builds sukkahs in their hometown of Melbourne, Australia. With their team of eight to 10 contractors and humorous videos, poking fun at Jews for their lack of building skills, the Sukkah Boys now construct approximately 300 sukkahs each year. In addition to building sukkahs, they are also happy to install lights, doors, walls, and windows, put up *schach*, and even supply the Four Species used in Sukkot rituals.

"News like this spreads like wildfire," said Rapp, "especially when people find out that they don't have to build the sukkah themselves."

These days, in addition to private customers, the Sukkah Boys are hired to build sukkahs for local synagogues and older people care homes around Melbourne.

"The 10 to 12 days leading up to Sukkot are frantically busy," said Klein. "It's a logistics nightmare. We have 300 jobs in a two-week period. The customers all want it done last minute. And the day after Sukkot, they all want it down."

Rapp added: "To get everyone done before the holiday is extremely hard work. But we have never let a customer down."

With the Sukkah Boys' handiness and construction abilities well-known in their community, some customers have sometimes added in unusual, amusing, requests for help.

"One year, while we were installing a sukkah, someone asked us if they could hire us to trap and remove a possum in their roof," said Rapp. "We said no."

For the first few years of their operations, the Sukkah Boys were mainly building sukkahs, until Klein's mom, Gilly, who runs a preschool, suggested that they add an educational component to their activities. So in 2017, they began offering an interactive workshop on building sukkahs to children at Jewish schools and kindergartens.

"We introduced a sukkah workshop to schools," said Klein. "We went to 20 Jewish schools and kinders and presented our workshop to over 2,000 kids. We covered the safety of building tools and how to be safe in a sukkah."

The workshops were a great success and many families decided to start celebrating the festival after their children attended the workshops.

"Many people who had never had a sukkah wanted us. They thought it would be nice for their family to have one and to celebrate with their kids," said Klein.

While the Sukkah Boys only construct sukkahs in the suburbs around Melbourne, they have been able to help other smaller, and more remote Australian Jewish communities gain access to a sukkah.

"One year, my friend who lives in

Newcastle [a regional area of Australia] needed a sukkah for his shul and community. We decided to send him one, and after that we partnered with Chabad of RARA," which services Jews living in regional and remote communities of Australia, said Klein. "We said that we would love to donate a sukkah to every community they serve. Even if the community did not have a rabbi, we were happy to send it to a local community member so they could put it up for their friends."

The idea was a resounding success, and the Sukkah Boys sent 30 sukkahs via a special courier to communities across Australia.

"We donated about 30 sukkahs to Chabad of RARA and we managed to have a Sukkah Boys sukkah in every single Australian state and capital city, as well as smaller communities like Alice Springs and Port Douglas," said Klein.

Using their entrepreneurial flair, the Sukkah Boys continue to innovate and grow their business. In 2023, for the first time, they will be offering a tiny portable sukkah, which is particularly helpful for those who want to always have a sukkah travel with them wherever they go or for people living

in apartments with tiny balconies or limited space.

"It's actually a mini porta-loo sukkah without the toilet or roof, just the walls," said Klein.

The best part of their work is definitely the community members they meet while building their sukkahs.

"We helped an older lady a few years ago put up a sukkah," said Klein. "She lived by herself and was terminally ill with cancer, but she really wanted to put up a recyclable sukkah. We used tires and plastic bottles. It was probably one of our most meaningful jobs. She was so involved even though she was sick."

Most of all, the Sukkah Boys want people to enjoy their sukkahs.

"It's always about safety first. Because it's temporary structures, you can never secure your sukkahs enough. Wind and rain. A sukkah is temporary," said Klein. "Make sure you secure the walls, roof, and decorations. We've heard too many stories of things blowing away and too many stories of people falling off ladders. Make it safe, so you can enjoy the sukkah with your families." ■

This article was originally published on September 28, 2023.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Etrog

Fiction by Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon, for Sukkot

BY S. Y. AGNON

To witness how precious the mitzvah of Etrog is to the Jewish people one need only visit Meah Shearim between Elul and Sukkot. That neighborhood, which is like a withered plant all year long, becomes a verdant pleasure garden in that season, with stores full of etrogs, lulavs, and

hadasim. Jews from all over Jerusalem crowd into those stores, inspecting the etrogs, lulavs, and hadasim, or sharing learned insights about them. Even the elderly, who never exit their own doorposts all year long, either due to weakness or fear of wasting moments from Torah study, come to purchase an etrog. Because of the importance of this mitzvah, they go to the trouble to select

their own etrog—after all, an etrog selected by someone else cannot be compared to one chosen by one's own hand. These elderly jump from courtyard to courtyard and from shop to shop, with renewed youth and vigor as the shopkeepers run to and fro with boxes full of etrogs, each according to the stature of the customer, and the budget he has to spend. In between push young boys with little baskets woven of the lulav palm fronds, used to bind the Sukkot species together, beautifying the

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mitzvah, and beautiful in and of themselves on account of their lovely shape.

The morning after Yom Kippur I went to purchase an etrog for myself. I pushed my way into the shop of a seller of old books, who abandons book selling during the month or so before Sukkot in order to sell etrogs.

The shop was full of customers, aside from the usual scholars and the types that crowd about wherever crowds are gathered. A beautiful scent arose from the etrogs and hadasim, which masked the smell of old books, most of which had come from the apartments of poor folk, forced to sell off their libraries to buy Sabbath provisions or to marry off their daughters.

The book seller, who had become an *etrogger* (that is, a seller of etrogs), was busy with his merchandise. Very, very busy. He leaped from corner to corner, from shelf to shelf, pulling one etrog out of its wrapping while wrapping another etrog back up. He opened one crate of etrogs, hiding away an etrog or two, all the while running to greet his customers, sharing a word with this one and that, like a guest of honor glad to see each and every acquaintance who had come to rejoice with him. It is the manner of merchants that every deed is intended toward advancing their livelihood, and this fellow, too, acted to increase his income, yet love of the mitzvah itself elevated the man to act with alacrity in order that his customers might merit beautiful lulavs, beautiful etrogs, and triple-leaved hadasim. Know this to be true, for that year road travel was perilous, and he endangered himself, traveling to Transjordan and a variety of other terrible places, to import lulavs, etrogs, and hadasim the likes of which Jerusalem had never seen even in times of peace. If a person should say, “There’s a wrinkle in this here etrog,” know that this wrinkle is to the praise of the etrog, for the fruit that Eve ate in the Garden of Eden was none other than an etrog, and her teeth marks remain on the fruit in the shape of this wrinkle.

On seeing that the shop was packed, and the storekeeper preoccupied, I decided to leave. He pulled me back and said, “Wait a moment and I’ll give you

“Despite the differences among the etrogs—in size, quality, and beauty—the storekeeper’s mouth had the same word of praise for each.”

an etrog that blesses those who bless on it.” He abandoned all his other customers, jumped about while presenting me with two or three etrogs; about each he asked, “Were you looking for one like this? Is this the one you desire?” I hadn’t a chance to examine them before he presented a fourth, fifth, and sixth etrog. I hadn’t a chance to examine any of these either before he left me to attend to another customer. As he treated me, so he treated him. Despite the differences among the etrogs—in size, quality, and beauty—the storekeeper’s mouth had the same word of praise for each. While he was standing with an etrog held in the face of one customer, he had bounced back to me saying, “Nice choice. That’s the etrog I thought to suggest to you from the start.” When he told me its price, I set it aside. After all, aside from the etrog we have many other mitzvot, and none of them are free. I set aside that etrog and sought another more within my budget. The storekeeper smiled at me and said, “Rabban Gamliel purchased an etrog for one thousand *zuz*, and the sages did not even specify whether it was beautiful or not, and you set aside the choicest of etrogs on account of a few shillings?”

Aside from the storekeeper who at first ignored me, then attended me,

then ignored me again, there were various others who didn’t leave me alone. They grabbed from my hand each etrog I picked up to inspect—either to buy it themselves or to speak some learned insight about it. In that way I heard the tales that are repeated each year: like the story of the rebbe from Nashkiz, who took all his savings to buy an etrog. He saw an old man crying over a dead horse. He asked the man why he was crying. The man replied, “I am a water carrier, and this horse would pull my wagon. Now that it is dead, so is my livelihood.” The rabbi took out all his money, giving it to the man to purchase a new horse. That righteous man said, “What’s the difference? Etrog is one of God’s commandments, as is giving charity. Let others recite a blessing over their etrogs. I will bless that horse.” Many other tales were told. Since they are old and well-known I will leave them be and only tell a new tale that has something new to teach us.

In a corner of the shop, away from all the other customers, stood an old man inspecting the etrogs in one of the boxes. Sometimes a person can stand in the thick of a crowd, and yet it is the lone man on the side who draws his attention. This is what happened to me with that old man at that time. I ignored the rest of the goings-on in the shop and stared at him.

When he selected an etrog he asked the storekeeper what it cost. He told him the price. Setting the etrog aside, the old man said, “That much money I do not have. Give me one cheaper than this.” The storekeeper said, “Rabbi, if you want a kosher etrog you have to pay such-and-such a price, just as Rabbi Ploni and Gabbai Almoni paid for theirs. Do you know, rabbi, how much *they* paid?” At that point the storekeeper named an outrageous price, while looking at the etrog and declaring it to be the very embodiment of the Torah’s ideal of beauty, strictly kosher according to all opinions. The old man replied, “Even the money, with which one purchases the etrog, must also be kosher.” In the meantime the storekeeper had already sidled up to me, inquiring, “Have you found one yet?”

I turned to him and asked, “That man

you called ‘Rabbi’—who is he?” He whispered, “Why, that’s the Rabbi of Teplik. I’m surprised you don’t know him. All of Jerusalem says he’s a true genius.” I told the shopkeeper, “I’ve heard his name but have never seen him face-to-face until now.”

What had I heard of him? Aside from his genius in Torah knowledge and great piety, he is renowned for his charitable works with the poor. He struggles on their behalf with the hard-hearted and uncharitable and degrades himself to deal with those appointed to administer the needs of the poor. On account of the mitzvah of tzedakah he thinks nothing of his own honor, nor of the trouble he exerts on behalf of the needy—which for his own benefit he would easily forgo. There are rabbis who are praised for their Torah knowledge, for their piety, their cleverness, or worldly knowledge—that rabbi possessed all these things. He was worthy to be crowned with gold and reside in splendor, but he lived in a poor neighborhood, in a small apartment, in worn-out garments, like most of the folks in Jerusalem who do not possess enough money to purchase fancy clothes. Most of his meager salary earned from the rabbinate was distributed to orphans and widows.

He finally found a kosher etrog that was within his budget. He took out his wallet and paid the storekeeper. From the way he opened the wallet and counted out the money, it was clear he didn’t have much to spare.

I, too, found an etrog. More than I wanted to spend or had budgeted I ended up splurging on that etrog. Its price having been driven up by the competition for a beautiful etrog. After buying a lulav and hadasim I also got the small woven basket that holds the lulav for a mere two pennies. More than I delighted in my expensive etrog I was pleased

“Some mitzvot are within reach of the rich but not the poor. Yet Torah and mitzvot were given to all Jews.”

with my two-penny basket. Whether one’s etrog is beautiful or extra beautiful, he can always find one even more beautiful. If I had another three or four shillings to spend, I could have bought a truly, outstandingly beautiful etrog, but as for that basket—I doubt I could have ever found one better. The boys of Meah Shearim, who weave these baskets for the lulavs, even though they don’t always take care to dress nicely, their handiwork is second to none.

Weary and worn, I left the etrog shop. The day before had been Yom Kippur, and I had spent 26 hours or more fasting and praying barefoot, and I hadn’t felt tired—neither in body nor spirit. On the contrary, I experienced great joy from the onset through the ending of the Holy Day. But today I stood only three or four hours in the pursuit of an etrog, and felt not even a fraction of that joy. Even though I acquired a beautiful etrog, anything involving haggling over prices, even when it involves a mitzvah, brings me to exhaustion.

I have always been troubled by this: Mitzvot that are given to the whole of the Jewish people should be affordable to all Jews, yet some mitzvot are within reach of the rich but not the poor. Yet Torah and mitzvot were given to all Jews.

While I was still trying to digest this

dilemma, a certain fellow said to me, “You should wish me Mazal Tov—my wife, *she should live and be well*, gave birth to a male son.” I wished him Mazal Tov on his son, and when I had exhausted all the blessings I had to bestow on him I asked when the *brit* would take place. He told me, “On the first day of Sukkot, following the services at the Perushim Synagogue in my neighborhood. As you know, our custom is not to ‘invite’ people to a *brit*, but I wanted to let you know when it would take place, and if you are my friend, and share in my joy, and would honor me with your presence, please come to the *brit*.” I nodded my head and answered, “Please God.”

On the first day of Sukkot I rose extra early, not in zeal for the mitzvah of etrog, as is the habit of the Righteous, some of whom remain awake all night in anticipation for the first light of daybreak to take the lulav. Rather, against my will I was awoken by a ceaseless, honking automobile outside my home, arousing my neighbor to head off on a day-trip or shopping trip or hunting trip. The drivers are cruel: Because they are too lazy to get out of their vehicles and ring a doorbell, they sit and honk, disturbing all those around.

I was as agitated as any man woken early from his sleep. It was too early to get out of bed, but I was too annoyed to just lie there. I got up, washed my hands and face, entered my sukkah, and recited the blessing over the lulav and etrog. It would have been better not to be woken prematurely, so I could rise well-rested and in a good spirit and perform the mitzvah with joy. Having been woken early I was tired and knew not what to do. After thinking for a moment I went and poured myself a hot drink.

When I finished drinking I decided to go and keep my promise. Either way I needed to go, so what difference does it make whether I leave early or late? I took my tallit, my siddur, and my lulav and etrog, and headed off for the synagogue of that man making a *brit* for his son.

It was a nice day, neither too hot nor too chilly. The sukkot I saw along the way, and the lulavs of the men walking to synagogue, perfumed the air of my

FOOD

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journey. After a bit more than an hour I arrived in the neighborhood where the *brit* would take place.

That neighborhood was quite impoverished, with neither nice homes nor maintained streets, gardens, or orchards to please the eye. Yet it was quiet. No automobiles drove there, certainly not on the Sabbath or Holy Days. Here no honking horns wake slumberers from their sleep, yet the residents had already awoken. From the synagogues where the worshippers pray with sunrise was heard the sound of their prayers, and from a few sukkot could be heard the sound of Torah study. Out of love for the mitzvah of sitting in the sukkah, the men sat learning Torah there. The abundance of sukkot, with their leafy green roofs, made the neighborhood look like a flowery garden, while etrogs and hadasim gave off a pleasant fragrance, and the decorated cloth sukkah walls added beauty to the scene.

I entered the Persuhim Synagogue, set my lulav down on the windowsill, took a book from the shelf, and sat down to learn.

In the synagogue was but one old man, who stood bent over at the bookcase looking at a book. I had seen such a stance but a few days earlier.

After a moment he returned the book to its place and began pacing about like one troubled by a difficult matter he seeks to escape. I didn't raise my eyes to look at that old man, and neither did he look at me.

As he was pacing he passed the windowsill where my lulav and etrog rested. He looked and asked permission to

see my etrog. Upon examining it he declared, "Kosher, kosher."

I remembered him and what he had said about the officials who waste communal funds to acquire beautiful etrogs for themselves. His exact words were: "Even the money used to buy the etrog needs to be kosher, that is, 'kosher money' is more important than adding to the beauty of the mitzvah."

While I was pondering his words, he said to me, "I would like to perform the mitzvah with your etrog." I said to him, "It is given to you as a gift." After he recited the blessing, he returned my etrog to me.

I asked him, "Rabbi, where is your etrog? You bought a lovely etrog, and with 'kosher' money did you purchase it?"

He gazed at me with his large and lovely eyes, which God had graced with wisdom and innocence, and he said, "You were there when I bought my etrog? Indeed, a kosher etrog it was, but something happened to it.—Why are you standing?" I said to him, "If the rabbi doesn't sit, I don't sit either." He said, "I am used to standing, but so that you need not stand, I will sit."

He sat and said, "In my neighborhood there resides a certain householder. A tough, angry, irritable man, but careful about mitzvot. He bought an etrog for a half lira, maybe more. He bragged about it in front of his neighbors, that there was none finer. I'm not sure how beautiful it really was, but there's no one in this neighborhood who can afford to buy an etrog for a half lira. This morning I heard a sound of crying coming from his house. I told my wife, I hear a child

crying, go see why she is crying. My wife said, The girl was playing with the etrog her step-father bought for a half lira, the etrog fell from her hand, broke its *pitam* becoming invalid for the mitzvah, and her mother smacked her. My wife added, That poor wretch knows what's in store for her from her husband on account of her daughter from her first marriage. I asked my wife, Where is he now?—He ran to the mikveh to immerse prior to taking the lulav. If he's come out of the mikveh, he must be sitting in the sukkah of Rebbe Shlomo of Zvhil, to observe him as he waves the lulav, for his waving is like that of his father, who received the tradition from his father, and his father from his father back to the Maggid of Zloczow. I took my etrog to the girl and said to her, Don't cry. Here is my etrog, give it to your mother. If your father asks, have your mother tell him: The rabbi was here and saw that your etrog was not kosher. To enable you to perform the mitzvah properly, he gave you his etrog as an unconditional gift. Because of that trouble I didn't have time to recite the blessing on my own etrog."

The rabbi added, "That's the punishment for one who is hassled. Even if he exerts himself on behalf of an etrog, and purchases an etrog that is kosher according to all opinions, his haste prevents him from reciting the blessing over it!" ■

Translated from Hebrew by Jeffrey Saks.

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STONE COLD TRUTH

Tablet

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

Classic Kreplach

BY CAROL UNGAR

INGREDIENTS

DOUGH

- 2 ¼ cups flour**
- 1 egg plus one yolk**
- ½ cup water**
- pinch salt**

FILLING

- 1 cup chopped meat (can be raw because these kreplach will be boiled)**
- 1 onion, grated or sautéed (optional)**
- Pinch black pepper**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Place the dried porcini in a heatproof bowl and cover with the boiling water. Let stand until tender, 15 to 20 minutes. Remove the mushrooms with a slotted spoon, rinse well, drain, and roughly chop. Strain the soaking liquid through a fine mesh sieve or cheesecloth, reserving the liquid and discarding any sediment.

Step 2

Meanwhile, in a large pot, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onion, carrots, celery, garlic, and a pinch of salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, 6-8 minutes. Add the porcini and cremini mushrooms and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and lightly browned, 7-10 minutes.

Step 3

Add the thyme, bay leaf, vinegar, soy sauce, reserved soaking liquid, stock, and barley. Increase the heat to medium-high and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low, partially cover the pot and cook, stirring occasionally, until the barley is tender, about 40 minutes.

Step 4

Taste, then season with a generous amount of black pepper and a little more soy sauce, if needed. Serve hot, topped with parsley.

Yield: Serves 6 to 8

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