The New Kibbutz

Kishorit, a self-described neurodiverse kibbutz, is redefining Israeli communal living at a time when these communities are on the decline

BY MATTI FRIEDMAN

This community was founded on the site of an abandoned kibbutz, Kishor, which had dissolved itself after years of failure.

I passed the goat-milk operation, the country’s third-largest, and the winery, which produces 50,000 bottles a year. There were the usual bomb shelters, a reminder that the Hezbollah missile crews were just a few miles to the north and were unlikely to make an exception for the people here. In the members’ meeting room near the communal dining hall, a man named Oren asked me if I’d like to sit down and discuss a book.

The greenhouses here looked like the ones you’d see at any other kibbutz, with rough tables and hanging tools and sweaty workers in cargo pants. I noticed signs of cognitive disability only when two of the workers walked over to say hi and see how I was doing; one of the differences between Kishorit and a typical kibbutz is that the people here are much friendlier. Not far from the goat sheds, a man in a red T-shirt stood in the shade of a terebinth, jerking his arms as he carried on a forceful discussion with himself.

Kishorit thinks of itself as a kind of neurodiverse kibbutz—that term, “neurodiverse,” being the one preferred here to older ones like “mentally disabled” or “special needs.” Many communal decisions here are taken in a plenum by
democratic vote, in the kibbutz style, including both the 186 neurodiverse members and the 45 member families who are “neurotypical,” the term for what most people might call “normal.” Some members can work full days, others can barely work at all—the place runs on the old kibbutz precept that you give what you can and get what you need. In the winery, for example, I met Yaron Biran, 50, who was born in Emek Hefer on the coastal plain. He was hauling a crate of bottles and stopped to chat. His job changes with the seasons, he said—pruning, picking, packing. He was busy, and had to go. In the kibbutz grocery, an elderly worker named Haya was busy, and had to go. In the kibbutz home in Toronto. I was standing on the blistering stone floor by the pool when my attention was diverted by the sudden arrival of a raucous horde of boys and girls—it was kibbutz gym class. They hit the water like a dolphin pod and churned it like beautiful torpedoes, another lap and another. They were all foam, tan, and muscle, and to my Canadian eyes, they seemed like another species. It was like watching a house cat wandering into a zoo and happening upon the cheetah pen.

Yael Shilo, one of the two founders of Kishorit, was born in 1948, the same year as Israel, at Kibbutz Kfar Szold in the Galilee panhandle. The idea for a neurodiverse kibbutz came to her after she married a man whose son fit that description, and she has dedicated the rest of her life to making it work. Shilo’s parents, like the other founders of her own kibbutz, had escaped places like Germany and Poland for lives of physical hardship in the Land of Israel. They spent a full decade hauling basalt rocks just to clear the land for growing, so it was said, naturally, “without complex,” in their true homeland.”

My own first kibbutz memory was at a swimming pool at Kibbutz Kfar Blum in the late 1980s, when I was 11 years old, visiting Israel with my family. I was standing on the blustering stone floor by the pool when my attention was diverted by the sudden arrival of a raucous horde of boys and girls—it was kibbutz gym class. They hit the water like a dolphin pod and churned it like beautiful torpedoes, another lap and another. They were all foam, tan, and muscle, and to my Canadian eyes, they seemed like another species. It was like being a house cat wandering into a zoo and happening upon the cheetah pen.

Shilo remembers the kibbutz as a wonderful place, even if the community was never as equal as it strove to be. “In our kibbutz, like anywhere, there were strong and weak. The idea of equality is a dream—in reality, there are people who are charismatic and strong, the leaders, and people who are more marginal, and it’s naive to think that everyone was equal and loved each other.” But the kibbutz was nonetheless a great thing: davar gadol, as she put it several times in our conversation. You were never alone, and you always had someone to help you. So what if a new kind of kibbutz could be created, one that would revolve around people who hadn’t been magically cured of “complexes” and who’d never be invited to star in those glorious calisthenic films, one that would harness the power of community but put it at the disposal of people who’d ordinarily be out of the frame?

The capable body was always a preoccupation of the kibbutz and of the Zionist movement: the bronzed pioneer of the Jewish National Fund posters, or the old newsreels with hundreds of brash New Jews performing calisthenics in unison under the blue-and-white flag. “Your first glance when you meet a young native-born man will reveal a flourishing, muscular, tall body,” wrote the pioneer Yaakov Cohen in 1933. “The hunched back and the bent gait that many scholars have identified as almost racial trademarks seem to have vanished, and the anxiety and fear of the ‘gentiles’ and the feeling of inadequacy and inferiority that were the lot of the young Jew in the Diaspora seem to have been pulled out by the roots.”

Just as the sabra, the prickly pear adopted as a symbol for the native-born Jews of Israel, grew wild here, wrote the historian Oz Almog in his book The Sabra, “so were the native-born Israelis growing, so it was said, naturally, ‘without complexes,’ in their true homeland.”

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against-all-odds pursuit. Social media seeking a life of meaning strikes us as created a world where nothing is real smartphone dopamine addiction sticks hand to glove. Silicon Valley and their dia and posing took to each other like Israelis like to celebrate among them-

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so much heart,” Mark said. “You can’t is unique and hard to imitate. Mark they often take for granted, but which is unique and hard to imitate. Mark didn’t think so. “A place like this takes so much heart,” Mark said. “You can’t just copy it.”

Kishorit is an innovation of the kind Israelis like to celebrate among themselves and display to outsiders, along with pioneering successes like the rehabilitation village known as Adi Negev, founded a few years later in the southern desert by Doron Almog, an IDF general, father of a son with severe mental disabilities, and, as of last month, the new chairman of the Jewish Agency. But in housing neu-

rodiverse adults, Israel actually lags behind other Western countries. In many European states, particularly in Scandinavia, there are no longer large institutions for people with mental dis-

abilities, and nearly everyone is housed in the community, said Dr. Lital Barlev, an expert at the Jerusalem think tank JDC Brookdale. In Israel, by contrast, of 11,286 mentally disabled Israelis who live outside the home, according to her research, about two-thirds are still in institutions. Even the United States is ahead of us.

“The trend is moving people to reg-

ular residences, not to neighborhoods of disabled people or kibbutzim of dis-

abled people, but to life like everyone else,” said Barlev. “You’ll have a regular neighborhood in the city, and every once in a while you’ll have an apartment with people who have disabilities. This is correct not only for people with dis-

abilities, but for everyone else, who need to see these people as part of society.”

But life in the city can mean acute isolation. “If we put people in apart-

ments, then they’re alone in their apartments,” said Levinger, Kishorit’s co-founder, when we spoke on a bench outside the village’s little office. “The kibbutz is one solution for loneliness.” Dalia Peleg, a counselor and resident, moved to Kishorit after her daughter Tal, 50, came to live here 20 years ago. “What these people lack most is company,” Peleg said. “At home people are nice to them. They’ll say hi. But no one will ever invite them over for coffee.”

A short walk away, in the swimming pool, a man with twisted limbs lay on his back in the water, moving with the help of an instructor. A tractor puttered between the rows of vines: The old kibbutz may be gone, but the grapes are growing. At the greenhouses the tools went down. It was time for a coffee break.

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NEWS

Punks vs. Posers

It’s the only culture war worth fighting

BY B. DUNCAN MOENCH

 Fifty years into our poser-filled age, we now live in a zeitgeist so devo-

ioph genuine art and even earnest human engage-

ment that the concept of seeking a life of meaning strikes us as an against-all-odds pursuit. Social media and posing took to each other like hand to glove. Silicon Valley and their smartphone dopamine addiction sticks created a world where nothing is real and no one can be trusted. Everything is a manipulation and, as evidenced by the recent news out of Google AI, soon no one will know completely if the avatar they’re conversing with online is human.

The answer to this corporate es-

cape room, though, is not to “shun the world,” but to “shed it.” The line comes from Lungfish singer and visionary artist Daniel Higgs, who in person looks like a gyrating, heavily inked version of Karl Marx come back to life. Higgs and Lungfish produced a series of hypnotizing albums during the ’90s and early ’00s, which were distributed on the Dischord record label created by hardcore legend Ian MacKaye. The former Fugazi frontman started the label, as he recalls for Michael Azerrad in Our Band Could Be Your Life, when members of his previous band Minor Threat demanded he “evolve.” In other words, they wanted him to start writing songs that sounded more like Bono’s in U2. That way they could make real money, not the slop they took in playing all-ages shows with $3 cover charges.

MacKaye rejected every aspect of the premise. Rather than hope against hope that some benign major-label producer allowed him to create halfway meaning-

ful work, MacKaye forged his own record label and distribution system. He took the venture many steps further,
too. All his bands’ records and CDs would be sold directly—postage paid—through Dischord’s mail-order catalogs at prices often 25% cheaper than they were listed in record stores. Fugazi also famously refused to play any shows that charged more than the price of a local movie ticket. In response to the corporate strumpets demanding he pose for pennies and plaudits, MacKaye instead created his own world and welcomed the like-minded into it.

Had MacKaye not forged his own path, Fugazi never would have become the most successful independent band in history. Nor would the nearly 200 albums Dischord has released have an audience on their own artistic terms. There is a model for change in America, but it isn’t posing for pictures while asking for permission from elites and their self-serious gatekeepers who pay your bills while thumbing their nose at the poor workaday suckers in whose name you supposedly operate, except, in reality, you don’t.

In the early 1990s, while Fugazi built up a massive underground following, the famously prescient historian Christopher Lasch sat on his deathbed finishing his last work. No single act could have been more punk. Alongside his daughter, his lungs failing from cancer, together they pored over every page until, right before his death, at long last the manuscript was complete. The finished product, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, is a masterpiece of anti-boomer critique. In the book, Lasch dares ask America’s most forbidden question: Does democracy deserve to survive?

In Lasch’s view, maybe not. The boomer left lionized dilettantes and intellectual pretenders in a manner so omnipresent it was destroying the foundation of all knowledge pursuits. The problem, in his view, started nearly 100 years earlier with a small group of wealthy Brahmin Americans transposing their wealth guilt onto social politics. By the time of the ’60s, the problem had morphed with mass culture and consumerism into something far more dangerous. With the carefully crafted Hollywood personas of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Clint Eastwood emblazoned into their occipital lobes, coolness—not integrity—became the boomer left’s utmost value. The way to rebel wasn’t to take part in broad-based campaigns for better wages, working conditions, and social safety nets (which everyone of all races and genders benefit from).

To the boomer left, that was all passé. The dirty work of building bridges with Middle American normies was an unnecessary concession of the New Deal-era and its buttoned-down ways. The best way to create change was to freak out the squares.

Being cool, in this new establishment left’s mind, changed things by itself. To lack coolness was the same as being a towns-person in the film *Easy Rider*—a gap-toothed nativist, fearful of anyone who thinks differently.

Boomer Ivy League elites maintained an all-consuming fear of becoming an IBM-punch card “organization man” like their parents. They wanted money and the accoutrements of establishment legitimacy, but to preserve their identities as cool political activists. In college they found the solution. Make change “from the inside.” In other words, they would sell out to business enterprise, government corruption, and consumer excess but don the costume of the collectivist radical—what people in punk rock would later call the “poser”: a pre-arranged identity worn by a scenester with nothing new to contribute, but seeking the recognition of creative coolness, socially, politically, or both.

Andy Warhol and Hannah Wilke were the maximalist personifications of the poser ethos. Unimaginative individuals who were masterful at manipulating wealthy donors and the art-going set into believing their pop culture obsessions represented edgy expressions of social transformation, they became icons and models for the next 50 years of boomer-influenced “edgy” self-expression as a business strategy that combined “progressive” poses with regressive policy. The administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama took the leftist poser philosophy and made it part and parcel with the state itself. Economically, they behaved almost exactly as Ronald Reagan and the Bushes did. But they listened to Fleetwood Mac and the Stones, and their wives weren’t just about “baking cookies.” So they were cool.

The boomers’ obsessive portrayal of Woodstock as the cultural second coming imprinted a superficial change-maker identity onto Gen X—which would then go on to mimic the 1969 music festival’s hedonism with Burning Man, Coachella, and many other regional love and drug fest imitators. Through the force of repetition, boomers managed to manifest in their children and grandchildren all the wrong lessons from the ’60s. The only thing needed to “change the world” was to listen to cool music, have hip views on things, and every four years vote blue.

The acceptance of “different lifestyles” came to represent an all-encompassing political salvo for the left. Politics became identity, and vice versa.

The desire to think differently in some cool new way quickly got so out of control that the American left rapidly lost touch with working-class mannerisms (except as a barn-door target for satire) by at least the mid-’80s. In their place, they took on the values of the art-going set—a group desperate to prove how different it was from everyone else.

It’s no accident that some elements inside today’s lucrative sexual rights organizations prefer to let the letters on the LGBTQIA2S+ moniker grow every few years. It’s the same reason why gay pride parades no longer seem to elevate primarily gay men and women anymore. Common cause with Middle America is not in fact their mission. Neither is general acceptance. None of those achievements would be cool enough.

For the contemporary American left, despite a great many pretensions to the contrary, the goal is exclusion, not inclusion. Alienating normies, suburbanites, and whatever dedicated social conservatives still reside in the country’s metro areas is in fact their raison d’etre. The goal is to advance identities different from those that include most Americans and thereby declare their membership, as Douglas Murray writes, “a bit better” than social traditionalists, who are pretty much the definition of uncool.

A century ago, when the United States
had something akin to a functioning working-class political movement, people inside it debated whether wealthy art-show poseur types were of any use. Now, after almost 50 years of operating under the iron grip of the Warhol generation, almost nothing on the American left remains but poseurs. As a direct result, the labor movement has shrunk down to almost nothing. Working-class pay has fallen steadily despite labor productivity skyrocketing. Housing went from highly accessible to a tragicomedy capable of destroying the country. Meanwhile, during the same five decades, large parts of America’s elite liberal education system devolved into a Nerf-world version of Pol Pot’s school system in Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

While Wall Street accelerated its de-dentified war on working people’s pay and benefits, the Democratic Party transformed itself into the party of Herbert Hoover, throwing up its hands—as it has for the duration of Joe Biden’s presidency so far—pleading that it’s powerless to enact its own legislative agenda. But check out this cool documentary about Angela Davis that my kid is showing at Sundance! Power to the people!

If understood properly, all this should have been expected. Follow-through and persistence are not poseur values. Neither is consistency.

Today’s poseur left-wing political class claims in one breath that to enact its promised legislative itinerary would mean superseding the nation’s most cherished institutions—like, apparently, the Senate filibuster. Meanwhile, it also encourages the country’s young people to topple statues of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and even abolitionist heroes (who died fighting slavery) to demonstrate the depth of their righteous anger. Create a Piss Christ of the nation’s past. Throw milkshakes on the House Speaker to perform when her job is to act? In her mind, tearing up Donald Trump’s speeches and mock-clapping with a carefully measured face of disgust is her real job—not passing legislation that alienates the captains of industry she serves.

In the TikTok era it’s easy to assume that, if given the chance, all Americans throughout history would have posed for profit. That assumption, though, is false. It wasn’t true for the foot soldiers of the American Revolution, or the mostly poor and immigrant Union battalions that fought against the Confederacy in the Civil War, or the 19th- and early-20th-century American labor movement, or the Civil Rights Movement. Members of each risked personal injury and even death for the causes they were unlikely to benefit from personally.

Posing for hire was never an option for the true Gen X punk pioneers, either—the Ian MacKays, Rick Frobergs, and David Yows of the world. If you came of age in ‘90s rock and these musicians remain unknown to you, it might be because you have no taste. It could also be that MTV veejays and corporate-controlled disc jockeys were told what to play and how often to play it. In consequence, pedestrian bands like Pearl Jam and Stone Temple Pilots were declared pioneers of the new “grunge” and “alternative” sound, when in reality, every last one of the millionaire ‘90s bands were milk-and-water versions of the post-rock and math-rock creative explosions happening at the time in small venues and independent labels.

The corporate takeover of the American music industry, not coincidentally, perfectly matched the timeline of the corporate heist of the American university system and the deracination of the working class from the Democratic Party. In all three industries, innovative yet accessible work was put forth at a staggering rate throughout the ’40s,

“The notion of punk hadn’t been coined yet of course, but the New Deal—and the labor leaders that pressured the government into creating it—were ‘all killer no filler.’”
An American Antidote to Rage

The most urgent writers of today are Ralph Ellison, Joan Didion, Thomas Pynchon, and Elizabeth Bishop

BY DAVID MIKICS

There’s no cavalry coming to save us. The Democratic Party and the GOP are effectively one monster with two heads, squabbling about how best to rule the nation on behalf of the Fortune 500. Our universities are now pyramid schemes (and professional sports teams) with social justice veneers. Holding out hope in any of it is a fool’s errand. If there is an American future, it won’t be built by participating in identitarian battles fought on handheld screens. Raising a placard and protesting institutions that don’t fear or care about the public is equally useless. Only by creating our own organizations and institutions—outside and separate from the unsalvageable ones now in power—can anything change. If there is any democratic future in these United States, erecting it will require effort, not bullshit posing.

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a chronicler of alienation and the loss of social bonds. In her prime—her first two essay collections, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* and *The White Album*—Didion was a sensitive-antennaeed student of anomie. Didion’s acerbic restraint later became mannered and her early skepticism toward all political pieties mutated into a dutiful recital of left-leaning platitudes. But that doesn’t matter. Her books from the ’60s are still definitive.

Conservative by nature, Didion was hard on her era—witness her devastating piece on Haight Ashbury, where she interviews a 5-year-old who is being fed LSD. Didion said of the hippies, “They are less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, *Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the Bomb.*” The dropout culture, Didion judged, was a dangerous limbo devoid of morals or insight.

The road back from the aimless ’60s vortex, Didion thought, required self-respect, that old-fashioned virtue: “People with self-respect display a certain toughness, a kind of moral nerve; they display what was once called character.” “They may not play at all, but when they do play, they know the odds,” she added. Yet it was impossible in the end for Didion to tell the difference between the self-respecting tough guy she aspired to be and the seemingly crazy isolato she feared she was. Her early novel *Play It as It Lays,* whose title carries along her as it lays, whose title carries along her the sense that old-fashioned virtue: “People with self-respect display a certain toughness, a kind of moral nerve; they display what was once called character.” “They may not play at all, but when they do play, they know the odds,” she added. Yet it was impossible in the end for Didion to tell the difference between the self-respecting tough guy she aspired to be and the seemingly crazy isolato she feared she was. Her early novel *Play It as It Lays,* whose title carries along her favorite gambling metaphor, features a lone woman who drives the freeway aimlessly, shellshocked by the abortion a man has pressured her into:

She bought a silver vinyl dress, and tried to stop thinking about what had he done with the baby. The tissue. The living dead thing, whatever you called it.

*Play It as It Lays* is one of the signal postwar American books about alienation, along with John Barth’s *The End of the Road,* Don DeLillo’s *The Names,* John Cheever’s *Falconer,* Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers,* Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son,* Raymond Carver’s *Cathedral* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*—and, in theater, Edward Albee’s 

“The alienated hero is a different species from the person to whom attention must be paid.”

*Zoo Story,* and David Mamet’s *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *American Buffalo.* All these differ from the French existential novel, since their heroes are neither brave nor despairing, just blank, and they are guilty of all the damage they do to others.

The alienated hero is a different species from the person to whom attention must be paid. The latter is usually a man out of his time, clinging to old-fashioned decency and threatened by youthful havoc. Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, our last great novelists of personality, specialized in such characters—people who stand for something, defying their era’s vulgarity and its scorn for the stad virtues. Nabokov in *Lolita* gave this clash of generations an acid-sharp spin. His hero, Humbert Humbert, is a monstrous rapist who yet elicits our sympathy, letting us enjoy his gibes at youth cult ’50s America, embodied in the 12-year-old girl who has—so he laments—destroyed him. Nabokov dared to seduce and repulse the reader at the same time, a feat unequaled in any other American novel.

Unlike Roth and Bellow, Thomas Pynchon has never made a case for the privileges of decency, except in that amiable buck and wing act, *Mason & Dixon,* his fond pastoral tribute to 18th-century America. Pynchon is cold and savage in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), the paranoid epic that cemented his fame. The novel largely revolves around the American serviceman Tyrone Slothrop, who is less a character than a focal point for Them, the myriad-tented intelligence agencies that exploit him relentlessly when they discover that his erections during the London Blitz align precisely with the trajectories of the Nazis’ V-2 rockets. This is Pynchon’s joke, but also a serious reflection on the Faustian spirit, the demon of information-as-power transmitted from Europe to America, whose tendrils are advancing faster than ever in the age of Zuckerberg, making *Gravity’s Rainbow* seem alarmingly up to date.

Slothrop, like his creator Pynchon, descends from a colonial-era Puritan theologian who wrote a heretical pamphlet about salvation. Pynchon speaks of “a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia, filtering in.” We anxiously overread signs to see whether we are damned or saved, the difference between the two states being more marginal the more paranoid we become.

Recalling his church-going New England past—before he went to Harvard, where he was a classmate of “that Jack Kennedy,” and bought rubbers from Red Little, later Malcolm X, in a Roxbury men’s room—Slothrop pictures the “slender church steeples poised all up and down these autumn hillsides” like “white rockets about to fire, only seconds of countdown away, rose windows taking in Sunday light, elevating and washing the faces above the pulpits defining grace, swearing this is how it does happen—yes the great bright hand reaching out of the cloud...”

Pynchon’s dorm room stoner humor can wear thin, and *Gravity’s Rainbow* sometimes feels tiresome rather than magnificent, with the author flogging one roll-your-own vaudeville number

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**HISTORY**

Tablet explores the past at tabletmag.com/sections/history
after another. Pynchon’s epic differs from Ulysses, its most obvious model, because there is no one for the reader to identify with, no rumpled and appealing Leopold Bloom. But in its most stunning moments it overwhelms you like Melville’s inexorable sea, or like one of Rilke’s Duine Elegies, often alluded to by Pynchon. “Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich,” Rilke wrote—every angel is terrifying. Pynchon, as Laurie Anderson put it, is gravity’s angel.

Pynchon took evil seriously, seeing it writ large in the systems that manipulate all of us. Flannery O’Connor, a fervent Catholic, detected evil in the corrupt heart of humanity—the stubborn spiteful impetus that makes us destroy one another, which she often plays for laughs in her stories, sneakily hiding the urgency of this spiritual matter beneath the rapacious pleasures of her satire.

The devil himself makes a cameo appearance in O’Connor’s novel The Violent Bear It Away. The 14-year-old Tarwater, one of O’Connor’s bitter, futile rebels, drowns a mentally disabled child as a sort of antinomian baptism. Tarwater, O’Connor’s young hero sets out for the city at the novel’s end, intent on preaching his grand refusal of every-thing pious:

His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping.

 Possibly Tarwater will be martyred by an angry mob, but more likely he will drop into some lonely hell, ignored by all. Having no hideout like the invisible man’s, and neither showing nor receiving any mercy, he is forever exposed, a raving child in the desert, “that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth.”

The poet Elizabeth Bishop, who is teasing, direct and cryptic all at once, dares to hope for shelter against the destructive elements that surround us. About “The Unbeliever,” she writes, “He sleeps at the top of a mast / with his eyes fast closed.” (Melville noted that atop a whaler’s masthead, a hundred feet above the deck, “everything resolves you into languor.”)

In “The End of March” Bishop describes a walk she took with friends on a cold New England beach. Her goal is a decrepit cabin:

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house, My crypto-dream-house, that crooked box Set up on pilings, shingled green...

... I’d like to retire there and do nothing, or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms: look through binoculars, read boring books, old, long, long books, and write down useless notes, talk to myself, and, foggy days, watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.

This ramshackle dream house offers a perfect loneliness fit for Robinson Crusoe (the subject of her “Crusoe in England”), but she cannot live there. The prospect remains faraway and unreal. Bishop pictures herself in the house lighting her nightly grog, making “a diaphanous blue flame,” but then admits she has created a mere fantasy: “A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible.”

Bishop wrestled with alcoholism and with the death by suicide of her companion Lota Macedo de Soares. She composed her poems slowly—one short lyric might take years—because every nuance counted.

Possibly Tarwater will be martyred by the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare with stupid eyes while from their beaks there rise the uncontrolled, traditional cries “Cruel” becomes a two-syllable word in Bishop’s meter: CRU-el, a steel-hard condemnation of the masculine ethos that rides high in her mindless, intransigent roosters.

Bishop refused to let her poems appear in women-only anthologies, but she wrote one of the most telling poems ever about gender identity, “In the Waiting Room.” The 7-year-old autobiographical protagonist, glancing at the “awful hanging breasts” of tribal women in National Geographic, realizes with shock that “you are an I, / You are an Elizabeth, / You are one of them.” Growing up is a quiet horror story in Bishop, and so she often imagines a dreamlike space where she might escape adult pressures, a secretive private island.

Bishop was our best poet after modernism, the one whose verse was designed to last forever, whose lines haunt the mind and reward endless rereading. She keeps building her dream houses, even while knowing how precarious they are, like the solitary perch on top of a mast.

If literature can teach anything, it is patience and conviction. We mostly have neither. We lash out violently, apocalyptic and urgent, with our enemies’ lists in hand. The days of rage have returned, both on the right and the left. To weather these tantrums, we should turn back to the writers who oppose the infantile fervor of groupthink—who acknowledge the lostness of the self in the world, the first step to declaring independence.

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THE REST

Committed to not repeating the mistakes they believed doomed the first Trump presidency, top aides to Donald Trump are planning to immediately purge the civil service if they win the White House in 2024, and replace current federal employees with pre-screened Trump loyalists. The centerpiece of the plan, as detailed by Axios’ Jonathan Swann, who broke the story on Friday, is an executive order called “Schedule F,” that was conceived in secret during the second half of Trump’s term and went into effect less than two weeks before the 2020 election. The order was quickly rescinded by President Biden after he took office but people in Trump’s inner circle tell Swann that it would be immediately reinstituted in the event that Trump is elected president again. The order would allow the president to reclassify the employment status of tens of thousands of government workers with influence over policy, nullifying their employment protections and making it possible to summarily fire whole departments en masse.

A man wielding a pointed self-defense weapon jumped on a stage near Rochester, New York, Thursday night and thrust it at Lee Zeldin, the Jewish Republican congressman running for governor of the state, who was in the middle of giving a campaign speech. Zeldin managed to control the man’s arm before the assailant was subdued by others including his running mate, former New York Police Department Deputy Inspector Alison Esposito. “The attacker will likely be instantly released under NY’s laws,” Zeldin tweeted after the incident referring to the state’s new bail laws that took effect in January 2020. And, indeed, the suspect in the attack, David G. Jakubonis, was released without bail hours after the incident. No motive has yet been identified in the incident.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Ghebreyesus has rejected the majority recommendation of the group’s emergency committee and declared monkeypox a global health emergency, the first such declaration by the organization since 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Of the 15 people on the panel, 9 told Ghebreyesus that issuing the formal emergency designation “might cause undue alarm among the general public when the disease is currently affecting a specific group of people,” according to The Wall Street Journal. It’s the first time a WHO top official has ignored the panel’s recommendation.

1.1 million: The number of Americans who die each year prematurely, according to data from an international mortality database and the CDC. Despite the United States collectively paying more for healthcare than any other country does, its citizens have shorter lives, with more disease, and fewer doctors to care for them. That number continues to rise; it’s ticked up steadily since the 1980s and has exploded since the start of the pandemic, from 626,000 in 2019 to 992,000 in 2020 to 1.1 million in 2021.

$420,000: The amount the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DNCC) has spent supporting a right-wing MAGA-aligned House Republican candidate over his more moderate, anti-Trump opponent in a key midterm race in Michigan. Although candidate John Gibbs is closely aligned with former President Trump and incumbent Peter Meijer previously joined ten other Republicans in a vote to impeach Trump following the January 6 Capitol riot, the DNCC has backed Gibbs because it sees him as an easier opponent to defeat for Democrats in the general election.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

This year, I noticed an uptick in the Gen Xers in my life—both online and off—proudly proclaiming their difference. “We were the last good generation,” they all seemed to say. I think that almost every trait people hate millennials for is either a Gen X invention or something Gen X significantly popularized.

Millennials might have perfected or updated the tech, but we didn’t pioneer it. It isn’t one or two flukes, either—the list is a mile long.

Off the top of my head: avocado toast and trend-seeking more generally; BuzzFeed, Gawker, and their respective styles of journalism; witchcraft as we know it today; the girl boss; the lax Silicon Valley wunderkind, replete with jeans, hoodie, and “startup campus”; the type of cloying fandom that empowers fully grown adults to pepper their everyday speech with Harry Potter-isms; the theater kid mentality; geek culture and the cultural baggage that comes with it; branding oneself; social media as a product and an ethos; living your life like you’re in a Real World house; and oversharers online, including the type characteristic of Xennial Kim Kardashian.

And do you know which kids were the first to receive participation trophies en masse? You’re never going to believe this. Gen X! Reading Douglas Coupland’s seminal Generation X feels like a case study on millennials, minus Instagram.

—Katherine Dee

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Am I a Jewish Writer Now?

I’m a writer. And I’ve converted to Judaism. But there may be more to it than that.

BY KRISTOPHER JANSMA

A few days before my 40th birthday, I converted to Judaism, submerging three times in a mikvah after completing a beit din and a year of study at a synagogue on the Upper West Side. For nearly two decades, I’d attended services there and more recently up in Westchester County, as a gentile. I’ve been married to a Jewish woman for 14 years, and we have two wonderful children together, also Jewish. During the past year our rabbi said, at several points, that he already considered me to be a “common law Jew,” but was glad I wanted to make it really official after all these years. He said it was not necessary, but I signed up for a yearlong Pathways course anyway. I had taken another one years earlier, before my wedding, but I wanted to spend a year studying the Torah and thinking about what it meant to me to finally become Jewish. I’m a writer, and I’m told I have a contemplative process. But when a few months later, the rabbi asked me for a short personal statement for the beit din, I eagerly turned out 22 pages, making it the longest he’d ever received. I could have written much more.

Following the mikvah ceremony, I was heartily welcomed to “the tribe” by my friends. That night I stood up in front of our congregation to sing the Shema from the bimah. The next day I mailed my paperwork to the American Jewish Archives and made a backup copy of the beautiful certificate declaring my Jewish identity. With it, I even would have the right to return to Israel and acquire citizenship there if ever chose. I am absolutely 100% Jewish.

And yet I have one lingering question: Am I a Jewish writer now?

I became a writer, by one version of events anyway, in the back pews of a Lutheran church in my hometown in suburban New Jersey. My family was not religious, aside from celebrating Christmas with presents and Easter with baskets of candy. I was never baptized, and our active church attendance was very brief: just a few weeks when I was 8 years old. I found it all so boring that I passed the sermon hours reading The Little House on the Prairie. When we abruptly stopped going, and instead began spending Sunday mornings at YMCA swimming lessons, I thought nothing of it. Only later would my mother explain to me that she’d marched us out in the middle of sermon the pastor was giving about the domestic role of women. That was a dealbreaker for my small-business-owning mother, who for most of my life has also been my father’s employer. I’d somehow missed all the drama, lost in the pages of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

As a young boy I continued to be an avid reader, and I already wanted to write my own books someday. In college, I went to study creative writing and began to form my own thoughts on spirituality in the secular humanist mold of my literary idol Kurt Vonnegut. Reading his novel Cat’s Cradle had reinforced my agnosticism in high school, much to the frustration of some evangelical friends bent on “saving” me, but even as I devoted myself to the religion of fiction, I began having some doubts.

My two closest writer friends, Ariel and Martin, both Jewish, would often draw from their religious and cultural traditions in their weekly workshop stories. They spun yarns about Jewish families arguing and struggling during a long Passover weekend. They wrote about dead grandparents returning as golems to crash a bar mitzvah party. I realized quickly that I didn’t have this same well to draw from.

I told myself that because I was freelancing in my spiritual beliefs, I had creative freedoms they didn’t, and that I could tap into all religions, myths, and writers—not just the Jewish ones like they did. But despite all that self-assertion, I never did. My characters were most often agnostics like myself. Often, they were interested in quantum physics or astronomy, as I also was, seeking rational and scientific answers to the biggest questions of existence.

Then I fell in love. I met Leah halfway through college and knew that things were really serious between us when she brought me home to meet her parents and attend Rosh Hashanah services with them. Eventually she asked me if I’d ever consider converting to Judaism. I said I didn’t see how I could convert from nothing to something. But when I said I was “nothing” then, what I meant was that I believed I was “everything.” Non-denominational, cross-cultural, seeking truth anywhere and everywhere. I said it felt arbitrary for me to pick one faith out of the many, just because I was in love with her. She asked if I thought anything might change my mind someday and I said I wouldn’t rule it out. I supposed I might someday have a spiritual crisis, or epiphany, perhaps following the death of a loved one. That’s always how it seemed to go in stories, I thought. Either way, it just didn’t seem right to me then and there.

I was, if you can’t tell, only 20 years old then. And I had no way then of knowing that within another five years my younger sister Jennifer would become diagnosed with a rare cancer, and that despite all our heartbreaking efforts, and her enduring months of painful treatments, that she would die just eight months before Leah and I planned to get married.

As this was happening, I was taking a Judaism course with Leah, not to
convert but to learn more about her beliefs and how we’d raise our children. Instead of feeling drawn more strongly to a spiritual life by my sister’s death, as I’d imagined, I was pushed away from it. I was angry that anyone would believe in God in a world where my sister had died for no reason whatsoever, at just 22 years old, with such a beautiful promising life ahead of her. When I spoke to a friend about it all, he advised me that in the Jewish faith it was common to take a year off from big decisions after a major loss. It struck me as odd, running resistant to the post-loss epiphany I’d imagined I ought to be experiencing. But I agreed, and it did in fact allow me time and space to find my way back again.

Leah and I got married; our wedding was officiated by a rabbi, and we circled one another underneath the chuppah and I smashed a glass inside of a napkin. We exchanged wedding rings inscribed with the words from the Song of Solomon: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved with the words from the Song of Solomon: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved and I smashed a glass inside of a napkin. We exchanged wedding rings inscribed with the words from the Song of Solomon: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved

I was then at whatever Higher Power decided to me—just didn’t know yet if it meant everything to me. If I wanted them to really be my traditions, over any others. We have two Jewish children together, and as we’ve raised them, I have slowly fallen in love with Judaism on my own terms. I loved its history and songs, its emphasis on questioning and not expecting answers. I appreciated that it was not a religion actively recruiting converts—everyone’s patience with me was a far stretch from the pressures I’d received from my born-again classmates in high school. Like Groucho Marx, I wasn’t sure I’d ever want to be part of a club that wanted me for a member. Still, attending every High Holiday service with my family, I would feel real joy. Each year on my sister’s yahrzeit, saying the Kaddish has brought real relief. Watching neo-Nazis march in Charlottesville, I felt real anger and fear for my family. Learning to cook food from Israeli and Yiddish traditions, I felt I was connecting with traditions carried out for thousands of years.

“As I presented the deepest parts of myself to total strangers, I still worried I’d be seen as an impostor.”

Only I still wasn’t really connected to them, myself. I was still a tourist in a foreign country, albeit one who had been extending his visa over and over and over again. I knew that the only thing preventing that connection, at this point, was my own reticence. But still I did not act.

Instead, I found myself awaiting an epiphany of some sort. Some single, clarifying moment where I’d know the right thing to do. Then, one day as I was teaching a story from Joyce’s Dubliners to my undergraduate students, it hit me—epiphanies were a key part of Catholicism, but perhaps not Judaism. A Joycean story builds to a climactic moment of revelation (another Christian-loaded word) where a character achieves a kind of clarity of themselves and an understanding of the nature of life. A sort of moment of divine intervention or connection occurs. But that, I considered, was not how it worked in Judaism. That post-Moses, there is not expected to be any direct communication with the Jewish God by his people. Jews have to work it out for themselves. To read the Torah, analyze its meaning, debate its application, and ultimately come to their own decisions.

My epiphany was that for my story, no epiphany was required. I only had to make my choice.

And so, I approached our rabbi about the conversion process last summer. I wondered if he would demand to know what had taken me so long, but of course, he was just happy I’d gotten there in my own convoluted but meaningful way.

One hang-up that I’d had over the past 20 years of my wandering, was that I had a hard time believing other Jews would really see me as one of “the tribe.” I’d paid careful attention to the kinds of stories my friends told about the things that made them feel Jewish. It was the Jewish summer camp they went to, or their first journey to Israel. It was a classful of Russian refugees whose parents had fled persecution in the 1990s. It was the first time they’d read Portnoy’s Complaint. It was memorizing a Torah portion for a bar mitzvah. It was getting shoved into a middle school locker as someone yelled slurs and mocked the shape of your nose. It was walking into a Starbucks covered in green and red decorations, the day after Halloween, and knowing your holiday items were consigned to a little shelf somewhere at the back. It was building a sukkah in the backyard every fall. It was being blamed for the actions of a government halfway around the world, for whom you had never voted. It was all these things, and so much more. Good, bad, ugly—their identities stemmed from experience, not just birthright.

As a convert, I feared I’d have neither of those things. That some certificate saying I dipped myself in some holy water wasn’t going to cut it.

But my rabbis told me that the Torah sees converts as equals to those who were born as Jews, or even somehow more special, because we chose it. Resh Lakish in the Midrash writes, “The convert is dearer than the Jews who stood before Mount Sinai. Why? Because had the Jews not seen the thunder, the mountains quaking and the sounds of the horn, they would not have accepted the Torah. But this one, who saw none of these things came, surrendered himself to the Holy One and accepted upon himself the kingdom of heaven. Could any be dearer than he?” (Tanhuma B, Lekh Lekha 6)
It took me a long time to see the truth in this, and I’m glad to say that by now I’ve witnessed the happiness and acceptance of lifelong Jewish friends dozens of times over. They know me and they know what this means to me, and what this journey has involved. I will always see my path as different from theirs, but I know now that it isn’t inherently inferior.

And yet—when I sat down to my laptop the next day and brought up my novel, I again wondered how this change had touched that other crucial part of my identity—not as father, husband, or friend, but as writer. How would it be part of my art? How would it be part of the “author” suit I sometimes donned when I spoke to readers? In this regard, as I presented the deepest parts of myself to total strangers, I still worried I’d be seen as an impostor.

Growing up, I was a big fan of *Seinfeld*, and would watch episodes in reruns on Channel 11 with my friend Josh on the phone. Josh was Jewish because his father was and because his mother had converted before they got married. But he said he planned to convert out of it as soon as he turned 18. He hated going to synagogue, hated having different holidays from everyone else, and hated being picked on by others for being Jewish. He resented feeling like an outsider, being marginalized, and yearned to shake off an identity he’d never asked for and personally found no value in.

So it was with ironic delight that Josh enjoyed the classic *Seinfeld* episode “The Yada Yada,” where Jerry suspects that his dentist Tim Whatley (played by Bryan Cranston) has recently converted to Judaism in order to tell Jewish jokes. It offends him, Jerry shouts memorably, “not as a Jew, but as a comedian!”

I’d thought about this episode many times as I faced my fears of nonacceptance after I converted, and it brings up a more specific question for me now. I’m not a comedian, of course, I’m a writer. If I were to now declare myself a Jewish writer, am I just the Tim Whatley of literature?

Buried in Jerry’s critique of his dentist’s Jewish jokes is, I think, a very serious point. To make a joke is to prod something sensitive, often to make people uncomfortable—this is what great fiction does, too. To be able to poke fun at an identity, a whole group of people, is a highly charged thing. When someone makes a joke at the expense of a group from outside of that group, it can be rude, bigoted, even hateful.

But the same joke told by someone within that group is acceptable, maybe even laudable. There’s incredible power in the ability to take ownership over, let alone to wield a term or a stereotype that’s been (and is still being) used to oppress you, is a powerful thing. I don’t see it as some limiting facet of supposed political correctness, but an expansive foundation of genuine basic decency and respect.

Hence Jerry’s frustration with his dentist. “Don’t you see what Whatley is after?” he yells. “Total joke-telling immunity. He’s already got the two big religions covered. If he ever gets Polish citizenship there’ll be no stopping him!”

Tim Whatley’s crime, in Jerry’s eyes, is doing an end run around the usual rules of comedy. He claims Whatley doesn’t offend him as a Jew, and perhaps he really means that. Even so, there are lines that are tricky to cross. What earns a Jewish person the “immunity” Jerry’s talking about, to make jokes about Jewish stereotypes? I’d argue it comes back to experience. If you are someone who has been marginalized by supposed jokes about your identity, then there’s power in reappropriating that for yourself. But if you’re someone who, a week ago, wasn’t Jewish and who hasn’t ever experienced any real discrimination as a result of that identity, then you aren’t re-appropriating anything. That, to me, is the heart of the Tim Whatley problem.

And so, I think, it applies to my calling myself a Jewish writer now. It would be disrespectful to the Jewish writers I’ve grown up sincerely admiring. I could do my best to mimic what they do, and write a narrator having a bat mitzvah or traveling to Israel, but it wouldn’t be very authentic. I haven’t done those things. If I, today, like my college writing buddies, suddenly began cranking our modern reinterpretations of Isaac Babel or I.B. Singer stories, or if I began dropping Yiddish-speaking

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**Islahat Ferman**

**Jewish civil service in the Ottoman Empire**

Over the centuries, Jews enjoyed various government-paid positions in the Ottoman Empire. Yes, among them there were advisors and tax farmers. But there was also a Jewish member of the feudal cavalry in the year 1431, and, in 1600, Jewish court physicians outnumbered their Muslim colleagues. By the turn of the 19th century, Jewish civil service had waned. A shift occurred with the Islahat Ferman of February 1856 in which the sultan declared all subjects eligible for public employment. Relying on government registries that begin in 1879, the historian Abdulhamit Kirmizi provides a detailed statistical analysis of hundreds of Jewish civil servants in the Ottoman state. Kirmizi writes: “An official of Jewish origin was not merely ‘a Jewish official’; […] Religious, ethnic, and imperial identities and loyalties overlapped with one another; they were not necessarily in conflict or mutually exclusive.”

—Alyssa Quint
grandmothers or kabbalistic golems into my work, I’d be about as bad as Tim Whatley, DDS.

Just thinking about it—to paraphrase Jerry Seinfeld—offends me, not as a Jew, but as a writer.

Yes, over the years, I’ve written Jewish characters. I’ve also written gay characters, female characters, Asian American characters. I think it’s vital to the ongoing life of fiction that all writers be able to considerately, thoughtfully, and complexly imagine life beyond the edges of their own experiences. But there are lots of shades within this vitality. Having one Jewish character in a novel with five protagonists, told in a close third person, is subtly different from, say, writing in the first person and directly centering the voice of a Jewish character in a novel.

I’m not saying that’s impossible for a gentile to do, nor a convert to do. I’m only saying that it is different, likely far more difficult to pull off believably, and that it runs a much higher risk of being done badly. Risk is good in fiction, I tell my students when this comes up now in my own workshops—but you have to stick the landing, or you’ll have earned all the criticism that comes. Can you stick the landing, then, I ask them? If you can’t, keep practicing until you can. So, where does that leave me? With one word: “yet.”

Am I a Jewish writer? No, but I’d like to be someday.

This year as I took the Pathways class, I was also working on a novel about my grandmother’s memories of her childhood in Holland during WWII. As I studied the Torah and discussed Jewish history, I noticed a subtle pulling of my attention toward fleshing out the story of my grandmother’s Jewish neighbors, who fled her apartment building at the start of the war. I more readily see their plight as tied to the hypothetical plight of my own kids, and now myself, if history were to repeat itself. When my grandmother told me about a relative who was imprisoned in the Vught concentration camp, I was compelled to use his scenes as a way of highlighting the murder of the many Jews who were there with him—along with “asocials,” homosexuals, resistance fighters, Roma, and so on. A year ago I don’t know that it would have stood out to me as a focus, but now it does.

What comes next? I don’t know, of course, and that’s the best part of any story. If I truly have been “a common law Jew” for a decade or two, that’s already some amount of experience to draw on. But right now I’ve only got a week of actual Judaism under my belt. But that will soon be two, and then a month, and then a year. Two days after I converted, I turned 40, and I thought about how, on my 80th birthday, God willing, I’ll be able to say that I’ve been Jewish for half my life.

By then, I’m betting, I’ll have something interesting to say about it.

This article was originally published on July 27, 2022.

**Belief**

**Kaddish, Revised**

How I mourned my dad a decade after blowing off my biggest obligation to him

**BY REBECCA SONKIN**

In late 2006, I flew to suburban Detroit to see my dad in hospice care in my childhood home. I was eight months pregnant. The TV screen crackled with a videotape of my latest sonogram. The fuzzed-out image of a fetus was as close as my dad would get to seeing his grandchild—a parting shot in a life punctured by irreconcilable loss.

A rabbi was visiting, too, making the rounds of congregants staring down the ends of their lives. My dad introduced him as Rabbi Nevins; Rabbi Nevins urged me to call him Danny. I gave him the side-eye. I figured him for a young clone of his predecessor, an artifact of the old school who had run our Conservative shul on the principle that children—and their parents, and most other congregants—should be seen, not heard.

That older rabbi had officiated at my bat mitzvah and my brother Paul’s bar mitzvah and both of our confirmations. And yet, when my brother died suddenly at age 16, that rabbi seemed not to see the extreme circumstance as occasion for warmth and a delicate touch.

Within days of my dad dying, Rabbi Nevins changed my vision of what a rabbi can be. Ten years later, he changed my vision of what mourning can be—and not just for me.

Today, the country faces a grief crisis. Mourning has gone awry for millions. But mourners have also met the challenges of the pandemic with innovation. Jews, for their part, have embraced online Kaddish, outdoor Kaddish, atheist Kaddish, and more. What worked for me was something else—something I never expected, at a time I never anticipated.

My dad died a few days after my visit. Rabbi Nevins came over to talk about the eulogy. I had flown back to Detroit from New York, where I live, with a couple hundred pages of interview transcripts covering stories that my dad
had been shaping and polishing forever: His pool-sharking in postwar Detroit and Venice Beach. The fictional fiancée he contrived to transfer his post-Korea assignment in the Air Force from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to San Francisco. The time the Egyptians captured his tour bus in the Sinai in ’73.

I handed Rabbi Nevins the transcripts. He blinked. Then something strange happened. He invited me to work with him on the eulogy. Stranger still, I discovered that I liked him. His officiating at the funeral strived to be sensitive and specific, while abiding by Halacha.

It was a revelation: a rabbi as rigorous as he was good-natured. Crafty, too. How better to co-opt the sharp-elbowed adult daughter than to recruit her?

Within hours of completing the week of shiva, I rushed back to New York—I couldn’t stay longer in Detroit or I would have been too pregnant to fly. I rushed to start my new job at Condé Nast, my mid-aughts dream. I rushed to move uptown, where an elevator building was better suited to strollers than our fourth-floor walk-up in the West Village.

Kaddish, I told myself, would wedge its way into the rush. It had to. My dad had said Kaddish for nearly three years of his life. As his eldest child, it was my turn to say it for him. I made other plans instead. Prenatal yoga instead of ma’ariv. Concerts, the theater, after hours at the museums instead of shacharit.

Nine years passed after my dad’s death. The youngest of my three children was about to start preschool. My time was my turn to say it for him. I made other plans instead. Prenatal yoga instead of shacharit. Posh lunches on my new expense account instead of mincha. Concerts, the theater, after hours at the museums instead of ma’ariv.

I told myself that my choices echoed the bodily imperatives imposed by pregnancy, even as I suspected reasons far less glorious. Kaddish was inconvenient. And hadn’t I earned a premium on pleasure for enduring another early, untimely death in my family? My dad died when I was eight months pregnant; my brother died a couple weeks before I went to college. The constant was my refusal to see that I needed a reckoning.

In 1976, when I was 2 and Paul was an infant, our dad lost his own dad. Our grandmother pressed our dad into Kaddish. The daily frequency stunned him. If it was irritating that shacharit burned into his morning routine of newspapers and pushups, then it was downright unnerving when it burned into the bottom line because he could no longer see patients before their own workdays at the auto plants.

He said Kaddish anyway. Eleven months for his father and again, 13 years later, for his mother.

Three years after that, Paul was killed. My dad zombied through another 11 months, never mind that mourning a child is set at sheloshim, or 30 days. For years I understood his decision to stretch out Kaddish as another one of his routines. Like checking the stock tables in The Wall Street Journal. Or washing down coffee cake with skim milk. Or handball on Thursday night and Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning.

It took me a long time to see his quiet revision of the rules as precedent for me.

Music nerds absolutely love art-school bands Black Midi, and frankly, you should too. Their new album, Hellfire, is a perfect chance to understand why. Black Midi is an absolute sonic rush, textured and layered. Listening to their music can feel like the equivalent of rolling over Niagara Falls in a barrel: The flow is overwhelming and you’re not really sure where you’re going to end up.

On and on it goes, each song delving into another world, signaling something radically different than what came before. The press for the album does a lot of heavy lifting by pulling the entire project together with the description “tells the tales of morally suspect characters.” But that still isn’t quite accurate; it doesn’t describe the tender love of “Still,” where Cameron Picton sings “I waited so long, That only a fool would try And stay If not for you If not for only you.”

Black Midi can’t be summed up easily, unless your summary is “a cacophonous mess.” But it’s a cacophonous mess that makes sense and is served up by people who know what they’re doing. It’s hard to pin exactly what that thing is, but a journey into the unknown with Black Midi is more enjoyable than many with clearly drawn maps.

—David Meir Grossman
Rabbi Nevins proposed a weekly havrutah, or partner study, as a revised act of memorial. He had in mind a rabbinical student, also from the Midwest. I had never heard of havrutah or siyyum, the concluding presentation of a partner study. It sounded like Kaddish with a couple of asterisks. One for the bespoke format. The other for the cozy accountability structure. Not just to a study partner but also to Rabbi Nevins who brought out in me an uncharacteristic desire to please.

Now that he had laid a path for me, I had to choose: Was I going to act and finally unburden myself? Or had self-pity become the point?

When we first met, my havrutah partner, Elli, was annotating a copy of the Mishna. Blond curls tumbled past her near-bare shoulders. She wore drapery athlesiure in sumptuous jewel tones.

I wondered: Is this what rabbinical students look like these days? Then again, was I the picture of the questing mourner? My skirts were too short, my lipstick too bright, my laugh too loud and frequent for the East Coast. It was a shiddach—two nerds in thin disguise who happened to hail from flyover country.

Over the next nine months, we met every Tuesday afternoon in the scruffy beit midrash of the rabbinical school. Our object of study was Semachot. Dating to 750 CE, it ranks among the earliest known texts to enumerate Jewish rules regarding the dying and the newly dead, burial and mourning. Semachot favors lists over stories. It’s a little snoozy. But if the text fell short of electrifying, well, does anyone swoon over the content of the Kaddish prayer? Doesn’t the minyan requirement of Kaddish point to community as the priority?

The Tuesday afternoon crowd of students and teachers and consulting rabbis in the beit midrash became my larger havrutah community. Unlike them, I was parachuting in to attend to unfinished business. I don’t keep kosher. Shabbat strikes me as a very nice idea that will never outrank all the other things that I want to do every Saturday. I lack the imagination to envision a God.

And yet, showing up every week was easy. Memorializing my dad Jewishly as he had done for his parents and as they had done for theirs—a custom unfurling across generations and the diaspora—that is a mighty force to behold. The weight of history can be a life raft, too.

On Tzom Gedalia—the Fast of Gedalia—Elli and I presented our findings at our siyyum. Rabbi Nevins presided. I recited the Kaddish D’itchad’ta, the burial Kaddish, a bit of proof that I read Hebrew. Or that Hebrew, at any rate.

Six years later, the havrutah continues to pay off. When I think of my dad, my thoughts are no longer darkened by what I have not done. And yet, nothing can change that he died a tortured man. At the end of his life, in waning moments of lucidity, I heard him say more than once that he could reconcile everything about how he had lived except Paul and how he had died. Cancer was not the only poison eating away at my dad.

Sheloshim was not enough. Ten months of surplus Kaddish was not enough. Maybe nothing would have been enough. Now that I have children, I see that: Nothing is enough for the death of a child.

For a bereaved parent, peace of mind is out of reach. In different ways, it’s true for a sibling, too. But now I know what it means to act. Now I know the power of forging a fresh path. Now, as I take on the unfinished business of my brother’s story, I know this, too: In the name of the dead, it is never too late. ■

This article was originally published on July 26, 2022.
Lamb Kubbeh in Beet Soup

BY IRIN CARMON

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE SOUP
5 beets, peeled and chopped
2 medium red onions, medium, roughly chopped
1/4 cup of olive oil
About 8 cups of stock of your choice (I used 1 cup of Fleischer’s 3-day lamb reduction, plus 7 cups of water, and added more water as needed)
4 cloves of garlic, sliced thin
1/2 teaspoon of cinnamon, ideally fresh ground
1/2 teaspoon of coriander
1 teaspoon black pepper
salt to taste
2 tablespoons honey
Juice from 2 lemons, plus more to taste

FOR THE DUMPLINGS AND FILLING
1/2 cup of bulgur (the finer, the better)
1 cup semolina
1 clove of garlic, minced
1 small onion, minced
1/2 pound of lamb (beef is traditional, but lamb feels at least as Mediterranean)
1/4 cup sliced cilantro
8 leaves of mint, chopped, plus more for garnish
1 teaspoon each of salt and pepper and coriander

PREPARATION

TO MAKE THE SOUP

Step 1
In a large saucepan, cook the onions and beets with olive oil over medium heat until the onions start to soften.

Step 2
Add the garlic and stir until the onion is translucent, roughly 10 minutes.

Step 3
Add the stock and bring to a boil, then simmer.

Step 4
Add salt and pepper, spices, and lemon juice, and reserve 2 cups of liquid for dumplings.

Step 5
Then, using an immersion blender or a blender, puree soup and return to a boil. Add water as needed.

TO MAKE THE DUMPLINGS AND FILLING

Step 1
Combine the semolina and the bulgur in a bowl and add the 2 cups of soup. Allow to soak for 15-20 minutes.

Step 2
Meanwhile, mix the meat and spices in another bowl.

Step 3
Fill a bowl with cold water. Roll the dough into balls, about 2 inches in diameter, flatten into a disk, and put in about a tablespoon of the meat mixture.

Step 4
Wrap it around in your hand to seal it, adding water and filling in as needed. If you can refrigerate the balls ahead of time they’re likely to stick together better; some recipes call for freezing but I found no appreciable difference.

Step 5
Drop balls carefully into boiling soup and cook for at least 15 minutes, until meat is cooked through.

Step 6
Serve warm with mint and additional lemon.