The Minyan: Orthodox Women

Talking about women’s religious and cultural roles, the dangers of social media, and the value of modesty

The Ailing Human Rights Industry

At this year’s Oslo Freedom Forum, even the most sanguine activists struggled to overcome a sense of drift and impotence

Rescuing Meena

How Meena Safi and other Afghan women were delivered from the Taliban

The Disarming Disharmonies of Shirley Jaffe

A retrospective of the painter’s work brings a new appreciation for her apparently random, meticulously planned style

A Wine for Mom

Do we ever outgrow our desire for a parent’s understanding and approval?

‘What Even Are These Things?’

Collard greens offered me a lesson in survival of the spirit

The Minyan is a series of moderated roundtable discussions about the state of the Jewish community in America from a variety of perspectives. By bringing together at least 10 people from a shared demographic or background—“everyday” people with personal opinions, not “experts” or titled professionals who earn their salaries by crafting statements on these issues—we hope to foster conversations that will illuminate how different kinds of people think about the larger Jewish community, and their own place in it.

Searching for a diverse group of Orthodox women to participate in this roundtable, it became clear how much resistance there is to labels: “Orthodox,” “modern Orthodox,” “Hasidic,” “Chassidish,” “Yeshivish,” “Chabad.” Suffice it to say that this Minyan includes those who lean toward more traditional observance, gender roles, and Talmud learning, and are either opposed to women as clergy or consider it unnecessary. There are also those who support complete parity for girls in Jewish education and endorse women as Orthodox clergy. Several fall in between. Similarly, when we talked about social media, there were some who felt it has been a crucial connector and educator for women in the Orthodox community, especially during COVID-19, and others who felt it was a pernicious scourge.

In talking to Orthodox women before this discussion, I found their opinions varied most when it came to expectations around modesty, purity, and prayer, so those are the topics I chose to start our conversation.

The Participants

Their ages, locations, and the adjectives they use to describe themselves

Tehilla: 36, Staten Island. Orthodox.
Devorah: 49, New Mexico. Chabad.
Shira: 24, New York City. Modern Orthodox.
Galya: 18, Bronx. Open Orthodox.
Elana: 39, Cleveland. “To the far right of modern Orthodox without being Yeshivish.”
Anna: 26, North Jersey. “Very left modern Orthodox, open Orthodox.”
Tablet: Let’s start with tzniut, or tznius—the laws in Orthodox Judaism around modesty, which require women to largely cover arms and legs, and then after marriage, wear a head covering or wig. Can you share what about those practices are important or meaningful to you personally?

Tehilla: I grew up with tznius. We were encouraged to cover ourselves up. And really, to me, it’s about keeping what’s most precious sacred and private. We never exposed our bodies to anybody except our husbands. It’s just like a diamond in an enclosed case, put away. What is the most sacred and precious is hidden from the public. That’s the idea of it. And the idea of the wig is that we get married and it’s a new level of tznius, of hiding what’s most precious and reserving it only for our husbands.

Devorah: It wasn’t until I came to New Mexico that I really appreciated tznius even more. I’m one of just a handful of Orthodox women in the entire state, and there’s a certain perception of Orthodox women, based on what people see on television or Netflix. But I find that when they see me and I’m covered and I’m modest, I’m treated differently. And it’s not because I’m a rebetzi [wife of a rabbi]. It’s because I’m dressed and conduct myself a certain way and I’m wearing a head covering. It’s just harder to touch me, to say or do something inappropriate. I’m sort of standing up and setting myself up for a certain treatment: “This is who I am.”

You’re saying because of your modest dress, you’re treated with a kind of respectful distance.

Devorah: That’s right. And as a mother of daughters, I appreciate that even more. It could be hard, when all their friends are running around and dressed in whatever. But my daughters have to conduct themselves a certain way. And it just sort of sets the stage; everything is different around that.

Elana: Since high school, I’ve covered my elbows and knees. But four years ago, when we were living in Pittsburgh and I was teaching fifth and sixth grade girls and high school girls, I had an early miscarriage. It was early enough that the students were maybe looking to see, “Oh, is she pregnant or isn’t she?” At that point, I remember feeling an extra appreciation for tznius and the fact that I don’t wear such tight clothing. Like, “How wonderful it is that my body is not always being stared at.” I can give you different reasons why I am grateful for tznius, but after that miscarriage, when women were like looking and I didn’t really want to share it, I was really appreciative that my form is not always showing.

Shoshi: I had a lot of infertility issues, and for a point in my life, I had to consult many doctors, but also many rabbis and yotzot [women certified by male rabbis to answer women’s personal questions] about my underwear [certain stains are indicators of a woman’s cycle], my sex life, what was going on between my legs, and suddenly all these things that you’ve been hiding your whole life were so exposed. So there can be, at some points in your life, a big struggle to maintain that sense of modesty, when you have to suddenly put it all out there for all to see.

Leah: Something that Shoshi said really caught my attention: the distinction that she’s making between modesty and shame. Modesty is a proactive choice. It’s not because somebody is imposing it on you or because there’s shame about our bodies. We’re choosing to keep our bodies private.

Anna: I didn’t always dress as modestly as I do now, and I used to constantly be adjusting my clothing and questioning how my body looked in it. I don’t really have that problem anymore. I’m not spending so much mental energy on that.

Maayan: I didn’t grow up Orthodox and I didn’t always dress with tzniut. Now I don’t have to think about tugging at my clothes—Is my skirt too low? Is this too high? There’s so much mental space that gets taken up by the thought of thinking, “Are other people staring at me? Is there something wrong with my clothing somehow?” Now I can peacefully go about my day and think about more important things.

Galya: I feel like I don’t need to look observant, per se. My neighborhood is very Jewish. If I’m with my dad and he’s wearing a kippah, or with my brother, it’s socially acceptable in my sphere for me to not wear skirts all the time. It’s just not my vibe.

Devorah: I find that tznius—modesty—is actually natural for all women. I don’t think it’s a difficult thing; it’s internal.

Tablet: What do you mean by “natural” and “internal”?

Devorah: A little girl is born, and as she grows up, she does not want to be showing herself. Immodesty grows on her and it becomes the norm. But I don’t think that’s actually the natural way we are.

Maayan: I’m the oldest in this group, and I lived through a time of rising awareness of women and the feminist movement. I grew up in a home where my mom wore a sheitl [wig], and my rebellion was to wear jeans. The feminist movement influenced what I felt was my comfort zone. Being behind a one-way mechitza just didn’t work for me after a while. As a married woman and a mother of three including a daughter, I evolved and wanted to promote a certain kind of a voice for my daughter.

Since being married delineates different expectations and strictures in Orthodox life, I think it would be helpful...
to understand how many of you are speaking from a place of being married—please raise your hands. I see eight out of the 12 of you: Shoshi, Elana, Marianne, Malka, Lauren, Tehilla, Maayan, and Devorah. For those eight who are married, how many cover your hair? I see seven: Tehilla, Devorah, Marianne, Elana, Maayan, Shoshi, Lauren.

Leah: I’m no longer married, but I cover my hair. Because all the reasons for covering my hair still apply. I was married for 26 years. I have five children. I have no reason under the sun for me to take my wig off.

Tablet: Can you explain—for readers who may not know—why the wig is integral to modesty?

Leah: It’s not the wig per se. It’s the covering of hair, which is considered ervah [naked, indecent]. The communities in which I live and work take the wig as a standard. Religion and life are one and the same. When I walk into an event or a family or social gathering, I have the status of a married woman. The wig is sort of an announcement of where I belong. Taking off that wig to me would be renouncing some of the travels and experiences of my life. I’m not looking to go backward, but to embrace who I am. The fact that I am no longer married did not change the other pieces of my life. I still host my kids for Pesach, I still build a sukkah, and I still wear a wig.

Maayan: Once we do something, we don’t go backward. If you light two candles, you don’t start lighting one. We take something on. We just keep going. This is something that Leah does for herself.

Leah: At this point in my life, my wig is actually nicer than my hair. (Laughs)

Tablet: When you look at the landscape of raising Orthodox girls, is there something that worries you about social media? Girls are much more insecure and constantly comparing themselves. None of the girls think they’re pretty enough anymore, none of them think they’re thin enough, they all nitpick at themselves.

Tablet: Tehilla, as you think about what your children might be exposed to, how you are managing what the world will throw at them?

Tehilla: We stay away from social media. In my opinion, it’s a tremendous waste of time. It’s spending your life comparing other people’s possessions and private lives. We have some filtered internet, but we try to focus on the life in front of us and not the screen. And you see the difference. You see their brains working, the quality time, without the distractions.

Shoshi: Before I even had kids, I gave up on social media because I am an easily jealous person. And I’m very gullible. I believe everyone is in Hawaii on a Tuesday. It’s just not good for me. So religion aside, it’s not something I’m interested in.

Marianne: I actually have a pretty large social media presence. I’m on both Facebook and Instagram, and for me, it has developed a community of people with whom I can share my life and my Torah. I teach seventh and eighth graders, so I completely understand the dangers of social media for them. But for adults, it can offer, for many, a very specific community. The connections that I’ve made through social media have been very meaningful.

Tablet: I have seen that you use your Facebook and Instagram threads to answer frequently asked questions that come up for women in Orthodox life.

Marianne: I have smicha [ordination] from Yeshivat Maharat [the first seminary for Orthodox women, founded in 2009]. I use the title “Rabbi.” I’ve also lived in this community for a very long time and I have friends and connections with all ranges of Orthodoxy; they knew, years ago, that I was going to rabbinical school. And in one instance, someone you would probably consider right-wing Orthodox came up to me and said, “Please let me know when you’re done with your study, because I do not want to go to a man to ask a shaila [a question]—specifically about niddah [purity laws]—ever again. That was a great responsibility. When women come and ask me those questions, I take that extraordinarily seriously.

Tablet: Raise your hands if you are personally satisfied with the role of women in Orthodox Judaism. I see seven: Tehilla, Devorah, Elana, Marianne, Maayan, Leah, and Shoshi. Anna and Lauren are in between. Shira and Galya are not raising their hands.

Shira: The very fact that the first question that you asked us today was about modesty and what we wear, and the word Torah didn’t come up until about 45 minutes into the conversation—that does say something about how Orthodox women are perceived by people outside of the community. It also says something about what our role is expected to be within that community. I don’t think that means that women are shoved into a particular box and told to be quiet and sit in the corner. But I

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If you light two candles, you don’t start lighting one. We take something on. We just keep going.”
do think that there are a lot of ways, as Marianne said in the beginning, that a Jew who observes the mitzvot doesn’t necessarily get as much access—at least for Orthodox women—as maybe I wish there would be. There are certain kinds of religious spaces—not just synagogues, but also basei midrash [houses of study]—where women don’t feel like they’re natural members of those communities. They sometimes feel like the “other” coming in from the outside, and I wish that weren’t the case. I want to serve God in all the ways that I can. Sometimes there is a sense that women aren’t full citizens of the Orthodox community. Given all the hands that went up before, I’m sure that plenty will disagree with me.

Anna: In my previous community in Baltimore, I was comfortable with where I was, but there’s lots of communities where I wouldn’t be comfortable with my role as a woman. Becoming more observant and becoming a part of an Orthodox community was something I had to think a lot about because, similar to Malka, a lot of my beliefs stem from second-wave radical feminism. I had to think really hard about: Did I want to be in a community and living a lifestyle where I was saying, “I’m very different from men and my role will therefore be different”?

Marianne: I am satisfied with the role of women, but I actively push the envelope in what I do. I went to Yeshivat Maharat and got smicha to be a female Orthodox clergy and be trained that way. Not without some pushback. I’m in a synagogue where women do as much as women can do halachically within an Orthodox space. So I’m comfortable, but I will push it to be comfortable for me and other women in that world.

Tablet: But there are still red lines even for you. When it comes to the minyan or the mechitzah—the divider between the men’s and women’s sections in synagogue—you are not praying with men.

Marianne: Yes. Those are red lines. And the interesting thing is that the red lines are more of a problem with my colleagues who are to the left of me. It’s hard for them to reconcile the idea of a feminist who would also choose to be in a space that is segregated, even though I’m making that choice.

Tablet: Can someone share, even with Marianne here (whom I’m sure we all respect), whether you are not comfortable with women as clergy and explain why?

Leah: I’m not comfortable with it. And my first reason is barely religious. It’s more cultural and there’s a religious component, too. I own that. I think it flies in the face of mesora [tradition], and it goes against every standard that Haredi Jewry and Orthodox Judaism stand for today. I think that open Orthodoxy and Yeshivat Maharat just tip over the line. I mean nothing personally, Marianne, but from a pragmatic perspective, I think that having women in leadership roles in the synagogue—in shul—I think it pushes men out of one of the last remaining leadership spaces that is available to them in 2022. And I think that the literature bears this out; studies on churches found that as women became more active, the men retreated from religious life. I just think that women’s lives are so rich, full and meaningful, why do we have to do this?

Tablet: Devorah, do you draw the line on women’s leadership when it comes to being in front of a congregation or leading prayer?

Devorah: All Orthodox women have become way more confident, more open, more sure in what we believe, what we want. Not embarrassed about our lifestyle. As far as rabbis, clergy, and leadership? At Chabad, my husband and I are kind of co-directors. So women have a leadership position without being the rabbi. I find that I can get more done not being the rabbi—either behind the scenes or in front, through mentoring and leadership opportunities, and classes. I mean it doesn’t stop. When it comes to chevra kadisha—burying a person—I’m doing it without being the rabbi. There is so much that we can do as women. When we’re co-directors, there’s nobody who thinks that one is the boss and one is not. We just have different roles and sometimes we take each other’s roles if we need to. I’m very comfortable not being a rabbi. I don’t need it. In fact, I’m kind of relieved. I’m glad I’m not counted in a minyan or else I’d have to go daven. I’m not looking to take on more. We find that women could be so very powerful without that title.

Elana: I personally wouldn’t become a rabbi, but I think it is such an incredible resource, and I’m so appreciative that people like Marianne are around and exist as a resource. If it’s giving women an opportunity to serve Hashem in the way they really feel they want to, that’s great. Let everyone serve Hashem in the way that’s meaningful to them. I think it’s an incredible resource and so valuable to the other part of the Orthodox community that desperately needs this.

Galya: I do respect the people who are choosing to be female clergy. I think it’s good for our community.

Tablet: Sometimes the public conversation around child-rearing and homemaking in Orthodox life can be described or regarded as less substantive or significant than women’s education. Can any of you speak to that?

Tehilla: To me, there’s nothing more important, no greater role in the world than raising the next generation. The woman is the foundation of the home; there’s no question about it. She can control the atmosphere. The way she relates to her husband and her children, it’s a ripple effect. And every little word, every little action, if you focus, you see. You see the effects of it, and you see the power in it. It’s just huge.

Leah: I agree with what Tehilla said, and she said it beautifully. But now I’m past that stage. My baby is 21. I have five children and 14 grandchildren. I can tell you that being on the other side of it, I see a difference in my mindfulness and commitment. When a woman is raising children, besides the lessons that she’s imparting, she’s also constantly holding herself up to a higher standard. Somebody is watching. Somebody is learning. Now, when I go home and I’m preparing for Shabbos, and it’s just me, I have to think: Am I expending as much effort? Am I keeping to where I want to be? It’s a little easier to let the little things slide. So I agree with what Tehilla said; when my kids were young, those were the most intense, incredible years. But they had a secondhand effect on maintaining the standard of commitment. Now I
Leah: the same hopes for your daughter? Specifically learning the Gemara [Talmud]?

Tablet: That's where I wanted to go. So you're asking, do we feel that the women, the girls should be taught the same level of Gemara as the boys?

Tablet: Yes. Raise your hands if you think it should be equal. [Four do.] Marianne, Galya, Shira, Lauren. Elana, do you want to explain your in-between answer?

Elana: I think it depends what you're passionate about. For a student like me, I love Chumash [Torah]. That's what gets me going and inspired. So if I had a daughter like Marianne and the halachic [Jewish law] side really spoke to her, then I would want her to be able to express her Avodat Hashem—serving Hashem—in whatever way is meaningful to her.

Marianne: I grew up this way. I went to a yeshiva high school where boys and girls were held to the same standard for Gemara and everything else. It wasn't even a question. And for my children, they were fortunate enough to have a yeshiva high school here that offers Gemara to the girls. There's kind of a movement to have more parity.

Shoshi: In our community, we posted an event for a men's learning night through our Kollel [community] that said any man is welcome to come and learn. And someone got an email saying, “What about the women? Why aren't the women coming?” And I was saying to my husband, who is such a traditionalist, “Why would any woman want to? This is a man thing. The men are obligated to sit and learn. I'm so thrilled that I don't have to go to this thing.” But he made me think about it on its head, which is that everything I do in my Jewish life, I could explain to you the reason behind it. If you ask why I choose to cover my hair this way, I could give you a halachic basis for that. To be able to do that, you have to be learned. You have to understand. You can't just fly by the seat of your pants and go by what your mom did. You have to know the stuff. So to that end, I think women do have to be educated, and also to be able to answer questions for her daughter, her children, which is different than the obligation for men who should be studying Torah.

Anna: Right now I'm working and living at a yeshiva camp for high school girls. And they spend most of the day learning Gemara. I look up to them. They're teenagers, but their desire to learn is so aspirational for me. There also is something intellectually that happens when you're learning Gemara that I personally haven't gotten from learning Chumash or anything like that. Just talking about this makes me think of my friend, who is a genius and who grew up very frum [observant], and she no longer is. She's very “off the derech” [off the path, leaving the life of Halacha]. She told me that if she had been born a boy, she probably would still be frum, because she would have had the intellectual outlet of learning Gemara. That really broke my heart—to hear that not having that outlet drove her away from her observance.

Deborah: My daughters go to school out of town in Chicago, and they do have a Gemara class together with Halacha, and Tanya—Hasidic philosophy. It's a lot. Their day is long. They don't finish till after 5. They come home for their Pesach vacation, and they're not helping me prepare for the holiday; they're doing their Chumash report. Sometimes I wish my son would have to work as hard as my daughters. I don't think everybody should be learning the same thing anyway. So yes, the level of learning that the boys have is a little bit different, but the girls are learning a lot. They're strong, and they go on to do whatever they want.

Tablet: Malka, you have seen the arc of women's education and leadership over your lifetime—more than most of us. Can you give us a sense of what you see in terms of the opportunities for women's education and your comfort level with girls getting the same Gemara education that boys get?

Malka: Having been behind the mechitza all that time that I was growing up, and seeing the men have opportunities that the women did not ... I went to a Chabad school—first grade through high school, and girls did not have the same opportunities. We had lessons about how to dress modestly. That bothered me a great deal. My daughter had a women's tefillah [prayer] bat mitzvah, and not only did it empower her on some level, but it empowered me. Standing in front of the Torah and looking at it personally, I said to myself, “Wow. How is it that I've never had this experience before?” So I've tried to become more involved in shul roles. I was on the board of my shul and that also gave me a sense of—how shall I say?—that I've never had this before, and now I have it.

Shira: One of the reasons I believe that rigorous Gemara education for girls and women is tremendously important is specifically because it's really hard. It's the kind of thing that you have to spend a lot of hours studying a lot if you want to be able to have any kind of access to it. So much of this is about having unfettered access to our own tradition, being able to open up a book, look at the text and understand it, not needing to have that filtered through other people who are telling you what things mean. Even though a woman in a more traditional community might
have a more rigorous background in the Chumash and its commentaries than a man would, it is still the case that a man who is educated in a traditional Orthodox background would ultimately be able to open up a Chumash with Rashi [the Medieval commentator] and understand it, whereas I don’t think that is true of most women knowing the Gemara in the Orthodox community.

There is a line in the Mishna, if I’m not mistaken, that says, “Anyone who teaches their daughter Torah, it is as though he has taught her frivolity.” But today, even in very traditional circles, this thing [women learning Gemara] that was once met with a lot of resistance has opened up in a significant way.

**Tablet:** Since women in Orthodox Judaism are not required to go to shul the way men are, how many of you find more spiritual power in your prayer at home versus in shul?

**Elana:** I love davening at home—as long as it’s quiet and I can focus on it. I’ve been davening every day since fourth grade. Raising young children, I miss saying the *tefillot*—the prayers—that you can only say in shul. But I wouldn’t want to wake up every morning and go to a minyan.

**Tehilla:** Prayer is internal, so it’s really between a person and God and really nothing else is needed. But I understand that some do need that atmosphere in the synagogue in order to feel that connection. I do believe that as you mature and develop what prayer really is, nothing else is needed. It’s your own soul, and that’s it.

**Devorah:** When my daughters are home for Yom Kippur, pregnant or with a baby, and they say something like, “Oh, I didn’t really get to daven!” I tell them, “You have a baby! That is way more powerful to me than any davening you could do. That is your davening. You’re pregnant with the child, you’re bringing one into this world, you’re raising a child. To me, that’s the most powerful prayer. And when you can, you’ll go to shul and you’ll pray your heart out.”

**Shoshi:** There’s different things for different reasons, for different days, for different seasons—when a shul is more helpful or home is more helpful. And I’m grateful that I’m a woman and get to choose.

**Tablet:** We have two people in this conversation who converted, who chose Judaism. Anna, can you talk about choosing an Orthodox conversion after having gone through a Reform conversion?

**Anna:** I had wanted to convert to Judaism for a long time and I was leaning toward a more liberal conversion. But around the time I was preparing for the *beit din* [panel of three rabbinic judges] and mikvah [ritual bath], I realized that I did want to be more traditionally observant. I did my conversion with a rabbi through the Chicago Rabbinical Council. And to make that jump, I had to live my life under a microscope for two years and then appear in front of three old men and have that ordeal. But it was very much worth it.

**Tablet:** Maayan?

**Maayan:** When I was 13, I felt that something was spiritually off. I did a lot of journeying around spirituality and then found out that a great-grandmother of mine was rumored to be Jewish. And I thought, “Aha, maybe I haven’t been exploring the right places here. I need to look into Judaism more.” I started off in a Conservative place, but then eventually moved to Brooklyn and found an Orthodox rabbi and had an Orthodox conversion. And now I am what everyone else would call ultra-Orthodox.

**Tablet:** You have spoken publicly about being a Jew of Color and described to me movingly in our pre-interview that you feel entirely part of your Orthodox community. But do you still get too many questions?

**Maayan:** Before being married, walking into a synagogue or a Jewish communal space with cornrows or braids, I’d get a lot of questions: “Why are you here? What’s going on?” And a lot of mixed reactions. Some extreme in the negative and some extreme in the positive. But then, getting to know different people, I’ve built a really beautiful community here. And also, becoming a married woman, it was an automatic signal to everyone that, OK, she’s wearing the *sheitl.* She’s one of us. She’s following our customs. Also, I’d been there for a while. Going to new shuls was harder. Like when my husband and I first got married and he’d visit different synagogues, he would ask, “Do you want to go to this one?” and I’d say, “I’m not quite sure because I don’t know what kind of questioning I’m going to get when I get to the women’s section.” It’s always really uncomfortable for me.

My husband is Israeli, and he’s more traditionally Jewish-looking. So he would scout out the women’s section for me, talk to the *rebbetzin,* and find out what’s going on. And he’d tell me, “There’s a good women’s section there. I talked to the *rebbetzin,* she’s waiting to welcome you to shul.” It’s just been beautiful ever since. And he’s been so supportive of trying to help me to feel included.

**Tablet:** The final question for all of you, however you want to answer this: What is one thing you would like people to know about Orthodox women?

**Devorah:** We are doing this by choice. Nobody’s forcing us to do any of this, because I get that a lot.

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**THE MINYAN**

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Lauren: I would say not to judge Orthodox women on the surface. I think there’s so much discussion about what women wear. And there are assumptions about what everything else means in their life based on what religious symbols they’re wearing. That’s a big mistake.

Elana: Within the scope of Orthodoxy, everything is available to you.

I don’t think I fully appreciated being a woman until I became an Orthodox woman.

Tehilla: The goal is to just truly get in touch with your femininity. God gave us our minds, our bodies. He created us in a certain way, in a different way than men. We are who we are. The culture, the society around us makes it very difficult to really do that. But once you get there, the issues, problems and self-defense just falls away.

Leah: My commitment to Hakadosh Baruch Hu [the Holy One, blessed be He] has shaped my choices. But even the restrictions are liberating. My life as an Orthodox woman is rich, exciting, rewarding and meaningful. In some ways we are like everyone else. In some ways we’re not. But we’re facing life head-on and making choices.

Marianne: Our tradition empowers us to have a truly authentic and meaningful relationship with God and to live that life. It’s open to us in more ways than people would understand. It’s our choice, as Devorah said. We are adult, thinking, self-actualized people, and we make these choices because it provides us the most authentic way for us to serve God.

Galya: Orthodoxy isn’t our only character trait. Even though it is an important part of our identity, it doesn’t have to define you.

Shoshi: There are a lot of broad strokes being painted on Jews to the right, whereas there is a lot of space, love, and acceptance given to Jews to the left. I just want people to take the same energy to understand those to the right of them as they would those to the left.

Maayan: I was in an interview for my daughter to get into a school, and they asked me, “Would you be comfortable with her at her bat mitzvah putting on tefillin?” I said, “No. I don’t think those things are necessary for her. She doesn’t need to be adorned because she’s glorious and beautiful as she is. She shines as she is.” We all shine as we are. I don’t think I fully appreciated being a woman until I became an Orthodox woman.

Anna: I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to very actively choose to serve Hashem in the way that’s most meaningful for me. I had absolutely no pressure from any direction to be doing this. My only wish or hope would be that every woman, regardless of the community or family that she comes from, would feel the same amount of freedom to serve Hashem in a way that’s meaningful to her.

Shira: We’re a group of people who probably disagree about a lot of important things. We have chosen this life, although it exists on a huge spectrum, for a whole number of different reasons. Respect all of those positions as real positions of real people—with agency—making choices.

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**NEWS**

The Sanctification of George Soros

How the left stopped worrying about Soros the billionaire and learned to love Soros ‘the Jew’

BY JAMES KIRCHICK

Two weeks ago, George Soros took to the op-ed pages of the largest paid circulation newspaper in the United States to explain why he has spent tens of millions of dollars backing progressive district attorney candidates across the country. “Americans desperately need a more thoughtful discussion about our response to crime,” the billionaire philanthropist began in a piece for *The Wall Street Journal* titled, “Why I Support Reform Prosecutors.” Decrying the “demagoguery and divisive partisan attacks that dominate the debate and obscure the issues,” Soros elucidated his reasons for championing prosecutors who support, among other things, abolishing cash bail, reducing prison time for violent offenders, and declining to prosecute whole categories of crime altogether.

The scope of Soros’ efforts has been extensive. Through a combination of direct contributions to candidates, subventions to political action committees, and funding of other third party groups via his Open Society Foundations, Soros has spent upwards of $40 million over the past decade helping to elect some 75 prosecutors in metropolitan areas ranging from Los Angeles to Philadelphia, Manhattan to St. Louis. His pursuit of this agenda has been met with no small amount of controversy, and in some cases active resistance. In San Francisco, the Soros-backed District Attorney Chesa Boudin lost a recall vote earlier this year following a disastrous tenure marked by sharp increases in both violent and petty crime rates. George
Gascon, a Soros-backed prosecutor in Los Angeles, will also face a recall. It was no doubt in response to the backlash his public efforts have caused that Soros decided, not unreasonably, to defend his political interventions. “I have done it transparently,” he wrote in the Journal of his massive outlays, “and I have no intention of stopping.”

All well and good. America is a free country, and Soros has every right to spend his vast fortune however he wants within the boundaries of the law, as well as to justify that spending in the public square. The same applies to those of us inhabiting lower tax brackets, who have no less a right to criticize Soros for how he’s trying to influence American public life—which, to repeat, he is very much, and by his own admission, trying to do. That extremely rich people with grand ideological designs should not be immune to criticism—indeed, that they should be subject to even more of it than the rest of us—is a pretty widely accepted view in America, especially on the political left, where the maxim “behind every great fortune lies a great crime” has long been a guiding principle. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that this lack of deference to the wealthy and the titled is one of our major distinguishing national characteristics.

Or used to be. A week after Soros published his piece in the Journal under his own name, proudly and defiantly justifying his expenditure of vast sums aimed at sparking a revolution in the administration of municipal criminal justice, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio introduced an amendment to the $750 billion climate and tax bill aimed at stymying this agenda by providing funds for local law enforcement to keep violent criminals behind bars. The measure had no chance of passing, and when the Democrat-led Senate predictably rejected it, Rubio took to Twitter. “The democrats just blocked my effort to try & force Soros backed prosecutors to put dangerous criminals in jail,” he tweeted in complaint.

What followed was the sort of Pavlovian response one has come to expect from progressive politicians, activists, journalists, and other social media impact influencers whenever the name of their benefactor is invoked.

Soros, in case you couldn’t tell, happens to be Jewish, a fact that has absolutely nothing to do with his ideas about criminal justice reform, or with Rubio’s opposition to them. Yet it was this utterly irrelevant detail of Soros’ birth that the progressive hive mind seized upon, spurring its minions to attack an unsubstantiated presumption about Rubio’s motives to the exclusion of his substantive arguments. The rebuke from American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten was particularly rich in light of her response to Rubio’s motives to the exclusion of his substantive arguments. The rebuke from American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten was particularly rich in light of her response to parents upset about their children being denied in-person schooling during the pandemic. “American Jews,” she said in April 2021, “are now part of the ownership class.”

Put aside the merits of the criminal justice policies Soros is trying to advance with his humongous largesse. Also put aside the fact that, while he was alive, the right-wing Jewish casino magnate Sheldon Adelson was routinely denigrated by progressives in terms that, by their own lights, are no less “antisemitic” than what they accuse Rubio of fomenting. The question before us today is whether, in the course of criticizing activities that the country’s biggest progressive donor has undertaken “transarently” (his word), it is possible to even utter his name without being accused of bigotry.

The argument that the mere mention of the name “Soros” is tantamount to antisemitism, which is effectively the position of the progressive political, media, and activist elite, is made entirely in bad faith. Stating the plain and observable fact that some prosecutors are “Soros-backed” is no more of an attack on Jews than the broadcaster Soledad O’Brien’s warning to “full-time Florida residents,” an antisemitic dog whistle about God’s waiting room. If the mind of a Soros supporter, upon hearing his name, races immediately to an image of a “Jew,” and one who serves as a stand-in for “the Jews,” it’s probably not the motives of the critic that need questioning. The impulse to connect “Soros” with Judaism and Jewishness is not unlike the bigotry that associates the term “monkeypox” with Black people. It’s a form of essentialism that expects us to agree with the antisemites that “being Jewish” is somehow relevant to what Americans like Soros (or right-wing Jewish billionaires, for that matter) do with their time and money.

Those engaging in this rhetorical tactic are certainly not pursuing the “thoughtful discussion” that Soros says we “desperately need,” but rather the “demagoguery and divisive partisan attacks” he denounces. Worse, they’re minimizing the threat posed by actual antisemitism by cheapening the accusation.

It wasn’t so long ago that one could scrutinize Soros’ widely disseminated beliefs and well-documented activities without fear of being called a Nazi. “Is the speculator and philanthropist a one-man foreign-policy machine or an unregulated billionaire with a messiah complex?” The New Yorker asked in a long, critical profile of Soros published in 1995. No one thought this allusion to history’s most famous Jew was antisemitic. In a sketch aired during the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis, Saturday Night Live depicted Soros as a sinister currency speculator, single-handedly deciding the fate of the U.S. dollar and manipulating American politicians. “Multi-billionaire Hedge
The Ailing Human Rights Industry

By Armin Rosen

The message emanates from the untroubled green hills, the unremarkable fjord, the pristine and car-free downtown, the silent trams, the colorless streets where there is no trash, no crime, no visible suffering of any kind: All is well here, for you are in a boring place. Dullness is Oslo’s great asset—only somewhere with total confidence in its solutions to all of modern society’s problems could fail to see the obvious absurdity of the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, which takes place at City Hall every year. Maybe the Oslo Freedom Forum, the Human Rights Foundation’s (HRF) annual convention of political dissidents, could only happen in a place characterized by a sense of post-historical languor.

In two prior trips to the forum I have met an activist from the famously rebellious Syrian city of Kafr Nabl who was murdered by an al-Qaeda affiliate a little over a year later, overheard the embittered mutterings of the exiled former president of the Maldives while we killed time in a hotel lobby, and looked into the eyes of a secularist Bangladeshi blogger who was then near the top of a jihadi death list, glimpsing a mad imbalance of resignation and mortal fear. These and a hundred other interactions are in any single piece of writing all happened without my having to leave the Norwegian capital, where the convenience stores all close before 12, as if to punish you for even having an appetite.

The forum, which I attended this year for the first time since 2017, is based on a simple premise that no one would have disputed five years ago—namely that knowledge, publicity, technical know-how, and networking could free the oppressed from their shackles. The main programming is a series of TED-style 10-to-15-minute presentations from people who have fought autocratic regimes or nonstate groups, alongside similar talks from journalists, scholars, or technologists aiding the activists in their fight against tyranny. In between these sessions are hours’ worth of subtly curated workshops, dinners, and other quasi-structured schmoozing opportunities. These are all of astoundingly high quality because of the range of backgrounds and outlooks on hand. The forum is an experiment in discovering what anti-drug war activists, cypher-punks, Islamists, North Korean defectors, National Review staffers, Syrian torture survivors, and the CEO of Tumblr can learn from one another. In Oslo,
relationships would be built and awareness would be raised, seeding some kind of future positive change for the billions who toil under dictatorship.

HRF was founded in 2006 by Thor Halvorssen, the libertarian-minded scion of a prominent family in his native Venezuela who had previously headed the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (since renamed the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression), the leading group advocating for free speech on U.S. college campuses. HRF has a very different approach than Human Rights Watch (HRW) or Amnesty International. The latter groups seek to leverage their activist and donor networks, along with the waning illusion of moral authority, in order to accrue power within governments and multilateral organizations like the United Nations or the International Criminal Court, globe-spanning entities that the ideologists of the Western human rights industry believe to be legitimate, effective, and extremely important. In contrast, HRF avoids the incumbent human rights community’s lust for high politics, instead foregrounding the activists themselves, getting the advocates in front of people from a range of professional and ideological backgrounds who are capable of promoting their stories and advancing their work. Just as crucially, HRF exclusively focuses its attention on the denial of civil and political rights. The legacy human rights community gets much of its profile and fundraising from attacks on democracies like the United States, whose openness ensures that there is never any shortage of good- and bad-faith internal criticism. HRF cares only about dictators, predatory governments, and authoritarian militant groups, none of which handle dissent all that well.

Has either approach—the elite self-seriousness and sanctimony of Big Human Rights, contrasted with the freewheeling and heterodox HRF—really accomplished much? The world of 2022 is a nightmare compared to that of five years ago, the last time I was in Oslo for the forum. The list of things that have gotten worse is long and sobering. Any remaining hope that the Twitter and Facebook-driven revolutions of the Arab Spring would usher in an era of freedom and democracy in the Middle East has evaporated. Bashar Assad and his Iranian allies slaughtered their way to control over nearly all of Syria, Yemen became the site of an ever more violent and intractable proxy war, and even Tunisia devolved into a soft autocracy. The Taliban are back in power in Afghanistan; Nicholas Maduro held on in Venezuela, sending over 5 million of his subjects fleeing for their lives. Russia invaded Ukraine and became a full-on police state. Social media and the internet became an easy conduit for nearly any government in the world, democratic as well as autocratic, to track and manipulate just about anyone under their rule. China sent its Uyghur minority to concentration camps and dismantled democratic self-rule in Hong Kong, in defiance of international legal obligations, which of course counted for nothing in the end. The Chinese Communist Party might have created and accidentally leaked a pathogen that’s killed some 20 million people, a disease that proved to be a once-in-a-century boon for unfreedom the world over, in Sydney as well as Shanghai. The autocrats have grown more confident and more dangerous as democracies’ sense of weakness and drift settles into an indefinite and comfortable malaise.

“Powerful bad people are defeating powerless good people, just as they have for millennia.”

“The world has changed so much...
since we were last here three years ago,” opened HRF President Celine Assaf Boustani, alluding to the COVID cancellations of the past two forums. The pandemic, war, and democratic decline all plagued humankind. “Each of these,” she alleged to the roughly 1,000 people on hand, “is the result of authoritarianism.”

Halvorssen then spoke briefly. He wore red sneakers and an olive jacket without a tie. Halvorssen’s youthful round face competes with the unblinking focus suggested in his sharp hairline. The 46-year-old has the intense self-possession of someone waging a lonely, longshot war against nothing less than evil itself. When I spoke with him later that day, he rattled off his family’s history with the regime in Venezuela, the country of his birth: His father had been a political prisoner, his family’s property was expropriated, his mother was shot by regime agents; his cousin Leopoldo Lopez, a leading opposition politician, spent seven years either in prison or under house arrest or held up in the Spanish Embassy in Caracas. Halvorssen is the producer of The Dissident, a 2020 documentary about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

“More than half of humanity lives under the boot of authoritarianism,” Halvorssen announced onstage. “We have to keep repeating that number.” Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine and various regimes’ desperate attempts to influence election outcomes and change minds proved that the mere existence of unfreedom was a danger to democratic societies. “If we don’t end dictatorships,” cautioned Halvorssen, “dictatorships will end us.”

HRF, and Halvorssen in particular, want their production to look good, wanting marking another difference with more traditional human rights groups. The aesthetics in Oslo are not an afterthought; HRF aims for particular moments, images, and people to reach virality. The first striking image of the conference was of Evgenia Kara-Murza, wife of the imprisoned Russian democracy activist and former forum speaker Vladimir Kara-Murza, sitting on a spotlight high stool in a dour black jacket, facing the crowd in profile, reading a letter her husband had written to her from Moscow’s Fifth Pre-Trial Detention Facility. “The price of freedom is high,” Kara-Murza wrote, quoting his mentor, Boris Nemtsov, an anti-Putin figure murdered just outside the Kremlin walls in 2015. A fate more permanent than prison might be coming, Kara-Murza seemed to warn, lightly hinting at his own survival of two previous attempts to poison him. But, the jailed man continued, “I have no doubts and no regrets.”

Kara-Murza, we learned, had once said that the worst thing for a political prisoner is to be forgotten. At its best the forum was a three-day revolt against forgetting, even if it often had the unintended effect of reinforcing just how impotent memory can be. During his talk, Omar Alshogre, director of detainee affairs for the Syrian Emergency Task Force, dramatically acted out his cousin’s death in his arms in an Assadist dungeon in Syria. In the midst of trying and failing to imagine what Alshogre’s ordeal must have actually been like, it dawned on me that most Syrians like him—genuine liberals with English fluency and a bravery that democratic citizens can scarcely comprehend, a courage that to us looks almost like suicide—had been killed or exiled over the past 11 years of war.

The exhortations continued throughout the week. “I ask you to keep Belarus on the agenda,” pleaded one of the exiled leaders of that country’s pro-democracy movement, whose husband languished in prison for the crime of heading an opposition political party. “Help us internally in Eritrea so that we don’t have to choose between dictatorship and human trafficking,” urged Filmon Debru, who endured unspeakable torture, and the mutilation of his hands, when Bedouins kidnapped him in the Sinai during his escape from the hyperstrict Eritrean dictatorship. “My father is not doing well,” warned Carine Kanimba, adopted daughter of Paul Rusesabagina, the Hotel Rwanda hero now serving a 25-year prison sentence after being kidnapped to the country of his birth.

“Kazakhstan’s disappeared from the headlines already,” fretted one questioner during a panel discussion. Was it ever in the headlines? I thought. For someone who lives in Kazakhstan there might be few things more important than the state of political rights in that vast yet remote seeming Central Asian country—remote to me, that is. Alas, the front pages, and the attention of the average democratic citizen, can only hold so much faraway suffering at once. One’s reserves of attention and emotion are preciously limited. Time grows shorter with every passing second.

In the shadow of these hard and ever hardening realities, the forum could feel like a series of attempts to either salvage or bury leftover and potentially discredited visions of human progress. The U.N.-led international system, said Ukrainian activist Oleksandra Tamchiuk, was “in ruins like Mariupol,” a cutting reference to the Black Sea city that the Russian invaders had recently destroyed. On the more optimistic end of the spectrum, Tawakkol Karman, the “mother of the revolution” in Yemen and a winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, insisted that the chaos in her nearly destroyed country was not the fault of the protest movement that unseated the country’s long-ruling dictator. There had been, Tawakkol insisted, “a successful national dialogue that brought all of Yemenis together... We wrote a great constitution.” Awesome as that document undoubtedly was, it proved no match for “the forces of the counterrevolution,” namely the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, which had all sabotaged Yemen’s future. She took no responsibility for the post-Arab Spring chaos, and said nothing about what her movement could have done differently or what democratic activists could learn from her revolution’s failure. Karman’s speech, and Yemen’s plunge into chaos since the 2011 uprising, suggested a paradox that was uncomfortable to reflect upon at any gathering of political dissidents: A botched democratic revolution can ultimately turn out worse for human freedom than the regime it replaced.

Karman was, as she noted, a member of the Facebook and Instagram oversight boards, a merging of Big Tech and human rights activism that also reflected the naivety of an earlier time. The tech giants had a conspicuous presence in Oslo: Twitter, Meta, and Jigsaw,
which describes itself as “a unit within Google that explores threats to open societies,” each had displays and workshop rooms on the Konserthus’ ground floor. That these companies could themselves be threats to freedom, and that they are in an open and very often indecisive self-reckoning with the implications of their own vast power, are facts that are now too obvious to hide. “We can predict what the next conspiracy theory is going to be,” said Beth Goldberg, a research program manager at Jigsaw, during a panel discussion. “How do we boost people’s immunity?”

Google controls more information about more people than nearly any non-state entity in history (I am typing this very article on a Chromebook, in Google Docs). The line between well-intentioned defense of the information space and a quasi-Orwellian campaign to manipulate hundreds of millions of minds in the service of a preferred corporate or political vision might be thinner than most people at Google or its peers seem to realize, even at this late stage. Goldberg spoke of “pre-bunking at the level of meta-narrative or a rhetorical technique” in response to future conspiracy theories, a form of subtle content manipulation that, she assures us, is “not even political. It’s way more cerebral.”

To prevail against disinformation, she said, it was necessary to “tap into people’s deep-seated identities and beliefs.”

Scott Carpenter, Jigsaw’s director of policy, assured me that there’s nothing to worry about here, and insomuch as there is something to worry about, Google worries about it too. “The first principle has to be, ‘do no harm,’” he said of the ideal anti-disinformation content regime. “There’s a lot of harm out there already, so you’re balancing harms.” A counterproductive way to balance harms, he said, would be for Google to act as chief censor and force users to adapt to its heavy hand. “We want to get beyond the idea that the only response you have is to take things down,” he said. When lies proliferate on Google’s platforms, there can perhaps be “speed bumps so there’s a little bit of friction. People can push through them if they want.”

A speed bump isn’t a wall or a force field. That’s pretty reassuring. But could any web giant advance freedom in any meaningful sense if it held so much unaccountable power? I noted to Carpenter that his employer probably had the ability to read my email, and to read over my article drafts at the moment I was writing them—although I taught myself and admitted this is a power I continue to willingly give to Google. His reply pointed toward a fundamental dilemma of existence in the modern world, where people understand very little of the systems and technologies that allow them to live connected and relatively frictionless lives. “In the world in which we live,” Carpenter said, “ultimately you have to trust someone. Over the years in working for Google, I find that, in my experience, the commitment to security and protection for our users is really, really high.”

“Big Tech was never set up to be civil liberty-oriented,” Thor Halvorssen explained to me at the end of an emotionally draining first day of programming. “They’re set up to make money.” We met in the M.C. Escher-like entanglement of interlocking passageways that formed the Konserthus’ lower lobby as attendees filed out of the complex, catching a couple hours of decompression before dinner. Halvorssen is eminently capable of being funny but almost never laughs in public. He evinced no outward sense of accomplishment after a successful day of his organization’s premier event. The scope of the work ahead of him was just too daunting, work that extended even to the tech firms that sponsored the forum. “Big Tech needs to have a thorough education in authoritarian government and what it means. So many Big Tech companies have unwittingly become the tools of dictatorships,” he said. “Social media is not a place to share photos and opinions. It has become [like] weapons—their weapons.”

Twitter, Google, and Meta were all here, I observed. In fact the companies’ displays and seminar rooms were just down the hall. “Yes,” he said, “they’re not just here, they’re actually supporters of the Human Rights Foundation, and they are sponsors of the Oslo Freedom Forum. And obviously I’m speaking honestly. We’re grateful for their support.”

—David Meir Grossman
support. That does not mean that we are going to be oblivious and turn a blind eye to what these companies should do and are not doing.”

The 30-minute interview was a barrage of righteous accusation. “The billionaire who runs Apple” should declare himself an agent of China under the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act, Halvorssen charged. Fusion GPS, compilers of the debunked Steele dossier, “has been a criminal enterprise” because of its work smearing human rights defenders on behalf of the Russian and Venezuelan regimes. “Now,” he said, “we are a small conference that essentially stands in contrast to the world’s largest gathering of dictators.” Davos? I asked. No, Halvorssen corrected me: “The United Nations.”

I came to Oslo wondering if HRF had succumbed to the usual corruption-by-inertia, and if the NGO industrial complex, Big Tech, and politically minded corporate donors had nudged it toward the institutional progressivism that is now the monoculture of the educated West, conquering by attrition until everything looks and sounds like an episode of Pod Save America, except duller. Halvorssen is a big part of the reason this hadn’t happened. The founder and CEO of HRF was out to please nobody; he made no pretense toward any self-interest and made no obvious concessions to institutionalism, even in the case of the organization he’d built over 16 years. Maybe this was just the appearance of edginess, a kind of madman theory of human rights activism in the service of fairly conventional aims. Still, there was a plausible case for change that seemed to be organizing everything, one anchored in a certain realism about the sources of unfreedom and the difficulty of overcoming them.

“The world has been sliding in the wrong direction now for more than a decade,” he explained. “That has everything to do with the West being compromised or the West being cowardly.” Tech companies chased giant paydays in China; Tony Blair lived in a mansion in China; business and pay her kids’ school fees or permission. The Bitcoiners were easy to spot: The guy in the Pikachu hat and the cartoon Bitcoin gold chain was a Bitcoiner, as was the guy in the Long Bitcoin sweater. The guy in the Bitcoin is Dead sweater offered a more complicated case. Both presenters who went on the main stage in face-shadowing baseball caps were Bitcoiners. The crypto folks were cliquish and tended to be oblivious to the business casual and formal dress codes, like they’d achieved some new level of being in which our rules no longer applied to them. I get it, I thought to myself: The old level of being, the one I’d stuck in, is terrible a lot of the time. In this terribleness lies the optimistic long-term case for Bitcoin, namely that it could serve as a platform for solving problems that have never been solved before, and thus has both the velocity and the permanence of any other unkillable idea.

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What next, after utopia? Many of the liberating hopes of the 20th and 21st centuries have taken a pretty awful beating lately. The dream of de facto global governance under a multilateral liberal regime has proven delusional or worse. Only an ideologue still argues that freer markets automatically result in freer societies. These days, no one talks about the emancipatory potential of social media unless they work for a social media company. The internet might spread ideas and connect activists to one another, but it’s also a means to surveil and manipulate people on an unprecedented scale, as well as a medium through which young children get hooked on Chinese government-owned spy apps and slightly older children get hooked on porn. By now we know that liberal democracy is a superior way to organize society while also being as potentially dangerous as most other messianic ideas.

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The former modes of progress were premised on grand centralities, vast organizations standing for immutable universal truths and governed by virtuous administrators. Forget all that, the very large Bitcoin contingent at the forum seemed to say, and forget every other big idea to fix all the world’s problems—the administrators are mostly getting in the way of things. In Oslo, the Bitcoiners sought to progress beyond existing frameworks without anyone’s help or permission.

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ought the reach of autocrats who “relentlessly persecute their critics with the weapon of money.”

“What makes Bitcoin so incredibly powerful is that no one controls it,” said Elizabeth Stark, CEO of Lightning Labs during a panel discussion. “In Africa, banks are like a luxury brand,” noted Fode Diop, the Senegalese founder of the Bitcoin Developers Academy, who during his time on the main stage recalled his family’s savings being cut in half when the West African franc was devalued in the 2000s. “The future of banking is an Android device connect-
ed to the Bitcoin network itself,” he predicted. Jack Mallers, the CEO of Strike, explained in a tone of blissed-out evenness that Bitcoin could “escrow value anywhere on the planet … at the speed of light, across oceans … across regimes.” It didn’t matter that the digital currency was plunging in value at the time, as it periodically does. “This illustration works if Bitcoin’s at $10,000 or $1,000.”

“I’m a philosopher,” said Reed College professor Troy Cross during a panel, remembering when he’d first learned about Bitcoin in the early 2010s. “I thought, this is one of the most beautiful ideas I’ve ever encountered.”

The next day, Cross and I found our-
selves seated in the same bank of couch-
es. Since he is a philosopher enchanted with the idea of Bitcoin, he seemed like exactly the person to ask about the tech-
nology’s potential dark side. Perhaps, I

suggested, the people convinced that Bitcoin is the key to securing financial rights beyond the reach of autocrats and kleptocrats were repeating the mistake of early internet or social media enthu-
siasts high on the hypothetically democratizing power of a new technology. Cross, it turned out, wasn’t a starry-eyed crypto dreamer, but an intellectually curious man—a lover of long walks in the Oregon woods, I imagined—who wanted to explore the implications of something that seemed genuinely revo-

lutionary. “I bought two dozen pairs of

socks for five Bitcoin each from an Al-
paca farmer in New Hampshire in 2011,” he recalled. “I thought it was probably gonna fail. Most of us did.”

Over the following decade, Cross watched as the value of Bitcoin rose, as crypto turned from the realm of oddball hobbyists into a series of exotic financial products, the true nature of which was poorly understood even among its biggest boosters. “It’s not gonna im-
prove humanity,” Cross explained, re-
ferring to both the idea and the reality of an ungovernable global network for holding and transferring value. “It’s not gonna make us better. It’s a tool, like the internet. Even more than the internet, it’s gonna be like electricity itself. Imagine saying electricity is aligned with a philosophical mission—it’s a force of nature.” By this interpretation, Bitcoin is a system beyond all systems, outside of anyone’s real control, of a kind that would be built as soon as the technol-
yogy existed. It would find its purpose, however beneficial or malign, once the old consolidating projects were exposed as inefficient or oppressive.

I realized that Bitcoin is useful to Ni-
gerian peasants or Ukrainian defense militias or drug traffickers because it is in tension with the old and familiar human rights idea, which depended on state power, moral authority, and coer-
cion. States, the source of fiat currency, appear less stable and less trustworthy; the forces of good are getting harder to identify, and outside pressure has very real limits when applied to oppressive governments. Bitcoin’s “use cases,” to borrow the ‘coiner jargon, spring from a myriad of failures.

“It’s not debt, it’s not a unit of

account, it’s not a means of exchange, it’s not a good store of value in the short term,” Cross said of Bitcoin, meaning it fits none of the usual criteria to even be considered “money.” Bitcoin was, Cross explained, “part of nondeal political philosophy … In a perfect world it’s not viable. Its value is in the imperfection of our world.”

Bitcoin is almost a banality, or maybe a futile last gasp at agency against the world’s wrongdoers, when held beside someone like Carine Kanima, adopt-
ed daughter of Paul Rusesabagina, who Don Cheadle played in Hotel Rwanda. Rusesabagina’s continuing imprison-
ment in Rwanda seems an insult aimed at a specifically American view of hu-
man progress and of reality itself. If a beloved actor gets an Oscar nomination for playing you in a movie, a movie that millions of people saw and that became a sociopolitical event unto itself, then nothing bad can possibly happen to you, according to the American faith in the meta-
physical grandeur of entertainment and fame. You are untouchable, and the power of popular culture has taken you beyond the realm of the merely human.

In the case of the Hotel Rwanda rescuer, who saved the lives of 1,268 Tutsis and their sympathizers at the Mille Collines hotel in Kigali in the spring of 1994, it was force that mattered in the end. In September of 2020, Rusesabag-
a, a U.S. green card holder, was lured from his home in San Antonio, Texas, onto a private jet in Dubai, which he believed was taking him to a speaking engagement in Burundi. He was drugged onboard, and the plane landed in Kiga-
l, Rwanda’s capital. The forum, with its presentations from family members of the dead and imprisoned, could be an unintended reminder of the pathetic limits of awareness-raising and the puny dimensions of thought. The Uyghurs re-
main in concentration camps and Assad still rules Syria, neither of which are par-

cularly obscure facts these days. Ruse-
sabagina was tortured and sentenced to 25 years in prison by the regime of Paul Kagame, a former darling of the interna-
tional development human rights indus-
trial complex—the harsh sentence being an especially flagrant attack on the idea
that publicity can advance the work of human rights activists and protect them against harm.

As Kanimba explained when I interviewed her in Oslo, Rusesabagina is her uncle by marriage. Her parents were slaughtered in the opening days of the genocide; amid the chaos Rusesabagina made sure that Kanimba and her sister, both little older than toddlers at the time, were rescued from a displaced persons camp and taken to safety at the Mille Collines. She is now in her late 20s, a poised and elegant spokeswoman for her father’s cause and someone whose years living in Belgium and the United States mean she can plead his case on different continents and in multiple languages. She does not remember the genocide, or her biological parents. “I think they waited until we were 6 or 7 to tell us that we were adopted because as kids they didn’t want to scare us,” she said of Rusesabagina and his wife, Tatiana. “And so watching the movie, it was also a way for me to learn about my life, what our family went through. And it was a way for them to be able to explain it to us in a way that we could understand.”

In a place like Kigali in the mid-’90s, a luxury hotel manager such as Rusesabagina was a person whose social and political clout went beyond his job title. He met Paul Kagame when he allowed the Mille Collines to be used for meetings of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi militia group that ended the genocide before transforming itself into one of the most durable and sophisticated dictatorships in Africa. As an ethnic Hutu, Rusesabagina was too admired by Tutsis as a hero to be safe under a leader as jealous of admiration as Kagame. “Also,” Kanimba alleged, “they wanted to eliminate the influential Hutus,” which described Rusesabagina.

Rusesabagina moved his family to Belgium after the civil war. Kagame’s regime often sent representatives to ask him to return, dangling the prospect of high-level government employment. Rusesabagina realized this was a ploy to either imprison him or win his public loyalty. Then came Hotel Rwanda, released in 2004, in time for the 10th anniversary of the genocide. Rusesabagina felt he was in too much danger to attend a special screening at the national stadium in Kigali. Tatiana went instead, and watched from the same box as Kagame. “He stood up afterward and noticed how people were crying and people were admiring my father in the stadium,” Kanimba said of Kagame. Her adoptive mother had enough awareness of her country to know it was time to get out, more or less right that second. “She immediately left for the airport,” Kanimba recalled.

The serious threats didn’t begin until Rusesabagina’s two visits to the White House of George W. Bush after the release of Hotel Rwanda, once to meet the president, and then again to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Over the years, Kagame’s henchmen fabricated receipts connecting Rusesabagina to a rebel movement in the Congo and attempted to plant child pornography on his computer. The family moved to San Antonio, where Kanimba is certain Kanima is certain Rwandan regime agents continued to surveil her father. Now in prison, Rusesabagina joins the annals of wartime heroes whose lives became haunted by their own heroism: Soviet agents murdered both Gareth Jones and Raoul Wallenberg, Oscar Schindler died poor, Varian Fry descended into alcoholism and obscurity and bitterness. One key difference in Rusesabagina’s case is that the worst of his suffering happened after he became a global symbol of human decency.

What does one even do in response to something like Rusesabagina’s imprisonment, grim evidence of what dictators can achieve when they gamble—often correctly—that their public image, and reality itself, can be discarded and reconstructed at will? The question of how to shame, pressure, or remove dictators, which animates the forum and its moderator isn’t abstract—it’s not some metaphorical needle to be threaded between the figurative gaps in something called “human nature,” but an oppressive fact of existence filling every second of every day, aimed at destroying whomever it touches. The fight to change the mind of Paul Kagame hasn’t destroyed Kanimba, though. It is her privilege, she believes, to be able to carry such an immense burden on her father’s behalf, and perhaps on everyone else’s behalf too. “Here’s the thing,” she said. “Both my biological parents were slaughtered with machetes. My life was spared for a reason. And I was adopted by Paul Rusesabagina for a reason, and I’m grateful to be alive and I’m grateful to be able to stand up for him today. And so I think this is why I was saved.”

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THE REST

Dozens of FBI agents carried out a court-authorized search of Donald Trump’s Mar-a-Lago home in Florida on Monday, an unprecedented legal action against a former president and a major escalation in the Department of Justice’s ongoing investigation of Trump’s final weeks in the White House. The search was ostensibly linked to a separate Justice Department probe involving boxes of classified documents that Trump was legally obligated to turn over to the National Archives at the end of his administration but that he instead took to his Florida residence and private club. With a warrant the Miami Herald says was signed by one of three federal judges in West Palm Beach, the FBI agents searched Trump’s office, closets, and locked safe. Given the involvement of a former president, it’s unlikely that the daylong hunt for evidence didn’t move ahead without the consent, if not at the directive, of the most senior members of the Justice Department.

In less than three days of fighting over the weekend, Israel routed the leadership and operational capacity of the Gaza-based Palestinian Islamic Jihad (IJ) while suffering no casualties, and minimal damages. Yet, while Israel emerges as the decisive tactical winner, the strategic and political implications of the skirmish are less clear. With an Egyptian-mediated cease-fire reached Sunday night still holding up on Monday, the Israelis have managed to avoid drawing Hamas into the conflict, leaving Gaza’s dominant power on the sidelines while its smaller and more disorganized Islamic Jihad was pummeled. Both Hamas and Islamic Jihad are funded by Iran, but in Gaza’s internal politics, the two are rivals. One former member of the Israeli military told The Scroll that Hamas stayed out of the fighting “because this is the biggest gift they could’ve received. [Hamas leader, Yahya] Sinwar in particular seems to benefit from this: His internal foes, the IJ, are crushed, and he can now tell Gazans that this is what happens when you attack the Zionists without planning first, which is why only responsible leaders like himself can be trusted to plan and execute the grand attack.”

Big Tech now spends more on political ads than any other industry as it boosts efforts to keep Washington, D.C., regulators from cracking down on its monopolistic practices. Big Tech has taken the mantle from Big Pharma, the longtime leader in ad buys, spending $120 million in 2021 in ads mostly targeting Sen. Amy Klobuchar’s American Innovation and Choice Online Act, an antitrust bill that aims to curb anti-competitive behavior in the sector.

Featured on the latest cover of Vogue, Serena Williams announced her imminent retirement from professional tennis in a new personal essay written for the issue. But the 41-year-old doyenne of the pro tour said she’d keep playing if she didn’t have to choose between tennis and growing her family. “If I were a guy, I wouldn’t be writing this because I’d be out there playing and winning while my wife was doing the physical labor of expanding our family. Maybe I’d be more of a Tom Brady if I had that opportunity,” she wrote. Williams competed while pregnant—even winning the Australian Open—before she stepped away from the game following the birth of her first child in 2017. Her comeback has included four Grand Slam finals appearances, but a Slam title has remained elusive.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

I am surprised how little attention the mainstream media has paid to Christine Weston Chandler, the living legend of internet lore better known as Chris Chan, who is now accused of one of the most heinous crimes imaginable: a few breaking news reports last year; an article from Input; a 2016 mention in New York magazine; a handful of throwaway Insider pieces, but nothing more significant. No sprawling 8,000-word article in The New York Times, no melancholic profile in The New Yorker. No best-selling book or award-winning indie documentary by a digital ethnographer. No viral op-ed. Nothing.

Chandler was scheduled for a grand jury hearing in Virginia yesterday on charges of incest that stem from leaked phone calls in which he described regularly having sex with his elderly mother while she was suffering from dementia.

The assaults allegedly took place at the behest of Isabella Janke, a Texas college student Chandler had met online. As macabre as the alleged crime is, it was not exactly unforeseeable in the context of Chandler’s life. For more than a decade, “The Chris Chan Show” has been the center of an obsessive fandom online that was drawn to its tragic and freakish aspects and treated it as a form of interactive reality entertainment—like The Truman Show, but much darker and more dystopian.

—Katherine Dee
Rescuing Meena

A year of working with feminists, anti-trafficking experts, academics, ultra-Orthodox rabbis, and military veterans from all over the world to deliver Meena Safi and other Afghan women from the Taliban

BY PHYLLIS CHESLER

Last year, on July 26, 2021, my dear friend and colleague Mandy Sanghera, a London-based human rights activist and philanthropist, called and asked me if I wanted to help rescue women from Afghanistan.

“Are you kidding? I’ve probably been waiting for this opportunity all my life.”

“I thought you had some unfinished business there,” she wisely said.

I was once held against my will in Kabul as a bride a very long time ago, and have since read many memoirs written by Muslim or ex-Muslim women, by Muslim reformers and dissidents, and by Westerners who have traveled to Afghanistan—and I had a very good idea of what being trapped there might be like for women, dissidents, infidels, and gays forced to live in an Islamist 10th century.

I immediately threw myself into this very feminist, very moral, and very Jewish work, full-time, with all my might.

Mandy introduced me to the feminist Meena Safi, who lived in Kabul. Beginning on July 26, we began to exchange messaging app, via WhatsApp, via text, and eventually via email. I connected Meena to our team, which had, in a short period of time, rescued many hundreds of Afghan women and their families.

Last August, I did not know whether Meena had actually made it to the airport under the hail of the Taliban’s whips, bullets, and death threats. I did not know whether she was alive or dead.

Meena was on the last flight out on the very day, Aug. 26, that a suicide bomber attacked Kabul airport.

“We saw it all from our plane, which had just taken off,” she said.

Meena clarified this for me this past Sunday, at Newark airport, where she had just landed, almost exactly a year since we first met.

Meena (whom I named “Aisha”) in my early pieces up at 4W—articles that were absolutely invaluable in terms of both fundraising for her GoFundMe campaign and just as important for attracting valuable new members to the team.

Meena also told me that she and her family had been waiting outside the Kabul airport for two full days. Her family wanted to turn back, but Meena kept texting with Tatiana (whom you’ll soon meet), who kept telling her not to give up, to keep waiting.

Meena did just that over and against her family’s protests.

And now, Meena has landed in America. I met her together with my good friend professor Lilia Melani, who has pledged to pay Meena’s rent for the first year. Meena flew first class due to the generosity and access to frequent flyer miles that one of 4W’s staunchest readers, Linda (Penny) Wilson, provided.

As I write this, she is on her way to my home for an early, surprise Afghan dinner. She is the sweetest, kindest, most sensitive, and worthiest young woman I’ve ever met. Yes, she could easily be my Afghan granddaughter, and I now think of her this way.

Doing rescue work is hardly glamorous. It is tedious, exhausting, demanding, round-the-clock work. It is unpaid. One ends up paying for what one needs. The cries for help, the description of conditions on the ground, never stop coming. They are haunting requests. They are still coming my way. One needs a team to do this work. One cannot do it alone.

One finds such people, one delegates to people.

The team I was privileged to join consisted of Mandy; two feminist anti-trafficking experts from Germany, who got women out to Europe, but who prefer not to be named; an American academic who had to drop out almost immediately due to illness—but before she did, connected us to her anti-trafficking network; an American lawyer; an anti-trafficking expert, Tatiana Kotlyarenko, who, through her connections, had access to seats on military planes; Russ Pritchard and Sarah Lange of Team Themis, both of whom, if funded, were prepared to organize food and medicine drops, as well as doctor and midwife visits in Afghanistan; two ultra-Orthodox rabbis, as well as the amazing Lela Gilbert, who works with the Shai Fund, which is based in both America and Israel. They all funded the escapes of Afghan Christians and of one or two Afghan Jews. I also connected Meena to Tam Weissman, the best social worker-therapist I know, who worked with her online over the past year.

A group known as the Rainbow Railroad, run by K, managed to get gay men and/or LGBTQ people out of Afghanistan and into some Western countries.

When professor Sandi Cooper, a former colleague of both mine and Lilia’s, recently heard about what we were doing, she wrote a very generous check for Meena.

My own former executive assistant, Emily Feldman, was the one who created Excel spreadsheets and kept track of the voluminous correspondence between Afghan women and our team, which may easily number thousands of pages. Mandy’s volunteer assistant, Saba Ali, did likewise, as did a man named Jonathan whose wife had 13 family members left behind in Afghanistan, and who both wanted to help us and to get his relatives out.

We were in touch with women judges, lawyers, physicians, social workers, businesswomen, journalists, artists, athletes, professors, and mothers—all of whom feared for their very lives as well as their futures under the Taliban. They shared horror stories with us.

Here’s one: A Taliban barbarian wanted to marry one young woman who refused his offer. He had her kidnapped,
gang-raped, and had boiling water poured onto her genitalia. Members of our team got her and her sister out to Pakistan within days.

Here’s another: A prominent women’s rights activist was in hiding; she knew the Taliban were hunting for her. They kidnapped her—and returned her corpse later that night.

I made Meena my special ward. Where could she turn for asylum? Meena had worked with several foreign governments who were doing field work in Afghanistan. Norway was one. The United States was another. A European NGO was a third. I contacted every one of her Norwegian contacts on her behalf many times—but Norway did not want another Afghan. I had no luck with the European NGO. I then tried her French American professor, Jean-Francois Trani, with whom she’d worked. I contacted him and his staff again and again and again—and he came through brilliantly.

Trani spoke so highly of Meena’s work that he was able to obtain a $76,000 scholarship for her in social work at Washington University in St. Louis, with which he is affiliated. Initially he offered to have Meena live with him and his wife, but along the way his plans changed, as he will be living in another country. However, what he’s already done is more than sufficient. He, too, will be meeting her plane when it lands in St. Louis, helping her open a bank account so she will have access to her GoFundMe money, and escorting her to the very charming suite of rooms at a bed and breakfast on or near campus where she will be living.

As Meena’s plans were not yet definite, I thought: What about India? It is close to Afghanistan and planes are still flying there. I have a very dear friend, the American physician Dr. Michelle Harrison, who founded an orphanage for severely disabled girls in India. (I think of her as “Michelle the Saint.”) She was absolutely willing to take Meena in, allow her to rest and heal while she decided what her next steps would be. I had been in touch with a number of Indian Hindus with whom I had worked, and they all tried hard to help make this happen. But the Indian government did not want any more Muslims at this time, not even an educated Afghan woman who, of course, would be coming with her parents and siblings. Would even one of them become radicalized? The government never said a word. But my contacts apologized and suggested that this might be the case: The crises and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims were already too incendiary and tragic. In addition, Meena would not be able to leave without her family, and St. Michelle may or may not have been able to shelter them all.

My dear friends Hannah Meyers, Nama Sandrow, and William Meyers invited me to dinner with Ruta Nimkar, an expert in human-trafficking routes. She easily identified two Afghan men who, for a price, would lead Afghans over the border to Pakistan. I shared this information with the team immediately. Too many of the women had no money, but they also feared that worse might happen if they took this chance: They’d be robbed, raped, captured, and ultimately, not allowed to stay in either Pakistan or Iran. Even if they could obtain visas, and could stay, they could not get jobs. How could they feed their children?

A great feminist, who shall remain unnamed, introduced me to her friend in Turkey who runs a shelter for immigrant women. However, the longest anyone can stay there is only a few weeks—and they would need a visa to Turkey. And she had no room at the time.

I spoke to American army veterans, hedge fund mavens, and with impostors and opportunists of all kinds. My team consisted mostly of volunteers, except for two women, including my assistant.

Some of the Afghan women were terrified that the Taliban was hunting for them as women’s rights activists, going house to house, shooting guns; others were, very understandably, deeply depressed and self-deprecating. Some were very demanding, hysterical, and had delusions of grandeur. One woman wanted a theatrical agent so that she could either become a Hollywood actress or a filmmaker could make a film about her life. Mandy was helping the British government resettle 4,000 Afghan men and their families—men who had worked for the British military as drivers, translators, and “fixers”—and she was inundated with bitter complaints.

“If I got them into a hotel they wanted a larger suite of rooms,” she said. “If I got them there, they wanted a cottage, a nice house, a nicer house, one in a good neighborhood with a garden. The demands never stopped coming. And no one ever said thank you.”

What does such work cost?

I lost a very good friend doing this work—a feminist who called me and in a very loud and angry voice insisted: “President Biden did everything right in how he pulled out of Afghanistan.” I doubt she even remembers saying this, but at the time it may have been the cruelest thing anyone could have said to me. It was at a moment when I did not know whether Meena and others were alive or dead. I hung up on her.

I had been without sleep, all hell had broken loose, women with whom I was in touch were hiding, starving, running to the airport. And this was her way of—what? Diminishing the importance of this work? Supporting Biden for the sake of the Democratic Party’s position on abortion rights and refusing to be clear about the harm he may have caused in another area?

I also lost one of my major funders, a philanthropist who said, quite frankly, “I don’t want any more of them here and I’m not funding you to do this work.”

I lost a treasured colleague with whom I’d worked on projects that mattered ever
so much to me. It’s a story for another day, but suffice to say, she chose to believe a false narrative, told to her by a person on our team who had been accused of quietly paying herself for the work she was doing—work which I never believed was successful.

When the allegations surfaced, and that $50,000–60,000 that I had helped to raise was at issue, we called for a Zoom meeting, which Mandy chaired in a very balanced and diplomatic way. We managed to claw back $12,000 with a promise of $8,000 more for food and medicine drops and for doctor and midwife visits in Afghanistan.

My treasured colleague did not bother checking with either Mandy or myself, and the story got spun in such a way that three rather vicious emails landed in my inbox all at once accusing me of ruining a good woman’s life. My special colleague had me prepare extensive, back-breaking dossiers for her (which she kept losing), to Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman.

The demands of this work did not allow me to fall apart or to try and “process” such breathtakingly cruel behavior. The work demanded my entire attention, all my time. I had to keep thinking creatively. I had to keep after people to do what they promised to do. I had to help them cross all the “t’s.”

I guess that war zones and global crises attract both do-gooders as well as profiteers, egomaniacs, and scoundrels. I did not expect even a shadow of such bad behavior to rear its head among us—but one lives and learns.

There was one guy who said he was both a Muslim and a Jew, knew the Afghan territories, had money, and wanted to help. All he really wanted was to meet me and take a photo of us together—which he then photoshopped to make himself look younger and thinner. I know because he proudly sent me a copy. A major lawyer approached me wanting to do a fundraiser for women who were and still are trapped in Meshed, Tehran, Rawalpindi, and Islamabad. She had me prepare extensive, back-breaking dossiers for her (which she kept losing), but which I gladly put together. I never heard from her again.

As Mandy says: “In doing this work, one meets the best of people, those who really step up and want to do good in the world, but one also meets gaslighters, phonies, egomaniacs, mad people, and lost souls.”

Before Meena left on Sunday, she insisted on giving me the heavy gold medal she received in Spain on International Women’s Day, in March 2022, from “leading women” for her courage and bravery as a woman in escaping from Afghanistan. “It was the first such award I ever received in my life.”

Moved beyond words, I finally said that I would keep it safe for her. Meena then insisted that had I not written to her and had I not kept writing to her, she would not have become who she is now, and was quite clearly destined to become: A Leader of Women. ■

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An earlier version of this article appeared in 4W.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Disarming Disharmonies of Shirley Jaffe

A retrospective of the painter’s work brings a new appreciation for her apparently random, meticulously planned style

BY JOE FYFE

There is a retrospective of the American artist Shirley Jaffe running through the end of August at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The exhibition travels to the Basel Kunstmuseum and then to Musee Ma-tisse in 2023. Born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and raised in Brooklyn, the daughter of Russian and Hungarian immigrants, Shirley died in 2016 just shy of her 93rd birthday. A Paris resident since 1948, she never applied for citizenship. Shirley lived and worked for most of her life near the Place Maubert on the Left Bank, at 8 Rue St. Victor, the last remnant of an old thoroughfare that Baron Haussman’s 19th-century renovations had cropped down to two short lengths. It originally ambled to the Seine, past what used to be the 11th-century Abbey of St. Victor.

Shirley Jaffe was the doyenne for a great number of American artists passing through what always seems to me simultaneously feudal and modernist Paris. In her later years, more and more of them climbed the slate stairs to her home, unevenly burnished by centuries of wear, and sat with her on the top floor. Yes, it was a garret, and for most of her life she just scraped by. In her last decade, her late success and very moderate fame brought an influx of visiting women artists from the U.S. It was flattering, she told me, that they sought her out, but she didn’t get much from it because she had not seen their work.

I think I can claim to have known her pretty well on the basis of the many dinners and studio visit afternoons I spent with her. I traveled to Paris fairly often during the past 20-odd years, and always looked her up. She would
usually arrange for us to go to a French restaurant—I have never known a Parisian to suggest French food without first prodding them—because she knew I liked their traditional snails, _confit de canard_, etc. The second time we met she asked me flat-out what I thought of her painting and I fumbled for an answer, blindsided by the question, not yet understanding that it was characteristic of her.

I liked her immediately, and admired her intelligence, her dedication, and her curiosity. But I had problems with her paintings during most of our relationship. She brought this up often enough but I don’t think it impeded our friendship. Clearly, she could be blunt and confrontational, demonstrating that she remained a no-nonsense American (this also applied to her French, which she insisted on speaking with a “New Yawk” accent).

Otherwise she was the most attendent and polite of conversationalists, a lone _salonnière_ who had retained the manner of her original milieu, the post-war generation of American artists in Paris: Sam Francis, Norman Bluhm, Al Held, George Sugarman, Joan Mitchell, and the equally important but lesser-known Kimber Smith. They affected the glibness of taxi drivers and were forward and argumentative (French artists called this _pooshy_). This second generation of abstract expressionists were so confident in being heirs to a generation of abstract expressionists that they were so confident in being heirs to a new language of painting that they willfully ignored the Parisian art scene around them. They weren’t trying to please anybody but themselves. After most of them left, Shirley stayed on and became almost, but adamantly not quite, a French painter.

Americans came to Paris in droves after the Second World War on the GI Bill. Paris was cheap, as was the education in some very good schools, in which you had to enroll to get the money. Shirley came with her husband, who was there to study sociology at the Sorbonne. She had gone to Cooper Union and was already an artist. The earliest works in the retrospective, from 1952, date from a few years after their arrival: gestural abstractions, made with swipes of paint, some dry drags, some wet squishes of various colors. It is clear that early on she could paint abstractly, that she could organize seemingly random, arbitrary strokes into something anyone could recognize as pictorial in an _all-over_ composition: no emphasis on any particular area. There was a scaffolding of disbursement that one had to establish along the way by building on what went down before. That is pretty much how it was done, but it was also not as simple as it sounds. Al Held once tried to make me understand what it was like at that time: He said, “Look, there were about 20 people in the world that knew how to look at an abstract painting. One of us would have a show and one of the others would go up to their painting and point to one brushstroke and say, ‘What the hell is that?’”

Shirley later said that something had bothered her about this free improvisation: The picture always seemed to be some kind of landscape. As this very thorough exhibition progresses through Shirley’s 1950s production, partial solutions based on modernists like Sonia and Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky come to the fore, as if she was looking at past nonobjective painting through to its present problems. “The Plume,” for example, from 1957, is an inventory of marks and colors, of going back and forth with thicker, loamy, and then dry paint, alternating surface textures with shimmering transparencies. There appears an uncertainty as to where to stop and start. Her ’50s paintings are significant in making clear one of her chief characteristics: the opposite of simplifying painting, as Matisse’s teacher, Gustave Moreau, predicted of him. In Shirley Jaffe’s case, there appears a desire to complicate it. You really feel that in some of the early investigations she got in so deep she barely made it out alive.

Instead, she looked for a struggle. Shirley wanted to synthesize diverse elements as much as possible—in addition to the disparate coloring and tonal changes, she varied marking with scrapes and palette knife as well as brushing. She pushed and pushed. In the early work it was textures, applications, and brushstrokes, later it was in as great a diversity of shapes and colors as she could manage. A disarming disharmony. Each picture was a unique problem and because of this there were never more than eight or nine paintings finished per year.

I remember a conversation I had with her about a young, and it seemed to me enormously talented, French painter who was always able to produce a new, extensive body of interesting paintings and sculptures. She said she felt sorry for him, that he had never found a way to be substantially engaged in his work, which was why he overproduced.

Shirley’s first solo exhibition was in 1955, and she also exhibited with Americans Kimber Smith and Sam Francis at the American Cultural Center in Paris, with an accompanying text by Basel Kunsthalle director Arnold Rüdlinger, who later showed her in Basel and formed a collector base for her and helped establish her first contract with a commercial gallery there. This is the significance, in part, of the retrospective stopping in Basel. Another is for its affinities with concrete art, which had many Swiss adherents dispensing with subjective references and painting solid geometries of color. And Shirley always thought of making art as a problem, not an expression, or rather not a self-expression. Concrete art saw the very materials of the painting as expressive.

By the 1960s there were fewer Americans coming to Paris. Shirley had recently divorced and was to live alone from then on. A Ford Foundation grant allowed her to spend 18 months in Berlin, meeting painters, including Emilio Vedova, a very forceful gestural and angular painter, and interestingly, the composers Karlheinz Stockhausen and Iannis Xenakis, both of whom made _musique concrète_. There was a turning point in her work in Berlin—it became less organic, more frontal, i.e., there was less implied depth: looking more like a jammed suitcase seen from above—the plane of the pictures pieced together with broken and elongated bars, stripes and angles. The earlier evocative titles like “Arcueil Yellow” and “The Waves” gave way to solid, geometric designations: “Big Y,” “The Red Diamond,” and “Big Square.”
In addition, her exposure to Xenakis may have provided a conceptual baseline. His first major orchestral work, “Metastaesis,” from 1955, has been described as a meticulously planned form of sonic chaos. Xenakis’ composition was inspired by the sounds of an anti-fascist rally that occurred in his native Greece at the end of the war, and utilized musical concepts originating in mathematics and architecture, particularly the modular principles of Le Corbusier, with whom Xenakis spent time working. He described his music as trying to get from one place to another from within this ordered chaos, without breaking the continuity. Xenakis learned from Le Corbusier to think of mathematical proportion visually, and was already thinking of music in terms of sound masses and shapes.

I certainly didn’t realize earlier how this might also be a way into her work. This is one of the great values of retrospectives and the information in the catalogs, including that on her return to Paris she took photographs of the old Gare Montparnasse under demolition. It might have been utilized as a kind of model for a disruption amidst built structures, on which she could base paintings.

In her lifetime, there were often comparisons to the American color cubist Stuart Davis, or even at moments the paintings and murals of Le Corbusier and Ozenfant. In every case, this was superficial; her work always strove for a more complex syntax. Ultimately I perceive her painting as something conceptual rather than imitative. In one of the interviews in the catalog, she admits that what she got from French culture was a clearer conception of what she wanted to figure out how to get from one place to another from within this ordered chaos, without breaking the continuity. Xenakis learned from Le Corbusier to think of mathematical proportion visually, and was already thinking of music in terms of sound masses and shapes.

“Strong painting, in the end, doesn’t come from just looking at other paintings your whole life but finding an interesting problem.” sustain you. She benefited from the endless discussions one has in Paris about painting—which are one of international fine art culture’s great treasures, but they are waning. And they have further been reduced by her absence.

By the time Shirley returned from Berlin, the paintings became clearly made up of flat color areas. She was beginning to design, or maybe it is better to say engineer, a painting as she progressed, with a calculus that transformed what were merely loose gestures into shapes. “Untitled 1968” (list of works No. 162), is made up of mostly rectangles, triangles, half-discs, and drawn circles in a slightly airy, still slightly brushy midtone range, at this point, but there is an unpredictable oxblood-brown rectangle in the upper corner that seems to squeeze out its dark incongruity amid the ensemble, revealing itself quietly. I don’t know if this was a eureka moment for her, but it was for me. She had thoroughly understood the all-over painting, and wanted to figure out how to get from one painted shape, with its individual color, makeup, and “personality” to the next within the picture, without breaking the continuity.

From here on, for 48 years, came refinements, further explorations, and variations. All the works are hard-won, and surreptitious scrapings and revisions abound. If I were to make comparisons with other visual art, I would name two things: one which she mentions, Japanese prints, which are a key modernist source. In her case, we see her inspired by how they animate subtle shifts of blocks of color amid pattern and arabesque while maintaining a consistent foreground. The other is the late Georges Braque, who worked on paintings sometimes for years, attempting to synthesize deep textural and haptic shifts.

Around this time, the late 60s, she got her first important Paris gallery, Jean Fournier, who was also the most artistically influential gallerist in post-war France. She remained there until 1999. Fournier represented many of the most important painters in France at that time, Simon Hantai, and Jean Degottex, as well as some Americans, Sam Francis, James Bishop and Joan Mitchell, who was one of the few Americans of that postwar generation who continued to mostly stay there, and a younger generation of French artists, notably Claude Viallat, of the support/surface movement. This is the most impressive group of painters in one gallery I think I have ever heard. She held her own there among some outsized egos, and with limited support from some of the other artists. She was close to Joan Mitchell, but there were limits.

Shirley, wonderfully, and unusually, wasn’t a narcissist, nor a megalomaniac, nor did she have a big ego. Her survival was a testament to a simple curiosity. It involved a tenacious focus on what could be discovered in her work, buffeted, challenged, and defined by the art and artists that surrounded her. Al Held had returned to the U.S. early, but remained her close friend throughout his life. He did comment to me one time that, “Shirley chose to have an elegant life.” What he may have meant is that she chose an alternative to the bigger stakes market of the New York art world, but my impression was there was not exactly a choice involved. A number of artists I have known there who are not French simply found themselves not leaving, enough of a career had begun, or they didn’t want to interrupt.
their work, or they couldn’t afford to. Shirley’s career advanced with the help of Jean Fournier, but she was never a big seller, though there were more placements in museums and some exhibitions elsewhere. This was the case when she began showing with Holly Solomon in New York, too. In 1999 she left Fournier for Nathalie Obadia gallery, where she began making some real money for the first time in her life. I was shocked when she told me that it took years to pay back the stipends she had been forwarded by Jean Fournier during her time with his gallery. She had been living close to the bone for decades.

Around 2000 I began writing regularly for Art in America, which she read religiously, to keep up with what was happening in the U.S. and elsewhere and because my editor there, Raphael Rubinstein, and herself were very close friends and he has written many essays on her work. One insight, of the many that came from our conversations, came when she read my feature on Al Held’s recent work, which I had compared in the article to the pictorial structure of 19th-century American landscape painting and which she took great exception to, explaining that Al, like her, had worked hard to rid his pictures of any unaccounted-for simulated depths, that every square inch must be determined and fought for. Another time she explained that her great friend, the Canadian artist Jean-Paul Riopelle, whom I saw at first as being simply the father of a million kitschy palette-knife paintings, had a “tough” frontal surface.

At this moment, years later, these issues may seem esoteric or even quaint, and the idea of her retrospective may amount to more of an acknowledgment of her achievement as a lone woman artist, but from her point of view, it would only be fitting to have it be about the work. The writer Jean Rhys once described her attitude toward literature as being a large body of water and her being a rivulet feeding it. This would be Shirley’s attitude, that it is the contribution toward painting, in the largest sense, that is the point of her work.

I began my regular visits to Paris primarily to get to know the Paris-based style of abstract painting better. As the art world moved to New York, and by the new century had become international, with no one capital, French art had been largely left behind. In Paris, I discovered a wealth of overlooked concepts and attitudes.

The problem I had with Shirley’s work at first is that she inhabited exactly the attitude I had abandoned. I remember a conversation with her where she said that she wanted the complications of life to replicate in her work; its contradictions, its problems, and her process would put these discrepancies in opposition to one another within the canvas and resolve them toward a kind of satisfying truce. My response was that after a long period accepting that the making of a painting of any merit was going to involve a struggle, what I had found among some of the work I had come across in Paris was a new attitude, that one could choose what one wanted from an unlimited range of options, that painting could be a place completely removed from life, that it could be understood as an area with its own rules, another world completely.

That is what I found so liberating about what I was finding there, specifically the way of considering what the painting was as a form, how the object was constructed, how it was begun, and what, exactly, when one drew on the history of painting, was one to choose from?

The interesting question was, and I had found this question being asked by the works of French painters more than those in New York, what exactly was this thing you were working on? This would seem to be an inherent question that is answered by every painter, but I particularly mean where nothing is taken for granted, such as how one goes about it behaviorally, or how are the rules broken? So our discussions went on that way, where new exhibitions that featured an artist that had reduced the painting act to a single trope in the spirit of what might be called “the inherent sufficiency of limited artistic choices” would be praised by me and qualified by her. There was also the issue of her works on paper, which she largely would not show, and she knew I liked better than the paintings, saying “you just like them because they are more painterly,” still not understanding how the paintings were not more complete, but rather the point.

But maybe I understand them now. Listening to Xenakis’ “Metastaesis” and other of his recorded works, I was struck by the clarity of the individual moments, what were called shapes of sound we might call samples these days. His music seemed made of snatches, pleasurable ones, of what an orchestra does, but knit together, interlocked, then stretched out in time in new ways. The musical piece as a whole may have discordance, but its individual moments, as one picked them out, were polished and understandable.

Similarly, Shirley has said that she is not interested in beauty but in visual pleasure, and she wants people to see. It also occurred to me, listening to Xenakis’ music, that although he

“What, exactly, when one drew on the history of painting, was one to choose from?”

HOLIDAYS

Point your smart phone camera at the QR code to learn more about Jewish holidays.
progressed to electronic music later, in pieces such as “Metastaesis” he wrote individual scores for each of the 61 instruments, some of which, of course, are hundreds of years old. Similarly, Shirley insisted on the finished versions of her paintings. She said that she finalized them with tiny brushes, not mentioning that this was how easel paintings all used to be finished. She was orchestrating the very contemporary state of chaos, using modernist shapes and colors, but insisted on an unambiguous visuality. The detailed, or rather careful, finish finely tuned the painting. She was aware of the single most important aspect of making a painting, its continuity, its modulation from one surface area to the next. There is a French term, tableau, that means a fully realized or accomplished painting, there is no exact translation. In the pre-Revolution Ecole de Beaux-Arts, it meant that one had completed one’s apprenticeship, and had painted a tableau. Diderot, the first notable art critic, gave it more specific qualities, but in general, one might describe the history of modern painting as a revolt against the tableau, or the most radical attenuation of one.

As I surrender my long misunderstanding of Shirley Jaffe’s work to what I hope is a very late understanding, I would submit that her intention was to paint tableau, to make a work both fully accomplished and contemporarily challenging. If only she were here to hear me say this. She would most likely disagree on some point, and we would have a lively argument over dinner.

This article was originally published on August 12, 2022.

A Wine for Mom

Do we ever outgrow our desire for a parent’s understanding and approval?

BY ALICE FEIRING

Like many of her generation, my mother, Ethel, born in 1924, never outgrew her taste for clichéd kosher wines. Was it just her madeleine or that she didn’t know better? Manischewitz or Carmel or Schapiro’s, it didn’t matter which one, all those sweet koshers tasted like liquefied grape jelly, and I’m not sure it was ever made from a fresh grape instead of concentrate. Whatever. Ever since I was in diapers, I drank them every Friday night, Saturday afternoon, and holidays. Of course, at the beginning, my parents mixed my tipple with seltzer. By the time I was seven or so, full strength. That stuff was mother’s milk to me, I confess. There was a time when I, too, loved it.

Years later, I found another wine world, made from organic agriculture and one ingredient, grape. So different than the conventional wines that were made to a market with all the technology available to the industry. These natural ones were the only ones worth my liver. This was not about ideology over aesthetic; they taste better, the way a fresh-picked heirloom tomato tastes more complex than anything you can get in a package in the supermarket. Through sipping, those delicious wines also told stories of the people and year that made them. To me, these were way more kosher than anything with a certification. Because, except for one impossible-to-find kosher wine from Australia (Harkham), kosher and natural rarely existed. Depending on how you count, there are seventy-two perfectly legal wine additives (available in kosher, of course), and for the sweet wine my mother drank? Were those made from grape concentrate instead of real fruit? Most likely. Yet even the top Catholic brass, Pope Francis, agreed with me when he declared that only wines without additives were holy enough for the Eucharist. So why not for my fellow Jews?

This was one of my first-world problems. I couldn’t drink the old slop or what passed for modern kosher wines.
her daughter. Invariably for holidays, I’d plunk down way too much money, hoping high, expectations low, ferrying the rabbi-approved bottles over to Mom’s apartment in Long Beach, where, as the family shrank and shrivelled, we celebrated, if you could call it that, at a table for two. To her credit, she’d always taste, yet would say, “You know what this needs?” then she’d mix some of her favorite, Matuk Rouge Soft, with the thirty-five-dollar (kosher) Burgundy I’d brought, and then she’d nod. “That’s better.” Which really didn’t matter because that Burgundy sucked anyway.

That’s why one year I got it into my head to make my own: traditional, kosher, and natural. Of course, I couldn’t make it. As an apikores, nonbeliever, I couldn’t touch the grapes, tread, or punch them down. I was, however, allowed to look at them. You see, kosher wine doesn’t mean it was blessed by a rabbi, it means that it was made by a Shabbos-observing Jew. And if it didn’t go through the draconic process of being flash-pasteurized, only an observant Jew could open the bottle and serve it to another observant Jew. Ironically, my mother, who doesn’t even turn on a light when the Jura also grows brilliant pi-nut noir, but its special power is in the other red grapes, the ethereal poulsard not noir, but its special power is in the same grape, savagnin (often mistaken for sauvignon), and can be made in the same salty style, but when not aged for a shorter time, it tastes like a boat ride out in the ocean spray. Chardonnay drinkers? This might be the place for Passover of the pandemic, I’d had enough suffering. I had long ago become a full adult, and it was time for my own liberation. I headed to Discovery Wines and tried to find the wine that would serve me with pleasure on the night when you were supposed to drink four cups. There on the shelf, it called out to me. Bénédict and Stéphane Tissot’s Singulier.

The Tissots are an hour’s drive west from Burgundy or a forty-five-minute ride from Dijon. I loved the wines from that region, and when I first visited, I knew why: The place itself was soothing. Rolling hills and Irish-like greenery, cows marching through the vines with their bells donging, as if telling me to

“I had made up my mind: I wasn’t going to endure bad wine for the holiday any longer.”

the bureaucracy, like finding the rabbi to give certification. It wasn’t easy to reach the man in Tbilisi. The rabbi was always rushing out to Kutaisi for a bris or to Baghdati for a wedding. Finally, I trapped him over Skype. After the Jew-splaining treatise on the religious laws and why I, now a secular Jewish natural-wine lover, would never make my wine, we were disconnected. I called back. Friends in Tbilisi tried to reach him. The harvest came and went. It was clear that I wasn’t going to be making kosher wine that vintage, but I had made up my mind: I wasn’t going to endure bad wine for the holiday any longer.

On the occasion of the second Passover of the pandemic, I’d had enough suffering. I had long ago become a full adult, and it was time for my own liberation. I headed to Discovery Wines and tried to find the wine that would serve me with pleasure on the night when you were supposed to drink four cups. There on the shelf, it called out to me. Bénédict and Stéphane Tissot’s Singulier.

The Tissots are an hour’s drive west from Burgundy or a forty-five-minute ride from Dijon. I loved the wines from that region, and when I first visited, I knew why: The place itself was soothing. Rolling hills and Irish-like greenery, cows marching through the vines with their bells donging, as if telling me to slow down and park all anxieties. I’m a sucker for morel mushrooms, which are plentiful here, likewise Comté cheese. But the Jura also has a spirit of rebellion, an independent streak, and was a sweet spot for the resistance fighters in World War II. There was peace and sparkling air, and the wines had an originality, a lack of cynicism, and a lack of commercialism. Physically, it’s the mirror image of Burgundy, but the wines are fresher. Their most famous wine, and most expensive, is Vin Jaune, a wine made like an unfortified sherry—meaning it develops a yeast veil called “flor” that protects the wine as it loses its fruit and intensifies over the years until it’s bottled. It can be sublime and tastes like an unsweet salted caramel. There are other versions of wine made from the same grape, savagnin (often mistaken for sauvignon), and can be made in the same salty style, but when not aged for a shorter time, it tastes like a boat ride out in the ocean spray. Chardonnay drinkers? This might be the place for

FOOD

Culinary history, recipes, and ideas at tabletmag.com/sections/food
including instant coffee. That wine was as kosher (and as kosher for Passover) as eating an apple from the tree. I’d had it with the sixteenth-century rabbis who argued in and wrote the Talmud’s problematic interpretation of what kosher wine was. My wine was kosher in spirit and in ingredient. On top of it, my handiwork looked damned good.

That night at our seder for two, the candles lit and the Haggadahs out, I poured the first glass into my grandfather’s silver cup. That was absolutely the most gorgeous kosher wine I ever had. I was enjoying the seder, not counting the hours until it was over and we could sing “Chad Gadya.”

“Taste?” I asked Ethel as she was watching my rapture with laughter. She raised an eyebrow and picked the bottle up, not even looking for the kosher symbol.

Do we ever outgrow our desire for a parent’s understanding and approval? Even if we have another decade left, my mother will never quite accept my rejection of religion. But if she understood why I’ve devoted decades to writing about this magical, enduring symbol of life, culture, and humanity without shaking her head and saying, “Give it up already,” that would suit me even better.

Mom was fragile that year. COVID had pitted her memory and fueled her anxiety reactions. Yet as she poured some wine gamely into her own silver goblet, she crinkled her nose. “Not bad,” she said, and my heart perked up. Maybe she would understand. But then she picked up the Matuk Rouge Soft (naturally sweetened, of course) and blended it with Tissot’s trousseau. She was satisfied. “Taste it,” she insisted, pushing the goblet in my direction.

Excerpted from To Fall in Love, Drink This: A Wine Writer’s Memoir by Alice Feiring. Copyright © 2022 by Alice Sari Feiring. Reprinted with the permission of Scriber, a Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

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FOOD

‘What Even Are These Things?’

Collard greens offered me a lesson in survival of the spirit

BY MICHAEL TWITTY

Nothing is as awkward as the moment you find out someone is not your ally, your acquaintance, or even your friend. The moment when you discover real distrust and antipathy. It gets worse when it’s your culture, your identity, and your place that are on trial. You question all of who you are. It isn’t any fun to commit to being a native and being treated like an alien.

One of my first big catering gigs was for someone I can no longer call a friend—although our separation was not based solely on the incident I talk about here, but it definitely left an impression. He was a rabbi, and for the small community he served, he asked me to make a meal at his home for about 75 people, based on my “koshersoul” style of cooking. I agreed for a fee I would later laugh at, but I took the job because we had a friendly understanding. His wife was understandably nervous about a stranger in her tightly kept kosher kitchen and had her misgivings, but by the minute, I got more and more of a feeling that it was less my method of cooking than its material that turned her off. The final straw for the Yankee wife of the Southern rabbi was collard greens.

Collard greens. *Brassica oleracea var. viridis*. Collard greens are on my African American Seder plate, which I use the last two days of Passover as a symbolic piece. Collards are the *maaror*, the bitter greens, representing the bitterness of American chattel slavery. True to the season of Passover, spring collards are increasing in bitterness while winter collards mellow and sweeten. They were once endemic to the gardens of enslaved African Americans, a replacement for the many leafy greens our ancestors ate in West and Central Africa.

My ex-friend’s wife stumbled into their apartment, stressed and angry. Her husband had put her on the spot, asking her to go shopping for unfamiliar ingredients while he minded their baby girl. She left with my esoteric list of soul food products destined for that evening’s Shabbat *oneg*, catered by me. Collard green kreplach was the dish. Kreplach, Judaism’s opposite side of the Silk Road’s relationship to wontons, are traditionally stuffed with bits and pieces of this and that—leftover meat from soup or brisket, bits of veggies.

She did not look at her husband. All the rage was centered on me. “What even are these things?” I was hoping that it was fake rage meant to stage a joke.

“Collard greens?” I said, trying to deflect with a smile. “They’re good for you. My grandmother and mother and I used to make them all the time. You’ll love them.”

“I’m not touching them. How can these things even be kosher?” she raged. “Probably full of bugs. Whatever they are, they are gritty and dirty, and it got all over me, and now they...
elite against everyone else.... College is pointless... No one’s having babies, and it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn’t between left...
Emerald Palmer Mint Lemonade

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>medium cucumbers</td>
<td>3 (1/2 pounds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cups fresh mint</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cups lemon juice</td>
<td>1 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaspoons matcha powder</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cup agave syrup</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaspoon salt</td>
<td></td>
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PREPARATION

Step 1
Cut the unpeeled cucumbers into large chunks and put them, along with the mint, lemon juice, agave syrup, matcha powder, salt, and about 1 cup of water, in a blender. Puree until liquefied.

Step 2
Strain through a sieve to remove any large pieces. Pour into a large pitcher and add 4 more cups of water. Stir and chill until ready to serve. Garnish with fresh mint and/or lemon slices and lots of ice.

Hundreds of recipes at tabletmag.com/recipes