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NEWS

The Dangers of a Sentimental Education

The push for social-emotional learning brings managerial nihilism and corporate profiteering into the classroom under the cover of helping kids

BY JASMINE HU HOLLINGSHEAD

In an elementary school textbook, a math problem is framed by the cryptic question, “How can you understand your feelings?” Another asks students to write “math biographies” to soothe “math anxiety.” Controversy erupted last April when this textbook and 19 others were excluded from the Florida Department of Education’s recommendations. Amid ongoing furor over the role of race and sexuality in America’s classrooms, Florida cited an obscure justification: “the unsolicited addition of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in mathematics.”

But what exactly is social-emotional learning? Proponents claim that it is a pedagogical method that fosters social and emotional skills, but finding a real answer requires a Dante-esque descent into an inferno of impenetrable jargon. A leading SEL organization, the Collaborative for Advancing Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), touts “evidence-based best practices” for making “framework connections” and claims “the story of SEL is as old as the first relationships between teachers and students.” In reality, however, the organized movement pushing for nationwide SEL

only emerged after the passage of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, the federal education law that allows states to use one nonacademic measure for accountability alongside the preexisting standardized tests routinely given to students. In contrast to earlier quantitative testing-based reform, SEL calls for the incorporation of nonacademic “soft skills” like empathy and emotional management into traditional classroom instruction.

Today, SEL is emerging as a lightning rod in the culture wars over school curriculum. Progressives uphold it as an unobjectionable method for building emotional self-regulation in students, something not just benign but potentially lifesaving in the face of rising teen suicide rates. But conservatives reject those claims and argue that SEL smuggles ideological indoctrination into classrooms, serving as a gateway to critical race theory or boutique gender ideology.

Conservatives are right to distrust SEL. However, SEL is not indoctrination, but something worse: the nihilism of managerial logic, which finds therapeutic platitudes more convenient and lucrative than ideological fervor. Under the guise of empathy and well-being,

SEL enables the endless expansion of a bureaucracy of mental health and big data specialists, who profit off of America's schoolchildren. Paralleling the recent trend toward the mindful corporate workplace, SEL is the public school equivalent of Amazon's "data management" of its warehouse employees, who are offered meditation booths to offset the stress of being increasingly monitored and monetized.

SEL's immediate aim is not to politicize classrooms. While ideologically loaded terms like equity and social justice flit in on occasion, most curricula don't focus on race or gender. To be sure, as far as its actual educational content, SEL doesn't focus much on anything. Programs span a panoply of buzzword-rich subjects: safety, teamwork, identity, self-esteem, anti-bullying, anti-harassment, kindness. One curriculum's video module encourages students to "inhabit a growth mindset" by "drawing angry lines." A set of digital lessons is both "trauma-informed" and "music-based"; another app claims an "innovative way" to teach children about "appropriate levels of touch." If teachers are feeling left out, there's even Adult SEL for educators to practice "self-care."

For all the diversity of topics, materials largely consist of slideshows, video modules, and activity sheets. If the medium is the message, the message of SEL is not mental well-being, but something akin to mandatory corporate compliance training. The simplest act is often tortured into a litany of tedious technical concepts. A textbook discarded by Florida explains a basic counting exercise: "Students build proficiency with social awareness as they practice empathizing with their classmates." What isn't robotic is cloying (children are instructed to say "thank you for filling my bucket") or obvious (materials trumpet the benefits of cooperative work).

While a basic familiarity with children might lead one to question how any of this helps kids regulate emotions better than story time or recess, SEL advocates insist that their method is backed by science. But the blizzard of efficacy statistics proffered by advocates don't hold up to scrutiny. CASEL's

"Disbursement of COVID-19 federal aid has ripened public schools for plunder."

most-cited claim of SEL producing an "11 point increase in academic achievement" comes from a meta-analysis that aggregates educational studies conducted from 1970-2007 featuring the words "social," "emotional," and "learning," cherry-picked on the basis of vague criteria; the results aren't replicated by a later meta-analysis. That "11 point increase," however, now justifies a profusion of SEL "solutions" that bear no resemblance to the in-school programs analyzed, from mindfulness apps to a 3D printing pen.

Further, far less consensus surrounds SEL than supporters suggest. It has been criticized by education specialists for being unrigorous and rooted in the "faux psychology" of the self-esteem movement. In condemning SEL's "unexamined rise," Robert Pondiscio writes that "ideas and techniques borrowed from popular psychology have aggressively inserted themselves into classroom practice." Additionally, some teachers anonymously complain that SEL asks them to take on the role of provisional therapists for which they have no training. "Every day I had to organize for my SEL advisory class, which I had no qualifications for, and took a lot of time away from my real job teaching math," one former New York City public school teacher told Tablet. "Wouldn't

it be better if I had put that time into being the best math teacher?"

Perhaps taking time away from core skills like math to focus on emotional learning could be justified if it indeed resulted in happier and more resilient young people. But some teachers believe that, by priming students to be overly conscious of mental health concepts, SEL can in fact worsen emotional well-being and encourage its leverage as an excuse. "If you look at a kid as broken, they will break," one teacher says. "By constantly talking to kids about anxiety, are we just making them more anxious?"

And yet despite scant evidence that SEL improves academic performance—and indeed some evidence that SEL may make students' mental health worse—efforts to expand its programs are winning. All 50 states currently have SEL standards in preschool, and more than half have standards in K-12. The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly the harm done to students by extended school shutdowns, have increased demand for mental health resources. From November 2019 to April 2021, SEL spending grew by 45% to \$765 million. Today, it is a multi-billion dollar industry, well-poised for future growth.

This recent ascendancy is no coincidence. Disbursement of COVID-19 federal aid has ripened public schools for plunder. Companies scramble for a piece of the \$122 billion of the American Rescue Plan that Congress allocated to K-12 education, as well as the \$300 million mental health plan unveiled last October. Education management consultant Tyton reports with the refreshing candor of the for-profit sector, "The SEL ecosystem today is flush with dollars from grant funding and federal stimulus programs." (Tyton warns, however, that "long-term sustainability is far from guaranteed" and recommends "pursuing embedded SEL programs and practices" interwoven with "core curriculum, general professional development, and other staples of school operations.")

This wave of funding has created an expansive SEL bureaucracy located in a twilight zone between private industry, nonprofit organizations, local school

districts, and the federal government. CASEL, for example, is partnered with Allstate's nonprofit spin-off, the Allstate Foundation (which also partners with the educational DEI nonprofit Facing History and Ourselves, whose board cross-pollinates with Allstate's corporate PR branch). Though brochures feature stock photos of smiling teachers and students, their real target is administrators and superintendents. CASEL's promotional materials are written in acronym-studded corporatese: Students become "learners," friendship becomes "team building," education a "school career," and teaching "classroom management."

For these vested interests, SEL's vagueness is a convenient feature, not a bug. It makes for a neat label for profiteers to consolidate disparate interests in funding applications. One seemingly benign concept conceals endless appendages: the curriculum providers, data collection and assessment services, technology and telehealth services, training and credentialing programs, and corporate-academic research collaboratives. This dense canopy siphons funding while the intended recipients, the nation's classrooms, languish on the forest floor.

Since the industry leads its own credentialing and assessments, anything SEL-related easily validates and perpetuates itself. Take restorative justice, a recent trend often intertwined with SEL. Conceived by psychology and criminology academics, it advocates for justice reform through nonpunitive measures like circles, in which offenders meet and speak with their victims and broader community. Through a fuzzy equivalence between "prison" and "suspension," education reformers have in recent years encouraged schools to adopt restorative practices. Despite their enthusiasm, research on educational restorative justice's efficacy remains scant. Only one comprehensive study exists, which found that restorative circles led to the Pyrrhic victory of slightly lowered suspensions alongside slightly lowered math scores.

Lack of rigor extends to the credentials that certify new SEL administrators. Restorative Justice Education (RJE), for example, is a nonprofit

"Students are not beneficiaries, but the captive base fueling a data economy."

organization that trains prospective restorative facilitators. Like many similar credentialing programs, RJE's training, which costs \$950, is completely virtual and self-paced. Participants aren't asked to lead a restorative circle before becoming "Certified Specialists in Creating a Culture of Care in Schools." RJE's online FAQ asks, "Where can I find research on the effectiveness of Restorative Practices?" The answer links to a bizarre Google document that recounts not robust statistics but its founder's various Maori colleagues and conference presentations.

Meanwhile, restorative justice practices have grown dramatically in schools across the nation. Administrators boast of lowered suspension rates while teachers on the front lines are regularly cursed at and assaulted. Bans on punishment tie their hands; some resort to wearing padded bike suits to protect themselves from student beatings. As Jeremy Adams, a California public school teacher and the author of *Hollowed Out* writes, "Many teachers feel that they are being held hostage to an ideological experiment that harms them and their ability to teach, that harms innocent students who are trying to learn, and that in the end harms the very people it is meant to help by not holding them accountable."

SEL's technological emphasis also

provides ample opportunity for growing e-learning and digital health industries. Though reports detail the record learning loss that resulted from remote schooling, digital specialists and advocacy groups still push virtual content by engineering false needs. The nonprofit Common Sense Education loftily touts the benefits of "digital citizenship in a connected world" while selling gaudy apps that charge subscription fees. Most top SEL programs now offer entirely virtual options consisting of games and videos, removing any socialization from social-emotional learning. It's darkly ironic that, after a year of remote or masked instruction, kids are being instructed to recognize facial expressions through online exercises.

The long-term incorporation of virtual content bodes poorly for the future of public education. Peddled to teachers as a sophisticated solution to time-strapped curricular demands and bulging classrooms, digital platforms and classroom management technologies threaten to supplant traditional instruction. As curricula are increasingly automated and parceled out to e-learning providers, teaching will become little more than the pushing of buttons.

And while online exercises are unlikely to improve students' social or emotional skills, they do feed a secondary market for technological and medical data collection. SEL assessment services like Centervention boast of "high fidelity early intervention data" gathered through "gamified point systems" and "daily emotion check-ins." They even collect "unobtrusive measures," like the time taken for any action, or the order in which tasks are completed. Educators can "automatically track and monitor progress" to target students who need more "intensive intervention" in the form of more profit-seeking initiatives. More data allows administrators to show off statistics and bolster bureaucrats' claims of "impact." Students are not beneficiaries, but the captive base fueling a data economy.

Apart from a therapeutic bureaucracy's endless push for expansion, at the heart of SEL is a set of false premises about what constitutes emotional well-being and how it is acquired. Contrary to the

claims of new specialists, social and emotional skills are not acquired as cognitive concepts. We don't study for them as we might a test. They are acculturated-modeled by those we love or respect, developed through competition or play with peers. When we recall the sagest advice we've been given, we likely think as much of the advice-giver as the advice itself. Calm can be found in contemplating beauty, after vigorous exercise, or through tapping into one's inner resilience. Such epiphanies make no sense as a technical discipline delivered by PowerPoint, but should naturally flow from a learning process that endows students with the competence that fosters true emotional strength.

SEL's mindless approach to mindfulness is part of a larger educational trend toward hollow technocratic solutionism. The bipartisan standardized testing movement that preceded SEL, including the Bush-era No Child Left Behind Act and the Obama-era Common Core overhaul of education, imported the business model of management science, which emphasized measurable results. Standardized testing provided a uniform measure of progress across schools, while teachers were analogous to employees, overseen by their manager-administrators. And as Common Core advocate and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson put it, the student is the "product," standardized for the efficiency of the eventual modern workplace.

This results-based reform resulted in little more than an empty, nonintuitive curriculum. The much-derided Common Core mathematics standard, replete with "number lines" and "number sentences," deadened the electric thrill of sudden insight. The humanities fared no better. Prioritized over fiction and history were nonfiction informational texts, tailored to testing for content comprehension. The ideal "product" molded by this education was a worker in a knowledge economy, an "effective relay of information."

Small wonder the young people affected by testing-based reform are so depressed, aimless, and anxious. Their schooling deprived them of meaningful knowledge while inundating them with pedantic busywork. Neglected by

moral authority and cut off from deeper historical awareness, they are extra-dependent on institutional shelter and the certitude afforded by strident narratives of power and privilege.

Indeed, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act that precipitated the surge in SEL was meant to amend the failures of standards-based reform. A shift to soft skills was attractive to both teachers beleaguered by punitive testing demands and administrators looking to boost flagging scores. Reformers soon clamored that focusing on social-emotional development, not test scores, would produce "better outcomes."

But by adopting the unquantifiable as a method of quantification, the very soft skills that were originally not measured by tests became subject to standardization and assessment. Test-based reform's banal utilitarianism has ceded to something even more hollow and less sensible. What is instinctive or obvious is rebranded into a top-down discipline owned by experts. Everyday concepts like grit are "discovered" by pioneering Ph.D.s. The teacher is divested of her moral authority, transformed from role model into lackey who "delivers" content, standardized for assessment measures. Instead of number lines for math, SEL offers number lines for emotions.

Current conservative attempts to treat SEL as merely an offshoot of the "woke" DEI industry are misguided, and neglect its insidious adaptability. Legislation like Florida's Stop Woke Act, which prohibits classroom discussion of race or sexuality, is not a solution. It limits free speech, and further evacuates history. Initiatives like SEL are hydras and will reshape themselves to survive. (Coalitions defending SEL against "politicization," initiated by CASEL, have already formed.) There is simply too much money at stake.

America's schoolchildren deserve more than corporate simulations of empathy. The solution to a youth mental health crisis cannot be outsourced to experts of dubious quality. But SEL bureaucrats won't check themselves. Their revenue stream depends on it. ■

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Sometimes You Feel Like a Nut

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BY PAOLA GAVIN



THE REST

→ The six largest **oil companies made more money last year than any year prior**, a windfall that topped a **collective \$200 billion** as Western leaders urged them to increase oil production to compensate for Russian fossil fuels. Resisting pressure from activists and Western officials in recent years to accelerate efforts to decarbonize operations, oil companies like the American ExxonMobil were well positioned to respond to the sudden demand for their fossil fuels, and their stock grew in kind, rallying more than 50% in 2022. Oil producer **BP's CEO Bernard Looney said last week he was slowing the company's plan to cut oil and gas production 40% by 2030** as part of its switch to renewable power, a decision driven by the fact that "governments and societies around the world are asking companies like ours to invest in today's energy system," Looney told the Financial Times.

→ The FBI has opened up an investigation into the **eight Philadelphia cops who were stripped of their weapons and placed on restricted duty because they had siphoned tens of thousands of dollars out of a city anti-violence grant program**. Despite rules against city employees taking money from such programs, the group of cops, led by a captain who has resigned his post, took at least \$75,000 from the \$392,000 fund for a youth boxing program. Children and family members of the police also took some of the money, according to a new report by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

→ Pickleball, the squeaky, unathletic little brother that follows tennis around everywhere, will now become a permanent eyesore on outdoor courts in Manhattan's Upper East Side, further escalating the war for viable urban recreational space between its practitioners and those who enjoy real sports. The decision from the **New York City Parks Department to install three permanent pickleball courts in Carl Schurz Park** comes after a contentious showdown between the basketball players and skateboarders who'd used the space for decades and the **pickleballers who painted unsanctioned court lines in what critics rightly called a land grab**. Sanctioning the illegal courts has only emboldened the pickleball players, all of whom also hate children.

→ Following the failed attempt by India's **Prime Minister Narendra Modi to thwart the distribution of a BBC documentary critical of his administration's treatment of India's Muslim minority**, tax agents carried out a raid on two BBC offices this week, an increasingly familiar tactic for Modi, who's used similar raids against media outlets in the past. "It can't be the whims and fancies of a corporation," Gaurav Bhatia, a spokesperson for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, said at a news conference where he **accused the BBC of operating with a "hidden agenda"** that "cannot be tolerated." Modi has been aggressively tamping down on dissent while trying to burnish India's reputation with a public relations campaign championing India's global image as "the mother of democracy."

→ A single dose of a new dental treatment brushed onto the teeth of a group of roughly 3,000 children was **found to prevent 80% of cavities**, a new JAMA study found. Dental guidelines currently recommend kids receive more complicated and expensive sealants to keep cavities at bay, which can be out of reach for low-income families. The **single-dose treatment, silver diamine fluoride, could become a game changer for childhood dental health** as it can be administered easily by school nurses.

THE BIG STORY

Almost 3 in 5 teenage girls reported feeling "persistently sad or hopeless" in 2021, according to a new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study—a rate of despair that's twice as high as it is for boys and a more than 20% increase from a decade prior. Also, roughly 1 in every 3 teen girls had seriously contemplated suicide, the study found, a significant increase from 19% in 2011.

"America's teen girls are engulfed in a growing wave of sadness," Debra Houry, the CDC's acting principal deputy director said on Monday, noting that the widespread despair among American girls corresponded to "dramatic increases in experiences" of violence.

Since 2017, the rate of teen girls who report being the victim of sexual violence has grown by 20%. Similarly, girls but not boys are suffering dramatic increases in incidents of cyberbullying, with roughly 20% of girls targeted for online harassment, about double the number of boys who said the same.

Last week, a superintendent of a New Jersey school district resigned after the school was accused of mishandling the violent attack of 14-year-old student Adriana Kuch by four other teen girls in the school hallway, which was shared in a TikTok video. "I don't want to be that girl who gets beat up on video and made fun of," Adriana's father, Michael Kuch, recalled his daughter saying the day before she took her own life.

—Sean Cooper

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‘Ukraine Must Win’: A Q&A With Boris Johnson

A Tablet exclusive from the Kyiv Jewish Forum

BY DAVID SAMUELS

He partied during COVID, on his birthday. He let COVID lockdowns go on too long. He let his girlfriend, now his wife, cut his hair. An expensive London barber cut his hair. The prime minister's official barber came to his house and cut his hair. He's sloppy in public. He's an aristocrat. He worked as a journalist. He drinks too much (see: journalist, aristocrat). He dyes his hair, though his sister Rachel insists that the entire Johnson family are natural blondes, which is a bit too much information, maybe. Someone has something else to say about his hair. His hair is the secret to his political success, as well as the secret flaw or Achilles' heel by which his political failure might have been foretold.

The problem with Boris is that he's lazy. He was barely interested in being prime minister. The problem with Boris is that he won't shut up. Boris wanted to be everywhere and do everything at once. He's a Muppet. He's the Brexit Muppet, who led Britain out of Europe. He's a Muppet who thinks he's Sir Winston Churchill. But Churchill was bald, you see. Also, he saved Europe from the Nazis.

The British people had enough of Boris. After three years, the Conservative Party, which had formerly adored him, booted him out. Bye-bye, Boris. Was it only three years? It seemed like so much longer. Goodbye, and farewell. Ernest Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms*.

Who among us will write a farewell ode to Boris' hair?

Hear, hear. Let's hear it for front-page conventional wisdom and social media snark masquerading as deeply significant analysis of the times that try men's souls! Thank God that COVID is over, right, with all that jibber-jabber about jabs that turned out not to work so well and the cult of masked toddlers and mutilating teenagers and all that other public health nonsense that began to seem like the leading edge of some kind of sinister plot supported by monopoly social media platforms which turn out to be one-way mirrors for the American spy services who are spying on everyone, 24/7. Time to give Boris the boot, and try out someone who also went to Oxford but actually did their homework.

Only, on his way out of office, and actually a year before that, Boris Johnson did the most consequential thing that any British prime minister has done since botching the Suez Canal takeover, leaving India and Palestine, and winning the Second World War.

Boris Johnson stood up for Ukraine, and against Putin, when Ukraine was alone in the world, on the front lines of democracy, which no one particularly cared to defend, except for the Ukrainians, whom the rest of the world had come to understand as patsies for the Russians, and as an ATM for corrupt American politicians who partied on their yachts, fucked their hookers, and stuffed their pockets with cash from their oil and gas companies, which were as much Putin's companies as theirs.

Alone among the leaders of the West, who had benefited from Ukrainian largesse, only Boris Johnson, the Muppet who thought he was Churchill, thought they would fight.

More important, he got Washington, D.C., to go along with him, which bears some closer examination. This being the same Washington, D.C., that was hopelessly divided by partisan insanity, by the jailing of political demonstrators, the use of security services as political weapons, by brain-rotting conspiracy theories, and by the utter debasement of the American press, whose standards of objective reporting had been thoroughly trashed in the fight against racism, sexism, and fascism, after the once-grand pyramid of American magazines and newspapers had itself been defunded by the monopoly internet platforms that collectively became a giant video game for billionaires and spies to play on while properly informing readers about nothing. Tucker Carlson on the right and Glenn Greenwald on the left merged to become one person, spouting the gospel of American corruption and defeat.

Vampire Washington, aged, wealthy and corrupt, was inclined to go along with whatever Vladimir Putin wanted, feeding him Crimea, and slices of Donbas, and warm water ports in Syria, and nuclear reactor contracts in Iran like canapes to a hungry crocodile. In turn, Putin believed that Western governments were staffed by hollow sissy men who would drop their pants and bend over for him. In fact, Putin believed, in their decadence and emptiness, they yearned for it, for a taste of the good old czarist lash.

As for the Ukrainians, Putin thought, when were they ever a nation? A weird mix of Nazified peasants and servile Jews, Stalin taught them who was boss. Putin, though perhaps only a modest tyrant by comparison, was a Russian leader, and Stalin's heir. There could be only one outcome to the fight, which would be over in a week, or two at the most. The triumphal parade of tanks through the heart of Kyiv would continue on for days. It would be the greatest sight since the Red Army entered Berlin, or Budapest, or Prague.

The Ukrainian people believed otherwise. As did President Volodymyr Zelensky, the heroic Jewish comedian, who played a president on TV, and then in real life, better than anyone had done since Ronald Reagan. Just as Boris played the role of British prime minister better than anyone since Margaret Thatcher, who was also famous for her hair.

From a distance, it is easy to predict that Ukraine will win its war, and become a real grown-up nation, and a full member of NATO, just as its sometime Geppetto, Boris Johnson, will go down in history for getting the big questions right, from Brexit to Ukraine. By comparison, his faults will look small.

I spoke with the once-and-future British prime minister on the afternoon of Feb. 8 in London, following an address by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to Parliament asking the government of the current British prime minister, Rishi Sunak, for more airplanes. The transcript that follows has been only very lightly edited to remove stray interruptions, hems and hahs that were dutifully recorded by the transcriber.

David Samuels: Welcome.

Boris Johnson: Thank you so much.

D.S. Glory to the heroes.

B.J. Yes. "*Heroyam slava*," as they say in Ukraine.

D.S. And they are heroes.

B.J. B.J. The Ukrainians are heroic and the Ukrainian armed forces are heroic. And everybody in Ukraine who has put their lives at risk day in, day out, to rescue people, the emergency services, they're all completely heroic. They're heroes. But I think the Ukrainian leadership has also been heroic.

D.S. And you were just there?

B.J. I was there a few weeks ago.

D.S. Tell us what you saw.

B.J. I saw some of the suburbs of Kyiv, which I hadn't really looked at before, and I saw the residue of the Russian attacks. I saw appalling destruction of the buildings.

D.S. What does a year of war mean for people living there?

B.J. It's been a catastrophe. And the point, what I saw was how Putin is able to drop a 500-kilo bomb on an

"That's the only way to finish this thing off. You have to get the land bridge."

eight-story block of flats and just reduce it to nothing, with no conscience at all, no understanding of the laws of war or humanity. But he's doing it the whole time across all of occupied Ukraine and all the bits that he's attacking. And he's torturing, maiming, murdering innocent civilians the whole time.

D.S. And we hear about the heroic Ukrainian resistance, but that daily toll, people living without heat, people living without electricity, without water.

B.J. Yeah. I'm so worried about Ukraine fatigue. I'm so worried that people don't understand the urgency of helping Ukraine. The suffering is appalling. They're losing many, many brave young men and women in combat. They're losing civilians. Children are being killed in attacks on innocent centers of the population. They need help. They need more equipment and the faster they can get it, the better.

D.S. Today, President Zelensky came here to London and asked for planes.

B.J. He did. He gave a remarkable speech, and he was very focused on planes. I was very struck by how much emphasis he put on the need for jets. It's absolutely true. They need a load of stuff to stop the Russian aggression, but also to retake the ground that Russia has occupied. That's the only way to

finish this thing off. You have to get the land bridge.

D.S. There's a strange reluctance to provide Ukraine with the actual weapons it needs to win the war.

B.J. But don't forget, there's always been a reluctance. So, right back at the beginning, a year ago, more than a year ago now, 18 months ago. I remember when Ben Wallace, the U.K. defense secretary, and I were first considering whether or not to send shoulder-launched antitank weaponry, NLAWs. We had the system saying, "No, no, no, no, no. This would be an escalation. It'll provoke the Russians." We did it. It was invaluable, the NLAWs, the Javelins, which the U.S. sent, Donald Trump sent, actually, was invaluable in allowing the Ukrainians to protect themselves in that battle space that I saw around Kyiv. Then we had an argument about HIMARS. Then an argument about the Multiple Launch Rocket Systems.

D.S. Battle tanks, "They shouldn't have battle tanks."

B.J. Correct. And an argument about battle tanks. And every time we've come to these forks in the road, we've always taken the option of giving the Ukrainians what they need. But we've done it slowly. My argument would be, let's stop this titration of support. Let's stop these pipette drops of assistance. I'm not saying these are pipettes, we're giving huge amounts of assistance. By the way, I really congratulate and thank profoundly the United States of America. I think what America is doing is fantastic. I think once again, America is the arsenal of democracy and freedom.

D.S. You were just in the U.S. as well.

B.J. I was. I was.

D.S. But you must have heard the reluctance certainly on the Republican side of the aisle, which is odd. Traditionally ...

B.J. Yes. I want a caveat. I think that needs to be put in context. I thought that the overwhelming bulk of the Republicans I met were very strong. And indeed, most of the people I spoke to, Mitch McConnell, Lindsey Graham, Kevin McCarthy, a lot of senators, a lot of Congress, they were actually keen to go faster even than Joe Biden

is going. So they were outflanking on that side.

But, you're right. There are some who take a very peculiar view of what is going on, and I really can't explain it. They somehow have come to identify, through a really weird piece of logic, Putin with conservatism or upholding conservative values and Ukraine as being woke. I mean, give me a break. How is it conservative to set about extinguishing democracy and freedom in an innocent European country? How's it conservative, by the way, to encourage the persecution of minority Christian groups, for instance, that don't subscribe to the Orthodox faith. There's nothing conservative about anything that Putin is doing. So I don't understand this. You're right to point at this train of thinking. I don't believe it's prevalent. And the vast majority of the Republicans I met were really solid.

D.S. Now, you were in Kyiv in January a year ago as well, correct?

B.J. I was in Kyiv in, yeah, in January and February.

D.S. At that time, did you think that Putin was going to invade Ukraine?

B.J. Well, we had the evidence that he was going to.

D.S. But did you believe that that was something that would actually happen?

B.J. It was a very interesting situation. Everything we saw. So, I thought reading [Putin's] crazy manifesto, his weird essay treatise about Ukraine, I thought that this guy plainly doesn't think Ukraine's a proper country. This is a mad, chauvinistic, imperialistic battle plan. He's going to do something. And so we formed that view in the U.K. government.

D.S. How early did you form that view? Because you were sending antitank weapons in January, right before ...

B.J. Months, months before. So we started the process of trying to send the antitank weapons way before January. Because as I said to you earlier, it was laborious to persuade people that this was the right thing to do, even within our own system. Actually, they got there in the middle of January, which was the nick of time.

D.S. And so November was the point,

right? Somewhere around November 10th, where you would've received warnings that these unusual troop concentrations were being ...

B.J. That's right. So we started to get these very, very convincing intelligence reports, and not just from the U.S. intelligence, but from our own intelligence services. They were saying that 115 battalion tactical groups were massing on the border with Ukraine and there seemed to be no other purpose but to invade.

When I went there, however, what was interesting was that there was a kind of mood of slight denial in Kyiv itself, and it was only afterwards I understood why that was. I think Volodymyr Zelensky perfectly knew that Putin was massing for an attack, but as a responsible leader who was about to become a war leader, he could not say to his population, "We're all about to be attacked by the Russian army."

D.S. Why terrify them?

B.J. Because they would've stampeded away from those places where resistance was going to be so absolutely vital. And plus, there would've been further economic carnage as well.

D.S. Those are very hard decisions to make as a leader. You're sitting there and you're thinking, "If I tell people what's actually going to happen, they'll run away. If I don't tell them what's going to happen, they're going to be in the path of this war machine, people will die."

B.J. Well, I think it was an appalling situation he found himself in. So we, I warned him what we were seeing in the intelligence, and also of course, assured him that we would do everything we could to support.

D.S. And in those early visits before the war, you formed a bond with him?

B.J. Yes. So I'd met him way back, I think a couple of years previously. And he'd come to London, we got on well. He's a very amusing and entertaining guy. He's come out of show biz, really. But he's an extremely talented guy, and he wants the right things for Ukraine. I think the U.K. government has always been very supportive of Ukraine, but we've always been concerned about corruption, about the

general direction of the country. Zelensky seemed to have the right ideas.

D.S. Amusing, youthful, friendly, but no one saw the person who has emerged as a result of the war.

B.J. I think that's right. I think he has a hardness and a toughness and a clarity about what he wants that no one expected, but he's more than risen to the occasion.

D.S. When the war started February 24th, how long did your intelligence and defense people think it was going to last?

B.J. So it's on February the 24th that we get the first ... I'm awakened at 4:00, 4:30 in the morning, and I have Volodymyr Zelensky on the line, and he tells me what's happening. They're being attacked from north, east, south. "It's all-out war," he says, "Planes are coming in from Belarus, they're bombing all the airports."

At that stage, the military advice that we were getting, and I think that many other countries were getting was, "Look, the Ukrainians are probably going to be overwhelmed within a matter of days." But I didn't believe that because I had been to Ukraine a couple of times, and I'd talked to them. I talked to people who'd been fighting in the Donbas, and I thought they're very brave. I mean, these are very tough guys, right?

D.S. It helps to actually go to the place.

B.J. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I went to places like, there's a pub in Kyiv, which is patronized by the veterans of the Donbas conflict. It's studded, it's got bullets all over the ... instead of wallpaper. They are very, very tough guys. 10 million Ukrainians fought in the Second World War, and they saw ...

D.S. Yeah. My family's Ukrainian. People forgot in the West.

B.J. Yes, Stalin's armies defeated Hitler. So they thought when Russia invades that must be it. But what they forgot was that 10 million of Stalin's armies were Ukrainians.

D.S. And people also forgot in a more recent context that the war hadn't begun when Putin launched this invasion. The war had begun in 2014.

B.J. That's so right. That's so right.

D.S. And thousands of people had been killed in battle.

B.J. Fourteen thousand. Ukraine had already become a very tough society that was used to suffering, and that was very battle hardened. Very battle hardened. One of the interesting things actually, when you go to Ukraine is, as I've done several times since the conflict began, since Putin's invasion, we talk a lot about Western training, and we're going to train them to ... They know about as much about war fighting as anybody in the world now. They are, they're very, very brave.

D.S. How did you understand Putin's initial war plan which resulted in this vast 60-mile-long column of tanks being set on fire day after day. Obviously that's not what he intended.

B.J. No. Well, this is a famous disaster, strategic disaster, which what people don't understand is that those columns of tanks, partly was because NLAWs were shooting them up and they were being interrupted on their roads and getting into traffic jams, they were running out of fuel and so on. But they were really Ubers that were going on their way to pick up their passengers, which were the crews for the tanks. Which were all going to arrive at the airport at Hostomel and the trouble, so it was the battle for Hostomel ...

D.S. Let's talk about that battle because I'm fascinated by it.

B.J. Well, look, I can't tell you, you'd really need a military expert. But what happened, as I understand it, was that the Russians landed. The Ukrainians had been supplied with an awful lot of intelligence about what was going to happen and they were ready. They shot the Russians up so badly that the Russians had to retreat, and then the Russians tried again. And essentially, even though Hostomel airport was not very far away from Kyiv itself, they couldn't capture it. And because they couldn't capture the airport, they couldn't bring their tank crews in. So there was no point in the tanks even getting to Kyiv because their crews weren't there. So the whole thing was a massive logistical disaster.

D.S. And the airport was defended by 500 local guardsmen mostly with rifles and a few missiles.

“If Putin set out to prove himself wrong, he could not have done so in a more decisive and elegant way.”

B.J. I think the story of Hostomel airport is a complex one.

D.S. How much intelligence had they been given about ...

B.J. We don't comment on all that sort of stuff. But the Ukrainians were fantastically brave. The basic difference is that the Ukrainians are fighting for hearth and home. They're fighting for their country. They're fighting for their families. Why do Putin's troops fight? They don't even know why they're fighting. They're poor, terrified conscripts or jailbirds.

D.S. For a victory parade they were promised and that never happened.

B.J. Correct. Remember what Robert S. McNamara says after the end of the Vietnam War, he says, “We weren't fighting communism, we were fighting nationalism.” The truth is that Putin has actually created and intensified the most passionate national feeling anywhere in Europe. That is going to be an absolutely unbudgeable, unbreakable force.

D.S. Whatever arguments one might have had about the existence of a separate Ukrainian nation before the war, certainly there will never be those arguments again.

If Putin set out to prove himself wrong, he could not have done so in a more decisive and elegant way. It's over, that argument.

D.S. Now, you visited Kyiv in April, and I remember the shots of those eerily empty streets with you and Zelensky walking together and one or two or three other humans visible somewhere.

B.J. Yeah. No, it was a bit spooky because Volodymyr Zelensky hadn't been out of his bunker for about six weeks as I understood things. He certainly hadn't done a walkabout like that. I mean, he'd been around, but he hadn't done a thing where you walk around the streets and meet people. And you're right, there weren't that many people around because it was still pretty unclear.

D.S. Who in their right mind would let the prime minister of Britain go running loose in Kyiv with Vladimir Putin's assassins everywhere? It was kind of nuts.

B.J. No, I don't think so. I think that the Ukrainians had done an amazing job. I think they cleared the Russians out of Kyiv, and yeah, there might have been a few stay-behind Russians somewhere in Kyiv or Chechens or whatever. But the chances were small.

D.S. Why did you feel that it was important for you to go there then?

B.J. This was April. I'll tell you why. It was because there was a sort of conversation building that there might be a deal. Do you remember all this stuff going on in Belarus, and there was ...

D.S. “You've put up a brave fight for six weeks. That's wonderful. We all know you're going to lose eventually, let's end this.”

B.J. There was a bit of that. There was a bit of that. Everybody was going off to see Putin and just trying to see what conversation there could be. And of course, I couldn't see the logic of any of that because there was no deal you could do with Putin, even if you could persuade the Ukrainians to do a land for peace deal. Whatever you're going to give Putin, some of the stuff he'd conquered already in exchange. It'd be Mariupol, whatever, and then he retires from the rest. Even if you did that, which would be morally obnoxious, catastrophic, you couldn't rely on him to observe the agreement you'd reached. Because he's shown by his actions in 2014 and since 2014, that he's prepared to do it again and again and again. So there was no deal.

D.S. How intense was that pressure?

B.J. I don't know. So I don't think that Zelensky came anywhere near to doing a bad deal for Ukraine. But I certainly think there was a lot of chatter in the West about it. And my purpose really, was to tell him that whatever, that he would have the U.K.'s unwavering support. And the position that we took from day one, literally from day one, was Putin must fail and Ukraine must succeed, or Ukraine must win.

D.S. Now, one of the things that is very, very interesting to me, coming from an American perspective, is that not only was your leadership wonderful and instrumental, but this was a consensus across the parties in the political system in Britain. There really was support for Ukraine on the left. There was support on the right. If there was criticism of you, it was that, "Oh, the weapons aren't reaching there fast enough." It was not a question of why are we involved? Why are we spending money? Who cares about these people? What accounts for that?

B.J. It's a really good question. I think that the Ukrainian ambassador to the U.K. is interesting on this. It's just something about what happened in Ukraine really struck a chord with the British people, and in some deep emotional way we sympathized with the Ukrainians in their struggle and in their suffering. I think it's as simple as that. People just opened their hearts to Ukraine.

D.S. And was it also the fact that Ukrainians were defending themselves? It was not "come rescue us."

B.J. I think that's right. I think the crucial thing about the way it all unfolded was that in those first few days, it was clear that those of us who'd believed in Ukraine, who'd believed they would fight, were going to be proved right. And that became a virtuous self-reinforcing phenomenon because the more they resisted, the more on Capitol Hill there was support for Ukraine. That was the crucial thing. I repeat, it's that huge support that's come from the United States of America. Every time the U.S. has been tested in its resolve on this, there's always been a delay. But in the end, the United States of America has come in and exceeded expectations.

So look, I'm just confident that America will continue to help and do the right thing.

D.S. Another thing that interests me politically about this, I saw a quote the other day from John Major, and he said that, "Well, Brexit is a disaster because if someday we really need to take a tough stand on something like China, then we'll be alone and we won't be able to do anything. Whereas if we were in the EU..."

B.J. Oh, boy. Complete nonsense.

D.S. Right, except this proves the opposite, doesn't it?

B.J. Exactly. Because if we'd been locked in the EU system with the common foreign policy, with all the discussions. We would've been locked into subservience to the Normandy process, you remember, which was set up after 2014. Basically when Britain subcontracted Ukrainian policy to France and Germany, remember? And we said, "Oh, let them get on with it," and we weren't even at the table.

D.S. Brexit in a real way made British leadership on this issue possible.

B.J. It made it possible. I think the interesting thing is that certainly in a lot of the East European countries, Central European countries, they totally agree with that. They saw the difference. I don't think you'd find Emmanuel [Macron] would necessarily support that, but then he doesn't like Brexit. As I said, the French, at least initially before the war broke out, had a different perspective on things. I think France and Germany did believe, or must've believed in this Normandy nonsense, and it just didn't work.

D.S. Ukraine has purchased its freedom, its nationhood, its place in Europe in blood. No one can deny that. That's what happened over the last year. They fought. They died. They held off this tyrant and this military machine. What do you think Europe and England and NATO owe Ukraine now? What do we have to do?

B.J. The Ukrainians are fighting for all of us. The Ukrainians are fighting for the Poles, for the Georgians, for the Moldovans, for the Balts. They're fighting for every country that could have its borders changed by force anywhere in

the world. It's a massive sacrifice that they're making.

I think that they're also showing why Putin was wrong. They're showing that they have a Western and a European vocation, that they're a free democratic independent nation, and they deserve, I think, once this thing is done, they deserve to be treated with immense, immense respect. Clearly, I think that their membership in the EU, if that is what they choose, should be accelerated by the EU members. Clearly, it's no longer for the U.K. to have a role in that. But certainly when it comes to NATO, I think we're now in a very interesting position. Because if you'd asked me before the war, before Putin did his act of lunacy, is Ukraine going to join NATO anytime soon? I'd have said ...

D.S. Well, Vladimir Putin asked you that question, right?

B.J. He did. I said, "No, not anytime soon." The reality was, to be frank, there was a strong enough caucus within NATO to block Ukraine that it wouldn't have happened till hell freezes over. But now, Putin has utterly destroyed, utterly destroyed the case against Ukrainian membership of NATO. Not having Ukraine in NATO meant the worst war in Europe in 80 years, colossal suffering, global economic disaster. The logic is to get clarity and stability and whatever ... Moscow has forfeited all right to protest now. NATO is not a hostile alliance. NATO is a defensive alliance. And Putin, by his actions, has proved to the Swedes, to the Finns that NATO is essential for them and he certainly proved that it's essential for Ukraine.

D.S. Thank you so much.

B.J. Thank you. ■

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Bronze Age Pervert's Dissertation on Leo Strauss

Should aristocrats of the spirit have sex with each other or seize power in a military coup?

BY BLAKE SMITH

Whatever passes for conservative thought in the American academy usually passes through the influence of Leo Strauss. In his teaching, the political philosopher combined an outward respect for liberal democracy with concern that this regime neutralizes the higher types of human beings, those capable of free thinking. Strauss, however, developed his ideas in an elliptical fashion meant to evoke the kind of thought he held to be the privilege of this type.

Out of the Straussian fold sometimes emerge singular thinkers who galvanize public opinion. One was Strauss' student Allan Bloom, who in the 1980s transformed himself from a translator of Plato into a bestselling culture warrior with his book *The Closing of the American Mind*. Its success proved the truth of the Straussian insight that texts address multiple audiences, and that their perceptive readers are a small minority.

On the surface, Bloom offered Reagan's America a defense of the literary canon and old-fashioned morality against the "relativism" of the post-'60s left. But perspicacious readers—including Bloom's former student, the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick—would notice he argued that the true pedagogue awakens intelligent young men to free thinking by inculcating contempt for democracy and mass culture, and that this awakening includes a (homo)erotic

element. *Closing of the American Mind* was misrecognized by ordinary readers in something of the way that the Village People's ode to gay cruising, "YMCA," became the anthem of dorky straight people at sporting events. For all the absurdity of this situation, however, Bloom's bestseller served a philosophical aim, directing a minority of readers to his studies of Plato's *Republic* and *Symposium*, which are pinnacles of philosophical and political insight.

Bloom might have remained an isolated monument of reactionary homoeroticism, but our era has its own *Closing of the American Mind* and its own Bloom: *Bronze Age Mindset* and Costin Alamaru, who is widely understood to have been its author. *Bronze Age Mindset*, a campy, fascistic "exhortation" written half in internet slang, has by now been reviewed by every would-be intellectual trying to demonstrate his daring proximity to the limits of acceptable opinion. Alamaru, however, is no basement-dwelling "incel," as some of his sneering critics would have it. He is an Ivy-educated political philosopher, trained in the Straussian tradition. His doctoral dissertation, *The Problem of Tyranny and Philosophy in Plato and Nietzsche*, deserves recognition as one of the most lucid reformulations Strauss' teaching, and most bracing revivals of Bloom's practice.

Alamaru lays out with great clarity what he takes to be Strauss' views. Strauss, he argues, held that Plato took from Athens' execution of Socrates the

lesson that political life—perhaps particularly in a democracy—threatens philosophy, i.e., the free exercise of reason in search of truth. Because truly thinking people challenge convention, they appear wicked to their less-intelligent neighbors, who persecute them. A society, like that of classical Athens, in which public opinion finds ready expression in law, requires such thinkers to disguise themselves. To evade persecution, or perhaps even to rule the beguiled multitude, Plato secretly enjoined philosophers to wear a mask of virtue, conforming in appearance with—but quietly influencing—their neighbor's beliefs.

Alamaru deserves credit for divining, and insisting upon, this aspect of Strauss' thought—that Strauss was only a friend to our liberal democracy in an ironic, unstraightforward way, and that his praise or blame of our regime and its enemies must be interpreted with great hermeneutic finesse. Alamaru is a careful, thoughtful exegete—when it suits him to be. For this reason the superficial crudeness, even stupidity, of *Bronze Age Mindset* and Alamaru's persona on Twitter (@bronzeagemantis), appear as a strategic dumbing-down of certain of the points made in his dissertation, as a tactic for generating interest in his work, or as a means of acting, in a peculiar fashion, on another, non-philosophical audience. In fact, his dissertation outlines, quite openly, the rationale for such an approach, which shows Alamaru to be a rogue disciple of Bloom.

Like many closeted gay men, and indeed many uncloseted ones, Bloom seems to have enjoyed little more than speculating on who else was secretly gay. As his friend Saul Bellow reports in *Ravelstein*, his novelized version of Bloom's last days, the philosopher spent much of their conversations speculating about the sexuality of his students—and thus, potentially, their sexual availability. He had a passion for bringing young male minds to philosophy and young male bodies to his bed. Indeed, *Closing of the American Mind* and Bloom's final essay in his less-read but far more brilliant *Love and Friendship* are semi-clandestine justifications for a postmodern

version of the original “Socratic method” of combining erotic and intellectual approaches to pedagogy.

Recognizing kindred spirits was the core of Bloom’s pedagogy, and not only in the sexual sense. Bloom inherited from his mentor Leo Strauss a vision of teaching and writing that aimed at separating a handful of potential philosophers who could be awakened into original thinking from the vulgar mass of ordinary mortals. There was a gradation of human types, with people like themselves at the top; the primary purpose of education, as of eros, is of finding one’s type.

This was true not only in the libidinally charged space of the classroom, but also in the public sphere, where Bloom, through his bestselling *Closing of the American Mind*, could address two audiences. On the one hand were the conservative masses willing to pay for Bloom’s diatribes against the Rolling Stones, blue jeans, and oral sex, and his defense of traditional liberal arts education; on the other were the unbelieving few who, seeing through his moralizing bromides, could detect the transgressive sexual and intellectual exhortation at the heart of his teaching. The latter types would learn, ideally, not only this teaching, but how to conceal it from the former, following the political prudence inculcated by Strauss.

Bloom’s combination of culture-war sloganeering and philosophical eroticism, public success and private deviance, was unstable, even ridiculous, in his own work; since his death of AIDS in 1992 there has been no sequel to it among American Straussians. Following what seemed to be the message of Strauss’ famous 1941 essay “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” they have disguised themselves as—and, in the end, perhaps become—conventional conservatives and patriots. Alamariu’s dissertation advisor at Yale, Steven Smith, exemplifies the soporific dullness of this tradition.

At conservative gatherings I have twice struggled to remain awake through Smith’s presentations on the necessity of being moderately patriotic, loving America in a rational, genial fashion. Such sermons are not exactly

wrong—it would be nice, after all, if we were more united with our fellow citizens in a not-too-energetic appreciation of our country. But they seem hopelessly ineffectual, unable to arouse conviction even in those, like me, who are sympathetic to their point. Indeed, they are not even able to convince other Straussians. In recent years, a set of wholly immoderate West Coast Straussians have convinced themselves that America needs a Trumpist revolution to reclaim “the republic” from the progressive-bureaucratic “regime,” election results notwithstanding. Divided between hapless moderates and unhinged reactionaries, the American Straussian project seems to be unraveling.

Strauss himself observed that his own “Platonic” approach to politics—of external caution and esoteric injunctions to inner nonconformity—had been powerfully critiqued by Friedrich Nietzsche a generation before him. Nietzsche, in Strauss’ account, noted that Plato’s followers had failed to preserve the independence either of their own thinking or of the Greek city-states. Both intellectual and political liberty were subsumed, eventually, in what Nietzsche regarded as the degenerate form of Platonism for the masses: Christianity.

A vulgarized Christian version of the Platonists’ own outward beliefs, made simple enough for ordinary people to understand—and with increasingly persecutory energy, to believe in and impose on others—may have first appeared to the philosophers as an instrument by which to govern. It became, in the end, an illusion in which they were ensnared. In Nietzsche’s telling, either the philosopher speaking to the public fails to capture its attention, and is thus unable to lead it, or, by lowering his own thought to the level of the herd, he does capture its attention—only to be captured by his audience in turn.

In contrast to Plato’s failed strategy of accommodation, Nietzsche implied that “free spirits” should adopt the pose not of the orator or preacher who address the multitude, but rather of the fool who scorns it. They should adopt wild, perverse rhetorical disguises to incite uncomprehending shock among

the many—and thought among the few. The outlandish statements, self-contradictions, and incessant, boorish humor that Nietzsche used in his writing, Strauss insisted, conceal the depths of his thinking from all but the free spirits. Moreover, they are also intended to have an effect on a class of readers sensitive enough to be enlivened by such prose, but not insightful enough for philosophy. This intermediary human type was described by Strauss as the “gentlemen,” and by Alamariu as “aristocrats.”

Bronze Age Mindset, written in an internet pidgin reminiscent of the “Lolcats Bible,” uses the tactics of Nietzsche as described by Strauss. It is aimed—and has been quite successful at reaching—an audience of young men who imagine themselves as future or would-be elites constrained by the suffocating norms and pieties of our still-too-Christian culture. It urges them to undo the errors of Plato and of modern academic Straussians and throw off their allegiance to religion, patriotism, and other collective myths that restrain their own will to power.

Alamariu’s dissertation explains the rationale behind the strange, offensive style and content offered in *Bronze Age Manifesto*. In it, he elucidates Strauss’ interpretation of Nietzsche, and explains why he finds Nietzsche’s critique of Plato more convincing than Strauss’ own rearticulation of a Platonic, prudential politics. The modes of prudence that had characterized Strauss’ and Bloom’s writing—a stylistic caution that soothed the scruples of ordinary readers, a moral caution that seemed to affirm what most Americans believe, and a political caution that upheld our regime while quietly dissenting in private from its intellectual premises—must, he argues, be overthrown.

Alamariu continues his internal critique of Straussian tradition, and his frank assessment of its failures, by insisting that Bloom, in his attempts to seduce students and readers into the philosophical life, missed an essential point. The “type” of the philosopher, the person capable of freely thinking, is not one that randomly appears among a mass of duller fellows, to be separated

from them by an attentive teacher. Rather, such people must be produced and perfected through an erotic education that aims at making young men more vigorous, physically perfect, and hostile to our supposedly feminized, egalitarian society (Alamariu, like Bloom, is frankly uninterested in women). Alamariu's project involves a combination of erotic pedagogy, in the vein of the ancient Greeks and of Bloom, along with a program of eugenics, the outlines of which he only sketches but which resemble no less the ideal city of Plato's *Republic* than the biopolitics of the Third Reich.

This is a deeply disturbing vision. It is perhaps even more disturbing that Alamariu forces us to recall how little distance separates the teachings of Strauss—on which much of modern American conservative intellectual life is based—from outright totalitarianism. Indeed, Plato, the cornerstone of Western philosophy, has often appeared to readers as a guide to utterly illiberal government. Strauss and Bloom, and their wiser students, take up Plato, and Nietzsche's critiques of Plato, in a spirit of prudence, distancing philosophical thought from political action. They want to protect American liberal democracy, seeing it as a decent enough regime within which free thinkers like themselves could, sheltered by discretion, pursue their own way of life.

Our regime needs protection, they sensed, from its most dangerous enemies—those who imagine themselves as exceptionally intelligent and worthy, and unfairly restrained by the rules and standards of ordinary people. This type, which rebels against the conformism and mediocrity of democratic life, has to be coaxed back into the fold of convention, or at least into an outward, ironic acceptance of public norms. Such people can be made safe for, and perhaps even useful to, democracy, on the condition that they be convinced that they are in fact superior to the rest of us—so dangerously superior that they cannot even make their superiority known. Strauss' and Bloom's analysis of human types, by these lights, is to be read not as the self-affirmation of a philosophical elite, but as a ploy by which readers who take themselves to be stifled by the

“If the public sphere of ancient Athens could turn the potentially tyrannical he-man into a rent boy, just imagine what Twitter can do.”

democratic herd can be reconciled to our society. The real esoteric teaching would be that the very idea of an “esoteric teaching,” and of a philosophical few who alone can divine it, is not addressed to genuine free-thinkers but to the “gentlemen” who naively take themselves to be intellectual elites. These are the enemies of democracy.

If they are not read in such an ironic light, Strauss and Bloom appear only as hesitant, timid pseudo-aristocrats of spirit, who do not dare to defy the herd-like multitude of their inferiors. This is the position taken by Alamariu, who writes in *Bronze Age Mindset*, “I don't do irony! Learn that I don't understand the gay idea of ‘irony.’” In his most decisive deviation from the Straussian approach to politics, Alamariu suggests that the philosopher should aim at seizing political power as a “tyrant.” He briefly notes, and rapidly dismisses, the critique of this ambition offered by Hannah Arendt, who had argued that the modern era differs from the classical in critical ways that make a revival of “tyranny” an absurd prospect.

In her analysis of the origin of totalitarianism, Arendt observed that modern dictators have little resemblance to ancient tyrants. If the latter possessed overweening ambition to demonstrate

their excellence, the former are histrionic mediocrities pushed forward by the crowds they only imagine that they lead. The apparent weakness of modern democracies, whether in the early 20th century or our own day, does not create a situation ripe for the emergence of truly great men.

Arendt warned that the conditions that produced totalitarianism—which she argued threaten all modern societies—pose as much of an obstacle to the emergence of a true philosopher as they do to a true tyrant. In particular, mass media so warps our minds that we are becoming unable to think freely. Our most apparently private intellectual acts are shaped by our sense of how they will appear to other people. The latter are not, increasingly, specific others who might elicit, guide and refine our thinking, in the manner of Socrates, but anonymous, generic others. Life in this virtual multitude annihilates the possibility of either free thinking or political greatness.

Ironically, one of the critical passages in Alamariu's dissertation concerns a moment in a Platonic dialogue when Socrates seems to best his interlocutor Callicles, whose views anticipate Alamariu's own. Callicles calls for an aggressive, virile pursuit of open political power in the name of philosophical superiority. Socrates warns that such a course, in fact, will show Callicles to be the same type of person as an effeminate “catamite” who is guided only by his own pleasure.

Alamariu performs some awkward hermeneutic wrangling to argue that Callicles, “shamed” into silence by this comparison, should in fact be understood to represent what Plato took to be the better argument. This is just the point of view taken by another radical thinker inspired by Nietzsche, and usually identified with the left—Gilles Deleuze, in his 1962 *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. And indeed, the attacks that Deleuze and his co-author, Felix Guattari, would go on to make in such works as *Anti-Oedipus* and *Thousand Plateaus* against such supposedly “fascist” institutions as psychoanalysis, traditional party politics, conventional heterosexuality, etc., anticipate those made

by Alamariu, our renegade Straussian fascist.

These readings that vindicate Callicles, whether from the “left” or the “right,” are a kind of covering one’s ears to Socrates’ warning that neither virility nor philosophy can avoid being corrupted if they display themselves openly—least of all, if Arendt is right, under modern social conditions and through contemporary social media. If the public sphere of ancient Athens could turn the potentially tyrannical he-man into a rent boy, just imagine what Twitter can do.

Socrates’ warning and Arendt’s pessimism are unlikely to bring sobriety to illiberals who dream of returning to a

pre-modern age of tyranny and avowed hierarchies among human types, by which they imagine people like themselves will be placed at the top of a nakedly unequal society (as if our own hierarchies were not already brutal and obvious). But, for the remaining friends of liberal democracy, it may be at least a reminder that the problem is not, after all, one of finding the right message to inculcate our fellow citizens in civic virtue, to “deradicalize” them, or to awaken among them an enlightened few.

The problem, as Alamariu notes but cannot apply to his own case, is that the very conditions of possibility for thinking, alone and together, are being undermined—that whatever we attempt

to express in public, whether intellect or eros or will to power, becomes an image of itself, in which we are narcissistically and fatally delighted. In our time, the social context for either of the Straussian solutions—rational collection action guided by political rhetoric or authentic private thought at a safe distance from public life—appears to be disappearing, if it is not already absent. In such an era, discursive games of seduction as practiced by Bloom and Alamariu may still be bring attention and profit to those who play them, but seem capable neither of defending nor truly endangering our decadent regime. ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

The Class Politics of Instagram Face

Plastic surgery is changing, and for an obvious reason: When in history have rich women ever wanted to look like regular ones?

BY GRAZIE SOPHIA CHRISTIE

At a restaurant in Miami last month, dining beside my husband, I examined the women around me for what people refer to as Instagram Face. The chiseled nose, the overfilled lips, the cheeks scooped of buccal fat, eyes and brows thread-lifted high as the frescoed ceiling. Many of the women had it, and thus resembled each other. But not all of them. Not, for example, me.

Critics call this trend just another sign of our long march toward a doomed, globalized sameness. A uniform suite of cosmetic procedures, popularized by social media, apps and filters, accelerated by both natural insecurity and

injectables’ dropping costs. One by one, they hint, women will give in and undergo them. Until we all look identical, just like our restaurants do, and our hotels, and our airports, in our creep toward homogenization which we’ve somehow mistaken for a worthwhile life.

They’re wrong, because in their focus on uniformity, they’ve forgotten the premise of cosmetic work in the first place. Distinction. Good face, like good taste, has a direction: downward. The success of Instagram Face, its ubiquity, isn’t the start of cyborg aesthetics. It’s the end of it. Because what might save us from such apocalyptic beauty is something almost too ugly to say out loud: When in history have rich women ever wanted to look like regular ones?

Kylie Jenner is widely considered the face that launched a thousand fillers. The reality star did her lips in 2014, and seemingly everything else soon after. If you believe social media, the model Bella Hadid covered Carla Bruni’s features like a singer does another’s song. Emily Ratajkowski, the extended Kardashian cast: Each began to modify herself until as if in some joint experiment they arrived at an aesthetic congruence. Their platonic ideal was an ethnically ambiguous woman, neotenous from the neck up, hypersexual from the neck down. Her whole schtick is that she looks unlikely to know who Plato is. That way when Emily, who is both a model and an essayist, seems likely to have read him, she gets not only your desire but also the delicious *gotcha* of having been misjudged.

Captured on Instagram grids, TikToks, and Snapchat stories, analyzed in duplicated miniature the world over, the gradual alterations of these famous faces became undeniable. And so, at least partially, they gave up denying them. Kylie confessed to her lips. Bella, much later, to her nose job. Filters, like “fox eyes” or “perfect nose,” permitted young women to try on, like hats, these features, just as it become increasingly normalized to go out and get them. Cosmetic surgeons advertised their noninvasive, or

“reversible” work on viral videos. The changes harbored a new life. Women learned that, if they were beautiful, they could make ludicrous money just existing online. The price of Botox dropped by 27% over two decades, as the price of seemingly everything else went higher.

And then, like malware which self-replicates, the now-obvious face began to obviously spread, first among the brash reality contestants, the dubious streamers, DJs, ladder-climbers and professional plus-ones. Onto the influencers, even the wholesome ones, respected designers, singers and actors. On and on, until it found in the average millennial woman with disposable income an unexpected and fatal respectability. So demand for Botox increased tenfold over 20 years, skewing ever younger than before. So 16 million minimally invasive cosmetic procedures were performed in the U.S. in 2019, with 2018 seeing more than 7 million neurotoxin injections. And so it won't stop until the faces in all our phones resemble not just each other but the one we see in the mirror.

Except that by approaching universality, Instagram Face actually secured its role as an instrument of class distinction—a mark of a certain kind of woman. The women who don't mind looking like others, or the conspicuousness of the work they've had done. Those who think otherwise just haven't spent enough time with them in real life. Instagram Face goes with implants, middle-aged dates and nails too long to pick up the check. Batting false eyelashes, there in the restaurant it orders for dinner all the food groups of nouveau riche Dubai: caviar, truffle, fillers, foie gras, Botox, bottle service, bodycon silhouettes. The look, in that restaurant and everywhere, has reached a definite status. It's the girlfriend, not the wife.

Does cosmetic work have a particular class? It has a price tag, which can amount to the same thing, unless that price drops low enough. Or unless women of all classes are willing to pay it, no matter how apparently prohibitive the cost. Before the introduction of Botox and hyaluronic acid dermal fillers in 2002 and 2003, respectively, aesthetic

“In 2018, use of Botox and fillers was up 18% and 20% from five years prior.”

work was serious, expensive. Nose jobs and face lifts required general anesthesia, not insignificant recovery time, and cost thousands of dollars (in 2000, a facelift was \$5,416 on average, and a rhinoplasty \$4,109, around \$9,400 and \$7,000 adjusted).

In contrast, the average price of a syringe of hyaluronic acid filler today is \$684, while treating, for example, the forehead and eyes with Botox will put you out anywhere from \$300 to \$600. It's been well-reported that during a single lunch break and without financial ruin, the contemporary professional can paralyze her masseters, fill in her under-eye troughs, soften the bump on her nose, remove any indication of worry, effort, or time's passage from her face. But Botox and filler only accelerated a trend that began in the '70s and '80s and is just now reaching its saturation point.

In 1978, *The New York Times* announced that aesthetic surgery was “no longer only for the rich.” They cited mothers returning to work, bank loans, tax deductions, years of savings and a philosophy of personal investment to explain the spread of procedures, up 5% to 10% a year, once reserved for “celebrities, jet setters and tycoons, or more precisely, wives of tycoons” to “the people who sit in front of the television set rather than appear on it.” In 1981,

the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons revealed that 52% of recipients of plastic surgery had an annual income of less than \$25,000 (around \$80,000 today). In 1988, *The New York Times* reported on disastrous silicone injections and procedures which had become “commonplace for everyone from the C.E.O. to the rank-and-file union member, male as well as female.” In 2004, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons surveyed future patients, all considering procedures within the next two years: 30% of them had household incomes below \$30,000 (today \$47,000). In 2010, 71% of cosmetic surgery patients had average incomes. Between 1998 and 2018, cosmetic procedures' average cost increased more slowly than inflation. Botox bars, and med spas, which promise speedier, more affordable treatments than doctors' offices, have abounded. So have payment plans, BNPL financing, and gimmicks like provider credit cards with “interest-free” loans.

Accessibility went up, and so did demand; demand went up, and so did accessibility, or at least sheer force of will. Consider it the opposite of the luxury sector's strategy, where Birkin bags maintained their chokehold not despite but because of an infamous exclusivity, sometimes in the form of a six-year wait. In 2018, use of Botox and fillers was up 18% and 20% from five years prior. Philosophies of prejuvenation have made Botox use jump 22% among 22- to 37-year-olds in half a decade as well. By 2030, global noninvasive aesthetic treatments are predicted to triple.

The trouble is that a status symbol, without status, is *common*.

Beauty has always been exclusive. When someone strikes you as pretty, it means they are something that everyone else is *not*. Oversize lips depend on under-size ones. Thick hair exists only in reference-distance of thin. It's a zero-sum game, as relative as our morals. Naturally, we hoard of beauty what we can. It's why we call grooming tips “secrets.”

Largely the secrets started with the wealthy, who possess the requisite money and leisure to spare on their appearances. Or they have belonged to women

who, by virtue of their beauty, became rich, and in the grand tradition of the chicken or the egg, became only more beautiful still: actresses, models, royals, philanthropy-minded wives. Empress Sisi of Austria slept with slabs of raw veal on her face, wore imported corsets, brushed her hair for three hours a day. Jackie O. survived on a daily baked potato with sour cream and a spoonful of beluga caviar. Still-experimental electrolysis gave Rita Hayworth a whiter, higher hairline. Marlene Dietrich may very well have removed her molars. Marilyn Monroe, just maybe, did her nose. For quite some time, supermodels advised us to drink water, but surely, secretly, did a great deal more.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but only because imitation was for most of history inexact. We copied the beautiful and the rich, not in facsimile, but in homage. Empress Josephine's empire waist. Marie Antoinette's cotton chemise. Clara Bow's bob, Elizabeth Taylor's bosom, Twiggy's lashes, Cindy Crawford's mouth: Appearances filtered down, achieving the mass reproduction we call a trend, but at such a slow pace and with such a resulting clarity of direction that its originator and her echoes could never be mistaken for one another. Simply because we didn't have the tools for anything more than emulation. Fake breasts and overdrawn lips only approximated real ones; a birthmark drawn with pencil would always be just that.

Instagram Face, on the other hand, distinguishes itself by its sheer reproducibility. Not only because of those new cosmetic technologies, which can truly reshape features, at reasonable cost and with little risk. And not just because our smartphones have made trends instantaneously and widely visible, unlike films and magazine covers, which lagged. But also because built in to the whole premise of reversible, low-stakes modification is an indefinite flux, and thus a lack of discretion.

Gone is the "grand reveal" of a new beauty on the scene, freshly but clandestinely altered before her arrival, whose innovative appearance starts a frenzy. Instead we have a stream of before-and-afters of the same face, month after month, year after year, procedure

“The good work is going undetected,’ Dr. Wassim Taktouk told me recently. ‘The only stuff you see is bad work.’”

after procedure, all in our pockets. These function as both an instruction manual and a sign of total defeat: There is simply no way to claim these changes are natural. Instagram Face has replicated outward, with trendsetters giving up competing with one another in favor of looking eerily alike. And obviously it has replicated down.

But the more rapidly it replicates, and the clearer our manuals for quick imitation become, the closer we get to singularity—that moment Kim Kardashian fears unlike any other: the moment when it becomes unclear whether we're copying her, or whether she is copying us.

Which may be why she and other progenitors of Instagram Face—suddenly confronted with hordes of clones—have begun fighting a fierce war of plausible deniability. Kim, despite all visible evidence to the contrary, denies using filler and once, on television, X-rayed her butt, to demonstrate that it was bona fide. (It was not; from one day to the next last year, it actually vanished.) Though Bella Hadid copped to her nose job in 2022, that was 11 years and thousands of irrefutable memes after she did it. Kendall Jenner blames liner for her unrecognizable lips. Kylie tried that for some time, and now just pretends to have dissolved them. J-Lo, as she would, denies everything. On online forums, any mention of

Selena Gomez's rather obvious aesthetic work is attacked by loyal fans, blaming her genuinely unfortunate diagnosis of lupus and the steroids which yes, treat lupus, but do not, in any way, cause fox eyes. They're defending something. It's her character. But why?

Because, as these women know, natural looks have always been, and still are, more valuable than artificial ones. Partly because of our urge to legitimize in any way we can the advantages we have over other people. Hotness is a class struggle. The beauty of the princess justifies her estate. The symmetry of the wealthy, the sanity of the system. One is never insecure about one's rightful place, and what could be more insecure than a nose job?

Indeed, a certain class of woman has managed to engage thoroughly in cosmetic work without falling victim to homogenization. Their relative security, financial and emotional, means they can afford what the Instagram Face sold off a long time ago. As more and more women post videos of themselves eating, sleeping, dressing, dancing, and Only-Fanning online, in a logical bid for economic ascendance, the women who haven't needed to do that gain a new status symbol. Privacy. A life which is not a ticketed show. An intimacy that does not admit advertisers. A face that does not broadcast its insecurity, or the work undergone to correct it. It's a marker of distinction that is, by definition, unmarked. Privacy separates women from men, who have trained us to respect, mystery, incuriosity. It also separates women from each other, in a schema old as time. The ones whose personal lives are for sale from the ones whose aren't.

Upper class, private women get discrete work done. The differences aren't in the procedures themselves—they're the same—but in disposition. Eva, who lives between central London, Geneva, and the south of France, says: "I do stuff, but none of the stuff I do is at all in my head associated with Instagram Face. Essentially you do similar procedures, but the end goal is completely different. Because they are trying to get the result of looking like another human being, and I'm just beautifying myself." Eva had lower-eyelid surgery at 20 years old to correct what

she described as chronic puffiness; for the past few years, she uses filler in her upper lip and in her chin, to engineer symmetry. She is 28 but appears younger. Eva looks like Eva. If she has procedures in common with Kim K, you couldn't tell. "I look at my features and I think long and hard of how I can, without looking different and while keeping as natural as possible, make them look better and more proportional. I'm against everything that is too invasive. My problem with Instagram Face is that if you want to look like someone else, you should be in therapy." Finally, after listing her procedures, she concludes, "I changed my face without changing my face."

Dr. Wassim J. Taktouk owns an aesthetic medical and laser dermatology clinic in Knightsbridge, London's most expensive address. His clients are upper-crust, sometimes famous, and it's not a coincidence that the clinic is described on its website as "discreet by design" and "tucked away in a residential corner." Dr. Taktouk is celebrated for his subtle results and is in high demand. Would-be patients wait for an appointment sometimes for months. "The good work is going undetected," he told me recently. "The only stuff you see is bad work." Among the undetectable treatments Dr. Taktouk's clinic offers are neuromodulators for crow's feet, bunny lines, gummy smiles; thread lifts; dermal fillers at £595 a syringe for nonsurgical rhinoplasties, temples, ear lobes, tear troughs; injectable boosters; and a procedure bundle referred to as MesmerEyes. Sometimes a new patient comes in and has "lost sight," as he calls it, so he'll begin a "detox," forge a "clean slate, dissolve it all and start again."

What she's lost sight of in those cases and what he restores is complicated and yet not complicated at all. It's herself, the fingerprint of her features. Her aura, her presence and genealogy, her authenticity in space and time. The philosophy is that a face can withstand some changes but not too many, and only if they are made with particularity in mind. "We've been preaching that for a while. It's what we try to teach. It's not a one size fits all," Dr. Taktouk says. The latter to him means a kind of "package." "They give you widened cheeks, they

make your nose narrower, they give you a heart-shaped face, they lengthen the chin, they make the lips plumper," he explains. Dr. Taktouk's approach is "not so formulaic." He aims to give his patients the "better versions of themselves." "It's not about trying to be anyone else," he says, "or creating a conveyor belt of patients. It's about working with your best features, enhancing them, but still looking like you." He praises new, smarter fillers, like Teoxane's RHA, that stretch and move dynamically with the face, and avoid the lumpiness that he says, "gives the game away." He never does.

Of good work, Dr. Taktouk says, finally: "You can't see where it is, because it's not so vulgar." Vulgar. I've said it too without saying it. That word, for the Instagram Faced, might as well be the grim reaper (and what a hollow-cheeked resemblance after all). "Vulgar" says that in pursuing indistinguishability, women have been duped into another punishing divide. "Vulgar" says that the subtlety of his work is what signals its special class—and that the women who've obtained Instagram Face for mobility's sake have unwittingly shut themselves out of it. It's all fun and games for celebrities, but for regular women, what's written on their faces now might as well be a target on their backs.

Which may be why doctors are now reporting growing numbers of women requesting injections of hyaluronidase, an enzyme which breaks down hyaluronic acid and permits it to be absorbed. From TikTok stars to reality show contestants, to the Kardashians' not-so-subtly reversed BBLs, the tide is not so much turning as being dissolved. The hashtag #lipdissolving has 67 million views on TikTok, and none of the faces in the videos looks more than 40. Aesthetic laser treatments, which are not only surgically noninvasive but also aesthetically so, tightening the skin, improving the complexion, changing the face without changing it, are predicted to expand globally by 17% in the next seven years.

But what if, thanks to merciless biology, your features have already changed? What if, God forbid, you're above 60? There's nothing so exclusive as time. When Dr. Taktouk works with older

patients, he asks them for photos from decades ago, and sees to what extent he can turn back the clock. It's a process of restoration that can't ever quite get there. While younger women are dissolving their gratuitous work, the 64-year-old Madonna appeared at the Grammy Awards in early February, looking so tragically unlike herself that the internet launched an immediate postmortem.

The tragedy was not the volume of her work, or even its obviousness, but that somehow, with every resource at her disposal, Madonna failed to get even close to the hopeless thing we wanted. Not the homogenized version of her that we saw, modeled after others, but the nostalgic one that doesn't exist anymore. The young Madonna of the '80s and '90s. As if by seeing her again we, too, might reclaim our former selves. Our anger at her is our anger that we can't do so. The folly of Instagram Face is that in pursuing a bionic ideal, it turns cosmetic technology away from not just the reality of class and power, but also the great, poignant, painful human project of trying to reverse time. It misses the point of what we find beautiful: that which is ephemeral, and can't be reproduced. Our own particularities which, once decayed, can't be brought to life again.

Age is just one of the hierarchies Instagram Face can't topple, in the history of women striving versus the women already arrived. What exactly have they arrived at? Youth, temporarily. Wealth. Emotional security. Privacy. Personal choices, like cosmetic decisions, which are not so public, and do not have to be defended as empowered, in the defeatist humiliation of our times. Maybe they've arrived at love, which for women has never been separate from the things I've already mentioned.

On this, I can't help but recall the time I was chatting with a plastic surgeon. I began to point to my features, my flaws. I asked her, "What would you do to me, if I were your patient?" I had many ideas. She gazed at me, and then noticed my ring. "Nothing," she said. "You're already married." ■

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A Jew on Death Row

The tragic case of Pesach Rubenstein, sentenced to die in 1876 after a sensational murder trial

BY ALLAN LEVINE

Chronicled and mythologized in scholarly and popular history books, novels, films, and plays, New York's Lower East Side in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was overcrowded, and teeming with peddlers, tailors, sweatshops, and barely livable tenement houses. By 1910, an estimated 540,000 Jews resided within the neighborhood's 1.5 square miles. The poverty, hardships, and daily struggle to survive drove some Jewish immigrants to seek other ways to make a living, even get rich. Hence, the Lower East Side also had a vast collection of crooks, pimps, prostitutes, thieves, pickpockets, gangsters, fraudsters, forgers, arsonists, and hoodlums. Offered here and in future articles are portraits of some of these nefarious characters, who also left their mark on the Lower East Side's historical legacy.

The reality is that prejudice is endemic and antisemitism will never entirely vanish. There has always been an ebb and flow to hating Jews—and at the moment that wave is cresting. Amplified by ugly outbursts on social media and nutty, albeit dangerous, right-wing conspiracy theories, Jews in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere yet again have been targets of random attacks of vandalism, harassment, and violence.

As bad as the situation is at the present, however, it was worse more than a century ago when discrimination was legal and Jews were not always accorded equal treatment of the law.

An early victim of antisemitism was a 30-year-old Orthodox Polish-Jewish immigrant who resided in New York City, close to where the Lower East Side and Chinatown intersect. His name was Pesach Rubenstein (called Pasach N. Rubenstein in the official trial transcript). His unfortunate claim to fame was being one of the first Jews (possibly the very first) in post-American Revolutionary New York and the United States sentenced to death, in an 1876 criminal trial that was tainted with antisemitism and sensationalism in the press. (By

most accounts, the first Jew in North America sentenced to death was Moses Susman, who did not speak English and who was hanged long before the Revolution, in July 1727 in Westchester County, New York, after he was convicted of stealing gold, silver money, and jewelry from Moses Levy, a prominent Jewish merchant.) If not an outright miscarriage of justice, Rubenstein's conviction for allegedly murdering his 19-year-old cousin Sarah (or Sara) Alexander—depicted as “The Murdered Jewess” in a widely distributed illustrated booklet—was based on circumstantial evidence, witness statements open to question, a prejudiced, if not blatantly antisemitic, district attorney, Winchester Britton, and an all-white male Christian jury who perceived the Yiddish-speaking Rubenstein (though he did know some English phrases) with his beard, *peyot* (sidelocks), and strange behavior as a suspicious alien to be feared.

In 1875, New York City's Jewish population was approximately 75,000, which represented about a third of all Jews then living in the U.S. That number would dramatically increase following a huge wave of immigration in the post-1880 period such that by 1910, there were about a million Jews in New York, which accounted for

approximately 25% of the city's total population. While there were Jewish criminals, gangsters, and prostitutes in the world of the Lower East Side, most Jewish immigrants tended to stay out of trouble with the law; bad memories of interactions with police and justice officials in Russia and Eastern Europe no doubt reinforced such behavior. These newcomers may have been poor, but as Moses Rischin notes in *The Promised City*, his classic 1962 book on New York's Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jews organized their own charities and mutual aid societies to take care of each other. Rischin adds that “prior to the 1880s only the Rubenstein [sic] murder case spotted the record of New York's Jews.”

(He was mistaken. In August 1871, five years before Rubenstein's trial—as historian Mia Brett, who has extensively researched the Rubenstein case points out—a Jewish abortionist in New York, Jacob Rosenzweig, was convicted of manslaughter after the body of a young woman, Alice Bowsby, was found naked in a trunk at the Hudson rail depot. It was later determined that she had died from a botched abortion that Rosenzweig had performed.)

The pre-1880 Jewish immigrants often existed within a hostile environment (as did those in later years). American Jews were not denied citizenship and Jewish males had voting rights, yet as University of Pennsylvania historian Beth Wenger has argued, antisemitism was part of daily life. “From portrayals of Jews as weak, deficient, and deviant to depictions of them as shrewd, cunning, and determined to undermine and ultimately control all aspects of American life,” she has stated, “anti-Semitism fed into the very streams of American thought that determined who was and who was not legitimately an American. Indeed, these anxieties shaped both legal and social policy, strengthening campaigns for anti-immigration legislation and cultivating fears about ‘outsiders’ who allegedly threatened to invade and overtake the young American nation.”

A typical assessment of the era was offered by Matthew Hale Smith, an army chaplain and writer. In his 1869

book *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*, he voiced his concerns about New York already being overwhelmed with Jews. Some of them, he conceded, were respectable, but the majority were not. “Jews of the lower class are disagreeable, and their presence a nuisance to any Christian neighborhood,” he wrote. “If they get into a block, they infest it like the plague. Persons in search of a house invariably ask, ‘Are there any Jews in the block?’” Such were the negative attitudes that influenced the police investigation of Sarah Alexander’s murder, the quick decision to charge Rubenstein with the crime, and the trial proceedings that followed and sealed his fate.

On Tuesday, Dec. 14, 1875, a farmer in New Lots, East New York (Brooklyn), about seven miles from the Lower East Side, discovered the body of a young woman in a corn field. The dead woman “lay on [her] back and the hands and arms, which were frozen stiff, were raised as if to ward off the blows of an assailant,” *The New York Times* reported the next day. “The face of the girl was covered with blood and her eyes were wide open. The tops of her fingernails penetrated her flesh so tightly her hands were clenched in the agony of death.” A more detailed examination by the coroner revealed that her face and throat had been slashed by a knife, cutting her carotid artery and a piece of her left ear. Searching nearby, the police soon found a cigar-maker’s knife, its blade and handle full of blood, which had been tossed into the corn stalks. The girl had a dark complexion and the *Times* reporter suggested she could be “taken for an octoroon,” a term then used to describe someone who had one-eighth African American or indigenous ancestry. The coroner also later determined that the dead woman was about five-and-a-half months pregnant.

The police investigation moved quickly. Interviews with a streetcar conductor and passengers on the Broadway-East New York route verified that a young woman who fit the dead woman’s description was seen two days earlier on Sunday late in the afternoon on the streetcar that traveled from the South

Seventh Street Ferry. She had gotten off at Howard’s Hotel in East New York, not too far from where her body was found. The conductor noted that the woman had not worn a bonnet or hat, which was at the time an unusual fashion choice. The conductor and several passengers had also told the police that on the same car was a “dark-featured man, apparently a Hebrew” (described in other news reports as a “swarthy Polish Jew”). The woman and this man, who “seemed fidgety,” did not speak or interact, but they did exit the car at the same stop.

Meanwhile, Sarah Alexander’s brother, John, who lived on Essex Street in Brooklyn, grew concerned Sunday evening when Sarah had not returned from visiting her cousins, the Rubensteins—Israel, the patriarch of the family who ran a dry goods shop; his second wife, Hannah (or Anna); her two daughters from her first marriage; and Israel’s children (and one of their spouses), including his son Pesach—who all resided in a tenement house, which Israel owned, on Bayard Street near the corner of Mott Street (the store was located on the main floor and family members and renters lived in the upper sections of the building). The next morning, John Alexander visited the Rubensteins and was told that Sarah had left their place at approximately 4 p.m. on Sunday after helping several of the women prepare for a wedding they attended later that day at a hall on Hester Street. Next, he visited the police headquarters on Mulberry Street to see if she had been arrested, but she had not.

When Sarah still had not shown up later on Monday, John placed a missing persons announcement in what he later described in court as “German papers.” This information was picked up by *The Sun*, a New York City newspaper that pioneered crime reporting. On Wednesday, Dec. 15, there was a brief notation on the *Sun*’s front page that “Sarah Alexander, a young Jewess has been missing from her house on Essex Street since Sunday.” It was published two columns over from a longer news story about the discovery of the woman’s body on the New Lots farm. By that morning, the Rubensteins had also read news of the found body and realized the woman had

to be Sarah. John soon arrived and they informed him; he agreed with their dire assessment. He immediately proceeded to the Brooklyn morgue, where he identified the dead woman as his sister Sarah.

According to *The Sun*’s version of these events (which differed slightly from the one in *The New York Times*), Israel Rubenstein also visited the Brooklyn police station and identified Sarah as the murder victim. While there and in a supposed anxious state, he related to the police that on the Monday night before Sarah’s body was found his son Pesach had told him he had had a dream that “Sarah was being murdered 10 miles away from New York and she asked me to bury her.” Admittedly, this story is bizarre, even suspicious, but not much more than that.

Upon learning of this development, detectives investigating the murder visited the Rubenstein house. One of the detectives, George Zundt, spoke German and was able to communicate with the primarily Yiddish-speaking family. But it is safe to assume that then and later some of the discussion literally got lost in the translation. The detectives questioned members of the family. Pesach was suffering from tuberculosis, an especially deadly disease in the 19th and early 20th centuries, for which there was no real cure. Several family members and acquaintances later testified that he frequently spit up blood.

A jewelry peddler, Pesach had immigrated to New York from Poland (under the control of the Russian Empire) in 1873 and lived with his family members, who had been in New York for several years by then. In doing so, he had left his wife behind. Though it was later claimed that he had abandoned her, it was more likely that—as was the case with many Jewish immigrants of this era—he came to New York to raise a sufficient amount of money for her to eventually join him. Pesach was both Orthodox—he attended synagogue for prayer services several times a day—and somewhat odd. Pesach later told the detectives (as translated by Zundt) that he had been out most of Sunday, Dec. 12, visiting with clients, or was at the synagogue. He said that he had seen Sarah

earlier in the day when he had briefly returned home to eat something and then he went out again. By the time he got back to the house at 8 p.m., she was gone.

The detectives requested that Pesach accompany them back to the morgue and also identify the body. He was reluctant to do so, but they insisted. Once Pesach saw Sarah lying on a stone slab, he became so agitated and distraught the detectives decided that he had to be the murderer and arrested him.

This can only be called a classic case of tunnel vision. Thereafter, all the evidence and witness testimony the police amassed was shaped to fit their conceived narrative of what had transpired, even if the facts as they understood them were open to question.

The police and district attorney's version of the events of mid-December 1875, which were presented at Rubenstein's trial, which began on Jan. 31, 1876, at the County Court House in Brooklyn, was as follows:

Rubenstein and Sarah were alleged to have been involved in an intimate relationship, though there was no actual proof of that. John Alexander did testify that Rubenstein had given Sarah earrings, but he did not know if it was a present between lovers or merely a gift from a jewelry salesman to his younger cousin. Nonetheless, the accusation that he had "seduced" her and that there had been "adulterous intercourse" was immediately accepted as the truth. "Between [Rubenstein] and the deceased woman an intimacy existed which is believed to have been of a criminal character," declared *The New York Times* on Dec. 16, without explanation. Presumably the charge of criminality was the soon accepted fact that Rubenstein was the father of Sarah's unborn child. Yet, there was no evidence of this either, nor was it possible to prove in 1875.

"DA Winchester argued that the defense team's alibi witnesses were not to be believed because they were Jews and Jews were 'clannish.'"

Nonetheless, as William Beach, one of Rubenstein's two lawyers—the other was John Mott, both hired by Rubenstein and his family—argued, the DA "turned the whole force of his investigation upon it ... [but] has failed to establish even a suspicion." In short, added Beach, there was "nothing suggestive of any impure relation between this defendant and the murdered girl."

The story was that Sarah, who had lived with the Rubenstein's for about 10 months working as a housemaid, had nursed Pesach back to health and they had become close. But given how strictly religious Rubenstein was, the idea of a woman, whether she was a cousin or not, taking care of him was open to question. John Alexander did believe that Sarah had taken care of Rubenstein, but his memory of the actual circumstances was vague. Other witnesses claimed that two men looked after Rubenstein. And Hannah Rubenstein insisted that Sarah had cared for her while she was sick some months earlier, not Pesach. The DA and police, however, dismissed this statement as they did almost every other fact that countered their narrative of the crime.

Rubenstein, the alleged father of Sarah's unborn child, had supposedly panicked about the impending birth, given his marital status. About a week

before the murder, the 12-year-old daughter of a knife and cutlery dealer on Essex Street swore that she had sold a cigar-maker's knife like the one found at the crime scene to Rubenstein. Other witnesses testified that the Polish Jew they had seen on the streetcar on the day of the murder, the one who had no communication with Sarah, was Rubenstein. This also was problematic: If it was indeed Rubenstein on the streetcar, how was it possible he and Sarah did not acknowledge or speak to each other during the entire trip?

Considering that there were many other Eastern European Jews with beards, sidelocks, black hats, and religious garb in New York at the time, it is not impossible that the 12-year-old girl and the witnesses on the streetcar were mistaken; that Rubenstein was not the man who purchased the knife, nor was he the Jewish man on the car. In fact, that person might have been someone else who had nothing to do with the murder. (According to the Los Angeles-based Constitutional Rights Foundation, "studies have shown that mistaken eyewitness testimony accounts for about half of all wrongful convictions. Researchers at Ohio State University examined hundreds of wrongful convictions and determined that roughly 52% of the errors resulted from eyewitness mistakes." In the late 19th century, when there were no real limits on police power or their interrogation techniques, eyewitness identification was even less reliable than it is today, especially given the unusual circumstances of the Rubenstein case.)

Rubenstein's trial also featured an early use of forensic science, such as it was in 1876. An analytical chemist testified for the prosecution that spots and fibrous substance found on Rubenstein's boots were dried blood intermingled with vegetable matter. There were also blood spots found on Rubenstein's jacket and *tzitzit* (the fringes worn on traditional garments). Yet there was no DNA or proper blood analysis at the time and the chemist did not know definitively whose blood it was or whether it was human blood or that of an animal. Three days before he was arrested and jailed, Rubenstein walked around the wet and

NEWS

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muddy streets of his neighborhood. The blood on the boots could have come from the fish market, slaughterhouse, or from Rubenstein's visit at the morgue, and the blood on his clothes might have been blood that he spit up, a common ailment of someone with tuberculosis. Much was made of the fact that during the 12-day trial, Rubenstein did not spit up blood into the spittoon that was placed beside him. At the same time, the chemist did not examine Rubenstein's boots until Jan. 23, 40 days after the murder, making his conclusions moot.

Rubenstein's defense attorneys presented numerous witnesses who, while not in agreement about Rubenstein's precise movements on the December Sunday in question, suggested that he was at the synagogue, shopping, visiting clients, or at home on Bayard Street when the murder was supposed to have occurred—just as Pesach himself had initially told the police. All of these witnesses, recently arrived immigrants who mainly spoke Yiddish, were dependent on several court appointed interpreters. While the lengthy transcript of the proceedings is not entirely clear on this issue, most of them, if not all, spoke German, rather than Yiddish. Hence, (as Mia Brett also notes) some parts of their testimony might have been not accurately translated and thus misconstrued. As religious Jews, most of them also could not swear under oath on the Bible with the men having to remove their hats. Though they were allowed to testify by making an affirmation—a solemn declaration to tell the truth—the district attorney later implied that their statements were somehow tainted by their objections to taking the oath the way a non-Jew did.

Rubenstein's trial came down to which version of the story the jury believed; and there was never truly a doubt that the district attorney's narrative would win them over. Despite the objections of Rubenstein's lawyers, DA Winchester in his lengthy summation demonstrated his anti-Jewish bias by arguing that the defense team's alibi witnesses were not to be believed because they were Jews and Jews were "clannish"—he used the word three times—and not to be trusted; and that

“The New York Times described him as ‘pale, haggard, idiotic, corpse-like, and filthy’— caused by his illness and refusal to eat any nonkosher food provided for him in jail.”

many of the key witnesses were members of Rubenstein's family and hence would have said anything to save him. It was an antisemitic diatribe from start to finish.

“This prisoner belongs to a class of people known as Polish Jews,” Winchester told the jury. “They come from a little place in the Russian dominions, among the conquered provinces of Russia; a class by themselves, peculiar in their characteristics, living in a comparatively small territory they are dirty, ignorant, uncultivated, have no school education, except what is obtained from their religious teachers, they are oppressed and despised by surrounding races. There they are isolated, having their own customs, their own laws, and their own peculiar faith, and as a consequence, they become intensely clannish ... Now, gentlemen, do not misunderstand me. I do not apply these remarks to all the people of this or any other country, who have adopted the Jewish or Israelitish faith—far from that. It does not lie in my mouth to condemn a religious people who have accepted as their guide the Old Testament handed down by God Almighty ... [But] when these people come to this country they bring the same characteristics which they possessed abroad; they assemble together in some specific locality; they live together, as it were, another

people than ours, with different customs and different habits; in the extreme, clannish ... [T]hese characteristics of this peculiar class of people ... such that they would override other obligations for the protection of one of their own kind, to a degree to which more intelligent and more cultivated men, differently educated, would not assent.”

Rubenstein's lawyers were outraged and insisted that the judge include a statement in his charge to the jury—which he did—that they “have no right to discredit any witness because of his race or faith as an Israelite, nor because of the manner of the administration of the oath, not because of any prejudice or any reason against that class of citizens.” And if they believed the testimony of the alibi witnesses, regardless of their family connection to the accused, “the defendant cannot properly be convicted.”

It was too late, however. Not only did the jury members accept the DA's anti-Jewish remarks as being true and relevant, dismissing the alibi witnesses, they were also influenced by Rubenstein's sickly demeanor—*The New York Times* described him as “pale, haggard, idiotic, corpse-like, and filthy”— caused by his illness and refusal to eat any non-kosher food provided for him in jail. Their deliberations only took an hour and they delivered a verdict of guilty. “I know nothing about it. I did not commit the crime!” Rubenstein yelled, tugging at his long sidelocks. “I do not want to give up my blood. They may yet discover I am innocent. That is my witness that I never had my hand on any woman—never touch a woman, and that time will found I am innocent, and the jury have made a mistake.” At that, the judge sentenced Rubenstein to be hanged on Friday, March 24, 1876.

Rubenstein was castigated in newspaper stories across the country as the “Jew Murderer.” Pamphlets and booklets soon appeared that detailed the case in the most sordid way possible. Strangers shouted “Rubenstein, Rubenstein” at Jews on the streets of New York and elsewhere. And children sang the song, “My Name is Pesach Rubenstein.” As for the nascent Yiddish press, many of its editors thought Rubenstein “was totally nuts,” as historian Eddy Portnoy writes.

Prison officials at the Raymond Street Jail in Brooklyn would not permit Rubenstein's family to bring him any food because they believed they would attempt to poison him so that he could commit suicide and evade his hanging. Eventually, they allowed Rubenstein to cook his own food, closely monitoring him as he used a gas stove to do so. But his illness and debilitating state worsened amid the "noisome atmosphere of a cell which was full of filth and swarming with vermin," as *The New York Times* described it. He prayed all day and night

exhibiting behavior his jailers and other prisoners considered bizarre.

Urged on by members of the family, Rubenstein's lawyers filed a motion for a stay of proceedings to delay the execution until a proper appeal could be made within a few months. This was ultimately granted so the hanging was delayed. Yet it was only a temporary reprieve and on May 8, Rubenstein was told that a final decision of his fate was to be made soon. That evening, Rubenstein had a seizure and died. He had avoided the gallows.

Whether or not Pesach Rubenstein rightly deserved to be on death row in the first place remains a matter of contention. He was arguably discriminated against and even victimized by Brooklyn police and justice officials and found guilty of the murder of his cousin Sarah Alexander based on circumstantial evidence and witness testimony, which at the very least raised reasonable doubts of his culpability. ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

The Desert God

Youval Shimoni's novels are dense, difficult, and demanding—and they may be the greatest literature Israel has ever produced

BY ARMIN ROSEN

I gripped my copy of the 2016 Dalkey Archive edition of Youval Shimoni's *A Room* during the most prolonged and intense mortal terror I have ever experienced in my 14 years of living in New York City. I was on the L train early on a midweek afternoon in the spring of 2017, traveling east under the river between First Avenue in Manhattan and Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn. There were maybe a dozen other riders, and in my memory each of us was silent and alone, with vast expanses of empty bench protecting against the physical and psychic nastiness of sharing a city with 8 million strangers. In my memory, I was the only young man.

A vagrant with a mountain bike and the build of a middle linebacker towered at the far end of the car. One of the great mysteries of New York City is its ability to attract, sustain, and perhaps even create a perpetually circulating population of subterranean lunatics, people with a quasi-mystical resistance to any

attempt to "help" them and whose apparent role in society is to expose the flimsiness of human sanity and reason. As the train descended beyond the Lower East Side and crossed into the riverbed, the vagrant began screaming threats into a woman's face and carrying on in uncannily eloquent detail about what he planned to do with the knife he had somewhere on his person. A word of objection from a nearby passenger only made the rantings louder and more severe, and the threats more florid and plausible.

He stalked from rider to rider. He lifted up the mountain bike, pump-faking it inches away from people's faces. No one spoke anymore; even breathing felt dangerous. He had imposed a set of moral conditions—the only ones that mattered, since until we reached Bedford our entire universe existed within that train car—in which it would have been our fault alone if he exploded into even greater anger. A dilemma striking in its premodern character suddenly presented itself: If he started attacking a

woman or an old man, really anyone else in the car, was death better for me than having to live with the dishonor of having done nothing to try to stop him? His hand clutching some unseeable object—or maybe clutching nothing, though in the moment it looked to me like he was hiding a box cutter inside a massive fist—he stalked over to the emergency brake cable and promised us he would pull it, stranding us with him under the water and under the earth. But he didn't pull it. After the eternal passage of really no more than 45 additional seconds, the train eased to a blessed halt at Bedford, and I was shaken enough to do something no other subway incident has caused me to do, which is leave the train, leave the entire transit system, and try to steady myself back up in the sunlight.

I ordered a falafel at Oasis, which in those days was directly above one of the stairs to the Bedford stop. Moments later, still trembling in panic, I saw the punchline or maybe the message to this story emerge from the anxious underworld: Out walked the lunatic in handcuffs with a broad smile on his face, sharing a laugh with the flanking police officers, as if they were all old friends. And maybe they were. These people were in the same business, namely the embodiment and suppression of antisocial extremes. They possessed an intimate participants' knowledge of a grand and fearful human system. I, in contrast, knew very little about any extreme, since like most Americans I live in a world that has been constructed to

conceal extremes. My environment has been built to hide all visible evidence of death and madness and other inconvenient pillars of existence.

It happened that the author whose book I had been limply clutching was someone with the rare ability to see things as they are. Life as an Israeli, and maybe also life as a Jew, had kept Yuval Shimoni anchored to the human bedrock. In *A Room*, written in Hebrew in 1999, one character remembers a Tel Aviv left deserted by Saddam Hussein's Scud missile attacks during the first Gulf War. The streets are empty except for "a beggar," who "lay like vermin on the concrete." The character is seized with a mischievous, sadistic urge to rob the sleeping homeless man, or maybe set his shopping cart full of rags and boxes on fire. He unscrews its wheels instead, leaving the cart on its frame. The vagrant remains oblivious to the chaos around him, or perhaps he understands it perfectly. "The beggar didn't even wake up: He continued to sleep and smile to himself in all his filth as if he held God by the balls."

The Dalkey Archive edition of *A Room*, translated by Michael Sharp, arrived in the Tablet offices sometime near the beginning of 2017. I had never heard of the novel or its author before. "Hailed from publication as one of the finest novels ever written in Hebrew," read the back cover, "*A Room* is a monumental, subversive classic of contemporary fiction." Amos Oz blurbed it as "a book that is both terrible and terrific."

"From a distance the fire could already be seen," reads its opening line. It was "as if all the stars ... had been spread by a fire such as this, in which a man is burning."

I am not sure I really understood *A Room* when I read it almost five years ago, although I nurture the view, or maybe just the self-exculpatory hope, that the 597-page novel doesn't really require its readers to understand it. Some long novels are puzzle boxes: You're meant to notice that a cloud crossing over the sun in one scene of *Ulysses* is described again from a different character's perspective several dozen pages later. Others are oriented toward a mystery whose

"Shimoni is the one contemporary writer who actually succeeds in capturing the dissonances of Jewish existence without moralism, neuroticism, triumphalism, or self-scorn."

irrelevance illustrates some larger point, MacGuffins like the identity of the killers in *2666* or the purpose of rocket 00000 in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

In *A Room*, written in 1999, the book itself is the mystery. Its three segments overlap thematically but not narratively; each of them contains something about artistic creation, time's erasure of human works, the atavistic call of a higher power, and the earthly and spiritual anxieties that make Israeli society so energetic and so at odds with itself. *A Room* was brain-rewiring stuff for me, a book that stretched what a long work of fiction could be and could do. It made no sense and it also made perfect sense; it was humane yet unsentimental, it had no gimmicks and no obvious answers—or maybe experience would only divulge the answers in the years after I put the book down. Or maybe, in my case, the answers would come from Shimoni himself.

I am not infrequently in Israel, which is not a very big place, and the best thing about journalism is that you have a ready-made excuse to try to meet nearly anyone. Yes, Shimoni has developed the impossible reputation of being a literary hermit in a country where everyone knows everyone else's business. He almost never gives interviews these days. Publicly available photos of him are

limited to a couple professional headshots. He is not a public intellectual or a public figure, even in Israel. In America he's almost totally unknown. Shimoni is important, but he will never be popular, however much Amos Oz liked him.

But as a part-time professor at Tel Aviv University and an editor at one of the city's major publishers, he was probably always somewhere within a one- or two-hour drive of wherever I was during my trips to Israel. Like Gaddis or Pynchon or Bolaño, Shimoni writes novels whose daunting length and complexity surrounds an elusive inner core of pure and often terrifying insight. Unlike those three, Shimoni is a living person with a publicly available email address.

I have no idea why he agreed to meet me in Tel Aviv back in September, at the offices of Am Oved, the publishing house where he is a senior editor. It is possible the success of my interview request had something to do with the upcoming release of Michael Sharp's English translation of *Kav HaMalach*, *The Salt Line*, a 1,069-page novel published in Hebrew in 2016 whose action takes place over a centurylong period and spans czarist Russia, modern-day Israel, and early 20th-century India. Maybe Shimoni wanted at least a little English-language press, and there weren't any other writers for North American publications cold-messaging him that particular week.

I do not know if he believed everything he told me, or how much he expected me to believe it. I don't know how much I trust any artist when they're asked to talk about their own work, particularly novelists, who are engaged in the most solitary and thus the most mysterious of creative disciplines. Shimoni's books, like his muted public persona, carry a heavy atmosphere of misdirection. He is the one contemporary writer who actually succeeds in capturing the dissonances of Jewish existence, something he does without moralism, neuroticism, triumphalism, or self-scorn. But he succeeds by hiding what he's really doing, encoding the Jewish element of his work within elaborate and confounding narrative systems.

The mysteries that emanate from the

ancient Judean wastes inflame Shimoni's sensibilities and connect his novels to the deeper facts of existence—the God that the slumbering vagrant grips by the balls in the midst of a rocket attack is a Jewish one. And on the deepest of all facts of existence, the rapid approach of the void, he spoke without any apparent evasion, as if he drew from some hidden, unnameable source of consolation for his own coming disappearance. At more than one point in a nearly two-hour interview, Shimoni told me without a tinge of regret that he did not expect his works to be read forever, or even for all that much longer. If there is some element of eternity in existence, Shimoni, who once aspired to be a filmmaker and a painter, isn't positive that it resides in art, though he was careful not to theorize about where or what it might be. "Kafka wanted his works to be burned," Shimoni said, "but Flaubert wanted his to be buried with him, the way they did in Egypt. They buried their treasures with them in order that they will last forever. But I don't believe in it."

Shimoni's office was bare-walled, almost spartan, no distinctive furniture or literary artifacts on conspicuous view. The 68-year-old novelist was athletically thin, short-shaven, dressed in a dark pair of jeans and a generic black shirt. For much of the interview he kept his forearms flat against his desk and leaned slightly forward, graying shocks of short hair framing a nearly fixed expression that could have been quizzical or curious or slightly confused. He spoke in what seemed like a series of slow and watery almost-whispers—he would begin sentences in English, finish them in Hebrew, and sometimes not finish them at all. On the Christ narrative's importance to Christianity, he mused, "without the story the religion has not been ..."—and then he snapped a finger and switched languages—"lo hayita masoret." Sharp, his South African-born translator and our interpreter for the interview, jumped in: "... wouldn't have come about." Sharp is from that species of dextrous and solid retirement-aged men that is ubiquitous across the whole breadth of Israel, which is to say he's as

unassuming as a lot of the more consequential literary obsessives turn out to be. For most of his life, Sharp was a radio journalist, not a professional translator—he began producing an English version of *A Room*, almost as a hobby, and sent part of it to Shimoni.

Meeting Shimoni furnished additional proof that the writing of novels is an activity of almost monastic self-isolation. But writers are sustained through their contact with real life, a process that, I am now sure, continues even when there's a journalist in the room. "The motives of artists are always kind of interesting to me," I nervously put it to Shimoni at one point, impatient to coax something out of him, and also vaguely ashamed of my own impatience. "Because: Why become an artist instead of a critic or instead of anything else?" "It's a question you have asked yourself?" Shimoni immediately replied in English, a slight smile in his voice, already knowing the answer.

Am Oved's offices are a block off of Rothschild, in a part of central Tel Aviv where the city rapidly alternates between grand boulevards, gardenlike side streets, and dust-choked archipelagos of construction work. The need for office space and housing is unlimited in the bourgeois epicenter of the country's ever more prosperous and increasingly anxious Jewish population. The light rail is always only about a year away from actually opening. Independence Hall, a short walk from Am Oved, is in the midst of a total overhaul, with only a scaffolded frame of narrow concrete marking the birthplace of the State of Israel.

Am Oved is another half-built monument. It was founded in 1942 as the publishing arm of the Histadrut, the coalition of unions that acted as an adjunct to the Labor Party, the dominant political force for the first 25 years of Israel's existence—Berl Katznelson was its first editor-in-chief. "The union used to give workers a subscription to Am Oved and on Jewish holidays they would get a gift," Shimoni recalled.

Am Oved means "working people" in English. In the early years of the state, Hebrew literature was promoted through the country's still-powerful

industrial masses, as if Israel could only plausibly exist if its workers were reading fiction and poetry in their new and ancient native tongue. Such romantically populist views of a national literature's role in the world's only Jewish state are gone now, Shimoni hinted to me. Reading in Israel is "on a very steep decline, a really worrying kind of decline," while "in general, the written word of the last 100 years has become weaker and weaker and weaker." Shimoni was born in Jerusalem in 1955, the grandson of the poet David Shimoni, laureate of the Bialik Prize and the Israel Prize in the 1940s and '50s. He was famous, Sharp said. "In his time," Shimoni added.

There is probably no better place to contemplate the larger arc of Hebrew literature than the Am Oved offices. Hebrew is the language of the Bible and the language of a war-prone nation of traumatized immigrants that has only existed for 75 years. Hebrew writers are both the inheritors of an ancient tradition and the creators of an entirely new culture and identity, which would be a hard predicament for any author, even in a society much less bizarre than that of Israel.

The challenge of producing work that could be true to reality while also establishing an entirely new culture on the fly was too daunting even for leading writers in Hebrew to adequately handle. In the early 20th century, Yosef Haim Brenner, a formal experimenter, pioneer of Hebrew prose, and the namesake for one of Israel's leading literary prizes, was plainly uncomfortable with the religious trappings of the accelerating Jewish return to Zion. When Israel finally became a settled enough reality to produce its own distinctly national themes and literary voice, its writers found that there were places they still had difficulty going. Yaakov Shabtai's



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Past Continuous, published in 1977, is a frenetic and moving elegy to the Israel of the founding generation, still my favorite of the relatively few Israeli novels I've read in translation. But it is a story told through that generation's disappointments and regrets, and the book's humanity barely rescues it from its own overwhelming pessimism. Belief in a higher national destiny or some potential redemption, never mind belief in Hashem, barely figures into the novel, which ends in a quest for transcendence that's thwarted by suicide.

Then there's David Grossman's *See Under: Love*, a magical-realist Holocaust fantasy from 1986—which might be an accurate reflection of how Jews both inside and outside the country once tended to view the place—and a towering folly of an experiment. But there is real warmth in its extravagance: The novel imagines the Jewish people facing its 20th-century predicament from a state of childlike hope and innocence, and it becomes an affecting if also bewildering saga about the hope of a less tortured future. These days, the Israeli writers who get famous internationally tend toward hard irony and harsh social criticism, a mode that conveys seriousness to the outside world without obligating authors to look far beyond their immediate circumstances.

At all phases of Hebrew literature there is a distinct unease with the language's religious inheritance, and with the redemptive promise that burned through every letter of the *Lashon Ha-Kodesh* even after it became a means for ordering coffee. Hebrew writers, even the poets who consciously echoed the form and rhythm of biblical and liturgical prosody, believed they were producing secular culture for secular readers in a secular society. Religion was a dark temptation or an anachronism, or maybe just irrelevant. Of course the tension between the madness of looking too hard at Hashem and the absurdity of not looking at all has been there since just about the beginning: "You will see my back," God tells Moses, "but my face you will not see." Expressing true things is difficult for artists and thinkers working within an unavoidably Jewish idiom. It was hard for Moses;

what hope did Grossman or Shabtai or Amos Oz have?

Shimoni has come close to finding a solution to this dilemma, even if his success has left him relatively unread and firmly convinced of his own coming obsolescence. His novels tend to deal with the uncanny convergence of forces within a single group of people living in a narrow strip of land on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean and its ramifications across time and space. Shimoni mounts no awkward attempts to avoid the spiritual implications of his art. He knows he cannot write his way out of Judaism, and that chosenness and tribal belonging are realities just as insurmountable as madness and death. And because of this awareness, the Jewish condition can become Shimoni's medium, through which nearly every other possible story can be told.

Take, for example, Shimoni's latest novel, the still-untranslated *MiBad LaKarka'it Hashkufa* ("Beyond the Transparent Bottom"). The book is about Christopher Columbus' dream of funding an expedition to conquer Jerusalem for the king of Spain using plunder from his adventures in the Indies. Shimoni didn't invent this, he told me. Columbus' journals, a fictitious version of which form the second half of the novel, really do refer to a future crusade that he'd pay for through his American conquests. "In his later years he went a bit crazy," Shimoni explained. The novel is built around a link between the European arrival in the New World, which is a precipitating event for the eventual founding of the United States, and a major historical figure's quasi-messianic fantasies about the lands that would become the State of Israel some 450 years later.

Because the novel is built around that link, it can also be built around something even bigger. Columbus, Shimoni says, is "almost fanatically religious," and sees himself as "a missionary, bringing Christ to the pagan world." In the novel, his counterpoint, or perhaps his parallel, is Tobias, a teenage converso, a Jewish-born believer in no religion at all who runs away from home after his father rats out their neighbors for secretly practicing Judaism. The first

half of the novel consists of the fictional Tobias' account of Columbus' voyages. Shimoni told me he is interested in "the juxtaposition of somebody without faith and someone with a lot of faith—the dynamic between these two forces."

This dynamic exists everywhere, across all of time and space. Nearly everything is pulled between opposed sources of meaning, all of reality being an unresolvable standoff between the tangible and the immanent, the high and the low. This dynamic is especially conspicuous in Israel, a place whose two largest cities, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, are archetypal spiritual opposites. The two forces converge in Jerusalem, which has an earthly and a heavenly version according to certain strains of traditional Jewish belief, which see the existing city as an achingly inadequate mirror to a perfected and invisible higher realm. And they exist within Shimoni himself, a writer whose power comes from his inevitable failure to escape what he knows is inescapable.

Until Sharp's translation of *A Room* appeared in 2016, Shimoni's most well-known novel existed as a rumor among the small community of cutting-edge, literary-minded Hebrew speakers, who hailed it as Israel's defining contribution to postmodern fiction. "Basically it's about art," Shimoni explained to me.

In *A Room's* first section, titled "The Lamp," a unit filming an instructional video for the IDF awaits the arrival of investigators from the army—they inadvertently filmed, or perhaps merely witnessed, a deadly accident in which a pilot has burned to death. The group is a cross-section of Jewish Israeli society, with its members representing various points in the country's ethnic, religious, and class spectrum. The perspective switches rapidly, settling on each character just long enough for the reader to grasp some poignantly fleeting vision of their dreams, loves, resentments, and past lives.

Numerous books have been written about Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and it's not that "The Lamp" isn't one of them. Any long narrative about something being consumed by fire in the wilderness of Eretz Yisrael with *klal Yisrael*

gathered is bound to conjure images of the *korbanot* or the *akeda* for some readers, by which I mean me. I was met with an almost piercing stare when I suggested all this to Shimoni. “Judaism doesn’t play that role for me as it plays with, you know,” he claimed, leaving the thought unfinished in English, or maybe just leaving me to puzzle over it. Jerusalem looms, as it always must, but the first 381 pages of *A Room* are also the great novel of Kiryat Moskin or Rishon L’Tziyon, an account of the Israel that exists between and beyond the holy sites and spiritual abstractions, the only book I’ve encountered that shows any deep interest in where the soldiers who get off the bus in the middle of nowhere are going, what they’re thinking, where they come from, and who they really are. (“And when you see the soldiers on the bus, what do you feel?” Shimoni asked me later in the conversation. “Good question,” I stalled, before launching into a panicked monologue. “A lot of different things ...”)

The protagonist of the second section, titled “The Drawer,” is an Israeli art student in Paris who hires two homeless people and breaks into a morgue in order to pose a modern version of Andrea Mantegna’s *Lamentation of Christ*, a strikingly de-sacralized work from 1480 in which the dead son of God is depicted “as a normal man,” says Shimoni, with his flesh discolored and his bare feet stretching into the foreground. Remarkably, Shimoni had not seen Mantegna’s painting in person when he wrote “The Drawer,” meaning he dedicated nearly 200 pages of narrative to an artwork he knew only from books. But he had in fact lived in Paris for a year at a time in his life when he wanted to be a painter, and his first novel, 1990’s *The Flight of the Dove*, takes place in the city.

When I read “The Drawer,” I thought the Israeli artist’s quixotic efforts to paint Christ as a human being were

“Shimoni knows he cannot write his way out of Judaism, and that chosenness and tribal belonging are realities just as insurmountable as madness and death.”

an extended meditation on how Jesus haunts the Jewish people, about how we live as outsiders in a world whose values and metaphysics are those of our antithesis, who of course, in a characteristically Jewish mash of contradictions, lived and died as one of us. (From *The Tree of Life*, the Polish-born, Yiddish-language novelist Chava Rosenfarb’s trilogy of life in the Lodz ghetto: “Sometimes it occurs to me that they torture us not because we killed Christ, but because we have given them Christ, and because we remind them too much of him.”) When I put this theory to Shimoni, he responded, only half-plausibly, “The story of Christianity interests me a lot, not necessarily Judaism and Christianity in relation to each other. ... It’s more Jesus as a character, his own personal story, than the principles of Christianity.”

The third section is a 13-page found text called “The Throne,” a Borgesian document recounting a civilization that seems to have destroyed itself in the process of trying to depict its god. The king wins a war to end all wars; his “high priest” (*kohen*, in the Hebrew text) then draws a picture of their god that is so perfect that the entire kingdom joins together to recreate it on a mountain, and then on an entire mountain range. Create what, though? The high priest keeps changing his mind. Maybe his

drawing wasn’t perfect, but blasphemous. Perhaps the god should be depicted standing, or reclining, or maybe just evoked through his physical absence, through a massive empty chair—or maybe the god can only be shown as a gigantic sphere, a mega-object which, according to one legend, eventually dislodges and crushes everything in its path, including the centers of power that created it, “the winter capital and the summer capital.” Maybe the god was expressed as a much smaller sphere, or maybe as a single speck of dust.

In all three parts of *A Room*, art reaches its limits as soon as it hits the unavoidable facts of reality, the ones that had burst into view for me on that subway car under the East River, and which Shimoni seemed to grasp so firmly. What is a film, a painting, a statue—or, for that matter, a novel—when confronted with fire, death, God, time? Shimoni shared the suspiciously unremarkable information that Borges was a direct influence on the third section of *A Room*. And yet the novel’s conclusion, like “The Lamp” and “The Drawer,” draws inspiration from much closer to home. “The Throne” is the story of an ancient collective project meant to link the nation to the heavens by anchoring both of them at a specific point on Earth, a holy mountain that will bring higher redemption but whose shape and purpose are never fully decided. Judaism is just such a project, and so, in some simultaneously hopeful and dangerous sense, is the State of Israel.

“An entire kingdom was involved in the labor,” we learn in the opening paragraph of “The Throne,” recalling—for me, at least, although Shimoni might object—how every Israelite was commanded to contribute to the building of the altar and the Temple, the places and objects where God, art, and nation would merge. But, Shimoni writes a few lines earlier, “No trace remains, not of their undertakings nor of the mountain they ordained for their yearnings.”

“All the books of his, basically, they always end with some sort of death—or a hint of death,” Sharp noted. “They are not happy books,” Shimoni agreed, his face momentarily threatening to arch



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into a grin. “That’s why they don’t have many readers.”

Not happy in the conventional sense, at least. Something must endure against time’s merciless effacement of human effort, or else we would live in world completely shorn of continuity, one in which the connections between an IDF filmmaking team and an expat art student and an ancient high priest couldn’t possibly form the basis of anything, never mind a 600-page literary masterpiece. *A Room*, like the Bible, uses the story of the Jews to illustrate that we don’t live in a world of total meaninglessness and discontinuity. In the Bible, it is Hashem that imposes order on the chaos of existence. The connective tissue of meaning in Shimoni’s work is harder to identify.

If meaning lies anywhere for Shimoni, it is in the things that can’t be avoided. The first part of *A Room*, he explained, grew out of a contrast he had observed between his homeland and the Far East, the kind of distant and wide-open place Israelis immediately flee to as soon as the claustrophobic ordeal of their army service concludes. At one point in adulthood, Shimoni spent an extended period in northern India, an experience that helped shape *The Salt Line*. Before doing his annual IDF reserve duty one year—“as I got older they sent me to a reserve unit that does filming,” he said—Shimoni traveled to “an island called Ko Pha-ngan in Thailand, where the most dangerous thing was if a coconut fell on you. There was nothing there, basically. After spending time in that kind of atmosphere”—the soul-stifling atmosphere of a Thai beach resort—“I was called up to *milium* and found myself in a room with all these various kinds of reservists who at that point seemed much more exotic than the place I had come from, these various characters in one room. Looking at all these different kinds of characters, I started wondering what each one had behind them, what they’d brought from their past, and how they would all connect together.”

Shimoni is stuck in a world in which a room of Israelis on *milium* is a bottomless mystery, while a Thai island offers a random assortment of people on a

pretty beach. He could have been some other writer if he had stayed in Paris or India or Thailand, or if he had gone for easy polemic or straightforward critique—he could have been less mystical, less fatalistic, less difficult, less withdrawn, less unknown to the world. But the road always led back to Jerusalem, to the tragedy and wonder of having to face what will always be there, regardless of what one might want.

I think *A Room* left such an intense impression on me because it is a novel about the things that can’t be wished away, written by someone who was grappling with them, rather than celebrating, mourning, or evading them entirely. The road leads back to Jerusalem for me, too. I work for a Jewish magazine and find myself at shul with a frequency that might once have felt strange for someone in breach of as many mitzvahs as I am. More importantly, the notion of *tzaddikim* rising from their graves to light Shabbat candles or *kohanim* being struck dead in the Kodesh Kodeshin no longer seem fanciful. Art and happiness and America now feel fleeting in a way that Judaism does not. To be stuck in Jerusalem is often far from comforting, since art and happiness and America are among the greatest things in existence. The earthly Jerusalem can bring on a similar queasiness. “There is stress in this country that you don’t find in almost any other place in the world,” Shimoni told me, in English. This was an excellent topic for a novelist, I replied. “The stress is part of what makes this place amazing in a way,” I said. “You think so?” Shimoni asked me. Yes, I replied. “You enjoy it?” he continued. “Or do you suffer from it?” Both, I told him: “There are moments where I really enjoy it and then two seconds later I suffer from it.”

In Israel it is possible for me to feel the full range of emotions in a single instant—connection, alienation, love, fear, ecstasy, regret—without being certain where any of it really comes from. It emanates from somewhere too deep for me to be able to repress it through any rational process. Perhaps I am feeling the shock of a cosmic power crossing through a psyche in constant battle with

its own smallness. I’ve experienced this onslaught of unbidden feeling outside of Israel, too, plenty of times. It has happened on the really good or bad or aimless days in New York, a place where madness and possibility couldn’t exist without one another. It has happened during especially meaningful time spent with family and friends. I’ve felt it on acid and at funerals. I’ve felt it at prayer, though only rarely. I feel it whether I want to or not, whether I like it or not.

“There are people who live near volcanoes,” Shimoni told me in English when the conversation turned to life in Israel, a place that could erupt into open conflict or turn into a quasi-theocracy and that might not last another 50 or 100 years. “People live in dangerous spots ... and they don’t leave their place. They were born there, their people are there, and their friends are there, and they can’t imagine themselves living in any other place, even if it’s very dangerous.”

This was not the first time Shimoni had likened Israel to a volcano. “He distanced himself from them and his life with and without them and from the country in which he lived,” one of the reservists in “The Lamp” remembers of his own wanderings through Asia. With the benefit of distance, Israel was revealed to be “a country in which war was like lava that erupts once every decade,” with “inhabitants like those children at the foot of Mount Pinatubo, who know nothing other than the basalt landscape.” The key words in this passage are “know nothing other than.” Shimoni is an inhabitant of the Judean volcano. He knows nothing other than it, nothing other than the truths it imposes, its terrors and revelations. His achievement is to show us that we live right alongside him. ■

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On Not Getting What I Wanted

I already had a baby. But I wanted another.

BY ELISA ALBERT

What I wanted was a baby. It was not a logical or defensible want. I already *had* a baby; a wonderful son I hesitate even to mention for fear of exciting the evil eye. But I wanted another one. Another baby. All the mom-people I knew kept having other babies, more and more babies. Everyone knows you have to have *at least* two, otherwise it's not a *real* family, and why even bother with the whole endeavor in the first place?

We were lust-crazed morons when we'd had our first baby, our wonderful son, but we'd learned so much, risen to the occasion, grown up, evolved, and now we wanted another baby, a celebration baby, to come from our hard-won stability and contentment.

By “we” wanted, I mean “I” wanted. He wanted another baby, too, and claimed he was very much looking forward to the existence of the other baby. But the thing is, he never wept inconsolably when it didn't happen. The inconsolable weeping was all mine. It's really surprising how many tears a person can weep.

I didn't tell a lot of people about my wanting because A) I did *not* want to

be defined by it and B) It hurt so, so bad. Of those I did tell, a few were kind and circumspect, but most were somewhere on the insensitive-to-fucking-asshole spectrum. So it goes. Do you know that there are people in the world who, given any opportunity, are ravenously eager to pity others in attempting to make themselves feel superior? They're called sadists, and they're everywhere!

It crushed me when people said crappy things and boy did people say crappy things. *Well I'm just so glad mine have each other. Don't you think it's cruel to just have one? Only children are weirdos! I know how you feel because I only had three boys and what I really wanted was a girl.* It was pretty astonishing, how much cruel, stupid shit people said to me. A reflexologist said I didn't want it bad enough. A nutritionist said I wanted it too much. A foul douche cousin said *I would never trust an only child.* One time, I overheard a kid from down the street in conversation with my son: “What's it like being an only child? Seems like it would be super lonely.” I had to clutch the kitchen countertop, close my eyes, and take a very deep breath to stop myself from popping in to be like *hey kid, what's it like having an alcoholic for a mom? Seems like it would be super toxic!*

Here are the kinds of people who have only one child: people disallowed more under fascist government, coldhearted selfish career-obsessed bitches, people who loathed the experience of having the one, people with biological incapacity, and mothers of such advanced age that having even one was a dystopian miracle.

You *have* to have *at least* two. Why did I constantly look at other families with multiple children—even when said families were wildly dysfunctional and/or broken and/or blatantly miserable—and think: well, at least they're a *real* family. Needless to say, I had to mute everyone I know who uses social media exclusively as a means of showcasing offspring. No big loss there, though, and honestly you guys: cut that obnoxious shortsighted exploitative shit *out*.

Let us pause to remind ourselves, in spite of our sitcom brainwashing and general cultural programming and absurd devotion to some bygone bullshit Rockwellian lie, that *there is no such thing as a formula for a happy family*. Some of every stripe in every configuration manage to fuck it up, and some of every stripe in every configuration manage to rock it. Maybe family happiness exists on a spectrum, like gender. Suck it, Tolstoy.

Anyway, anyway: I wanted a (noth-er) baby. And when the (other) baby declined to appear, I felt cursed and punished and blighted and tragic and enraged and impotent. I screamed into the void. I told God to eat shit and die. And I found out some interesting things about myself. Such as: I am in conversation with God!

Also: I did not want that other baby bad enough to sign my ass up for fertility treatment. I can almost, but not quite, imagine wanting it that bad. I one hundred percent did not want it that bad. That certainty was like a towering stone wall in my heart. I often rested my forehead against that wall. Its coolness and solidity provided great comfort and reassurance. That wall had always existed, long, long before I did. It was a primordial wall. It was covered in moss. It was an ancient, quiet, verdant, merciful, restful place. I spent a whole lot of time there.

Like I said, I already *had* a baby. A beyond wonderful baby. The most awesome baby. And still, I wanted *another*. How greedy is that? To “want” life itself. The more I thought about it—and hahahahaha, *man*, did I think about it—the more indefensible it seemed.

My job, then, was to learn to

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surrender want. I threw myself at this monumental task. I wanted to be worthy of it. What a badass undertaking. When you surrender want, you join the ranks of priestesses and seers. When you surrender want, you became a guru and a beacon. (But, like, ego-less.) I wanted to be *totally fucking at peace with exactly what is*. I wanted *not* to despise God whenever some odious jerkoff announced the birth of their second/third/fourth/fifth child. I wanted not to care when sadists parroted nonsense to me about “only” children. I wanted not to feel mortally wounded whenever some intimate stranger went on some dumb caption bender about how it’s Harlowe’s fifth birthday today and goodness gracious we don’t *deserve* her but *God sent* her to us and we’re just so grateful that she *chose* to *complete* our family or whatever thoughtless nonsense noise.

I wanted not to want. I wanted it so, so bad.

I thought maybe the mikvah (Jewish ritual bath, look it up, I’m not your ethnic shortcut) might help me in my progress toward relinquishment of want. Or maybe ... the mikvah would be the magical key to open the door to the desired pregnancy! UGH, so annoying, that reflexive, automatic want! Fuck off! I wanted to stamp it out, extinguish it. It caused me nothing but pain. Enough! No more! I was a prisoner of want, and I wanted to be free. Do you see my quandary? Wanting was everywhere.

I have a friend who bore 13 children. I can’t even fathom loving 13 people that much. How full can a heart *get*? Most everyone I know recoils in horror at the thought of 13 children, but I stand in awe. Not just because she *bore* 13 children (although, uh, superhero much?) but because she *raised* them all, with strength and decency and humility and love and self-sacrifice, which is something like governing a small country and something like running a school and something like being a top-notch nurse/administrator/teacher/CEO/cook/housekeeper. This woman has her shit *together*.

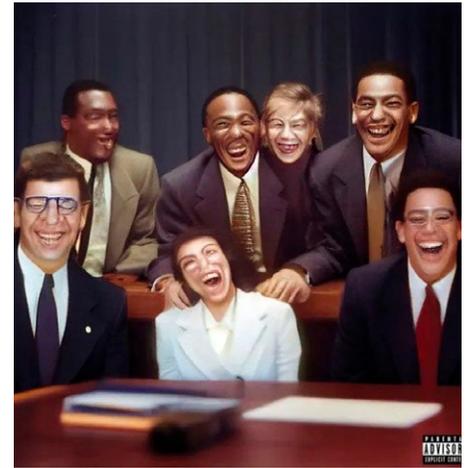
My friend with the 13 children agreed to tutor me with regard to the mikvah. She gave me books: *Taharat HaMishpacha*, *The Waters of Eden*. I already knew

the gist; I’d immersed once before, in advance of a reckless starter marriage at 23, but the real-real turned out to be a fair bit more complex and interesting than I’d previously understood. I read up, and went over to her house on Tuesday evenings to study some more. We sat side by side at her table and read aloud together. She was a good teacher, a gentle woman. There was nothing in it for her.

The laws of family purity get a bum rap for seeming to imply that menstruation is dirty, and that women need to be cleansed/purified because we ourselves are metaphysically dirty/bad. Cue the automatic assumption that religion is inherently misogynistic and all observant women must be an oppressed bunch of self-hating victim/slaves. I believe this to be a pile-up of etymological misunderstanding, but what can I tell you: look at the texts and the texts about the texts and make up your own mind, or don’t. No skin off my nose, as the old saying goes. (I mean, a personal no thanks to the part about sending one’s used panties to a Rabbi for inspection if unsure about the precise color/nature of vaginal discharge, but to each their own.)

My studies left me dazzled and delighted. To my mind, mikvah is as radically feminist a ritual as they come, and by “radically feminist” I mean: enormously insightful with regard to personal freedom, the rhythm and care and life span of a soul inside a body with an unmediated menstrual cycle, hard truths about fertility, life, and death, and power dynamics within long-term monogamous intimacy.

Sex with the same person for years and years and years gets boring, no matter how much you may adore and respect and like that person. Without mystery and newness and romantic intrigue and the psychedelic dance of courtship, how can you possibly stay jazzed? *Taharat haMishpacha* has some answers: You quite literally do not touch your spouse for two weeks out of every menstrual cycle. You separate, and then you reunite. Said reunions are glorious. You cherish your weeks “on” and you savor your weeks “off.” You take clearly demarcated, finite breaks from being sexually desired



Album of the Week

Lil Yachty, *Let's Start Here*

The first piece of truly moving AI art I’ve seen has not been from “Jodorowsky’s Tron” or “beautiful redhead in the snow,” but rather the cover art for Lil Yachty’s stunning new album, *Let’s Start Here*. Yachty’s first psychedelic rock-rap project, the nearly hourlong album is a major breakthrough for the 25-year-old from Georgia.

The cover art works because it plays into the soulless nature of AI art. The faces of corporate America are disfigured, ugly, melting. It looks like you’re about to have a very bad trip. But putting on “the BLACK seminole”—the album’s seven-minute opener—the listener is thrust into a wavy world of guitars and reverb. There’s not just a light-hearted feeling of “let’s make it trippy,” but a sound that cuts deep as Yachty declares himself the Black Seminole and the African Rambo. Most importantly, he has no time to joke around, because “the kid is now a man.”

There’s a funkiness that moves throughout the album, like on “running out of time,” where a bassline is front and center as almost-mumbling lyrics talk about staying up ‘til the sun. It sounds like a party, and it is, but not a rager. This is not an album for clubs, but for late nights.

—David Meir Grossman

and/or desirous. A human being cannot have or be had on every whim.

The mikvah is often described as the marking of transition. A movement from one place—one identity, one role, one state of being—to another. Marital sex, which for me had become routine, an exercise in futility, a hotbed of grief and anxiety and failure, could be thusly honored and reframed. *Yes*, mikvah said: sex *can* be boring and rote and pointless, and yes, it *would* be easy and fun to find someone new to do it with, but instead *you* are going to become new, which in turn will make your spouse feel new, which will ideally allow you to anticipate and enjoy relations for a long time to come.

Bleeding, which had become the embodiment of heartbreak and injustice, could likewise be thusly honored and reframed. *Yes*, mikvah said: Bleeding *can* be a recurring funereal curse. Now come and enact this ritual that belongs to you and belonged to your ancestors (oh ho, you thought we were going to get out of here without acknowledging the *ancestors?*), and allow it to wash away heartbreak and injustice, so that you may emerge fresh and intact and whole and fine, just as you are. You are *not* cursed or broken or blighted; you are alive in your very own body, which is, itself, an Eden, holy and sacred and worthy and fine, just as it is.

So, for the first time in years, I visited the mikvah. A little unmarked building in the far corner of the parking lot at my local JCC. How many times had I seen it without registering it, without even wondering what it was. A lovely *shomeret* was there to observe and assist. I said the brachot and completely immersed, three times, in the collected rainwater.

I won't bore you with tales of mystical rebirth; it's feckin' private. Suffice it to say, everything about it felt good and right. Every bell was rung.

The wanting didn't magically go away, but it did fade some. Wanting's a tricky bitch; it waxes and wanes. Wanting is like an odor; it can find its way through the tiniest cracks. Wanting is like a weed; it self-sows. I am a person of some privilege who came of age in late-stage capitalism, so I am not well conditioned to, like, chillax with not

getting what I want. (Dial up cinematic Veruca Salt from the original *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*: "I want a party with roomfuls of laughter, ten thousand *tons* of ice cream ... and if I don't get the things I am after, I'm ... going ... to ... SCREAM!")

I kept thinking I'd return to the mikvah, dip on the regular, make a proper habit/practice of it. But you know how it is ... there's soccer practice or the dog hasn't been walked or you're going on a trip or there's an event you have to attend or—whoops—pandemic time. Or you're just beat from trying to meet a deadline or advance yourself in some way or keep abreast with everyone and their mother on whatever platform holds you in thrall.

Still, my awareness continued to shift. I keep distance from my spouse during *niddah*, the days during and immediately after menstruation, and I notice that I tend to instinctively dress differently during that time, too. Less likely to put the precise contours of my body on public display. Less likely to advertise what nice tits and ass I have. During that time I do not exist for the pleasure or approval or appraisal of anyone else. It's my time to be an independent creative entity, a fundamentally human animal more than a socially constructed and perceived "female" object. (I'm happy to show off my tits and ass the rest of the time, though, rest assured! I'm not like an *anarchist* or anything.)

I'll probably always have a very tender spot where resides the lack of what I wanted, and that's okay. I might even go so far as to say it's *good*. Does the world really need more checked boxes, more acquisition, more staged holiday photos, more general smugness? Have we not seen the devastation wrought by certain classes of people in certain sorts of societies *getting everything they want?*

Not getting what we want can leave us soft, bruised, gentler, quieter, and maybe a little more watchful and humble than perhaps we'd otherwise manage to be. Maybe not getting what we want can make us more grateful for what we *do* have. Isn't that just so nice and tidy? Well, no: it's also hard, messy, awful, and frustrating. It really is quite insanelly hard. I still admittedly

have a lot of trouble with certain Instagram narratives.

I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought, quoth a Shakespeare sonnet I scrawled on the inside cover of my diary as a love-lorn teen. Back then I was pouting over unrequited love, as yet unschooled in deeper realms of thwarted desire.

I. Wanted. Another. Baby. For a long time it was impossible to even speak the words out loud: I was too desperately vulnerable: you could snap my spine in half like a twig. Even now, I can type it, but I probably still couldn't say the words out loud. How unfair it seemed, how *wrong* it felt that I didn't get that other baby. Only *losers* don't get what they want. And I really did not want to be a loser. But I also did not want to be lost in a vortex of thwarted desire forever, so. You find ways to move the fuck on, and you thank god you aren't one of those programmed shmucks who think there's some prefab equation for a full or happy life.

By the way! The essential nature of want is that it is infinite, and can't ever be fulfilled. Visit an AA meeting sometime, and see for yourself.

I know people with two children who yearn for three. I know people with three children who yearn for four. I even know someone with four children who years for five. I wonder if my friend, my kind teacher, the mother of 13, ever indulges in wistful imaginings of what number 14 might have looked like, or smelled like, or how it might have felt to touch her lips to that nonexistent baby's sweet, sweet brow. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

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Amaretti di Saranno

BY PAOLA GAVIN

INGREDIENTS

- 1 ¾ cups sweet almonds, blanched**
- ¼ cup apricot kernels, blanched**
- 1 cup caster sugar**
- 2 large egg whites**
- Powdered sugar for dusting**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Place the almonds and apricot kernels in a food processor or blender and process until they are finely ground.

Step 2

Beat the egg whites until they are stiff, then gradually fold in the caster sugar, ground almonds, and apricot kernels. Mix well to make a fairly stiff paste. Shape into small balls about 1 inch in diameter. Flatten them slightly and arrange side by side on a well-oiled baking sheet that has been dusted with flour. Bake in a preheated 325-degree oven for 12 to 15 minutes or until pale golden. Remove from the oven and set aside to harden.

Yield: Makes about 36 cookies

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