north of Jerusalem rises the hill called Ba’al Hat-zor, the highest in the West Bank, named for the old Canaanite god worshiped at peaks like this with human sacrifice, and mentioned in the Bible as the scene of a royal fratricide. When I was there late one afternoon, walking between an old cistern and a few twisted oaks, the hilltop felt stark and unsettled, though that might just have been because of everything I knew. The place kept its secrets. It was hard to match the landscape to the sketch made by the forensics team. There was no trace of the German or his temple.

I first heard of Erich Gunther Deutecom from a family friend in Nahariya, the northern town where my parents live. This town was founded by German Jews, and in the early 1960s, the war barely over, it was a place full of people with terrible stories that were alluded to in whispers if there were children around. Many residents had part of their minds shaken loose by what they’d seen, so Deutecom wasn’t unique in that way. And there was nothing strange about the fact he spoke German: Almost everyone in the town knew German, even if they’d sworn never to speak it again.

He was unique because he was the other kind of German.

You can explain Israel with the kind of stories that people are used to, narratives about politics, leaders, or wars. But if you spend enough time here, you meet characters driven by forces that rationalists find it hard to take seriously or even to grasp—forces like the voice of God, for example, as detailed in Scripture if you just know where to look; or the propulsive force of violence perpetrated in different times and places, and the lessons it seemed to teach; or urgent schemes for cosmic repair. The country can’t be understood without people like Deutecom. I spent months trying to unravel his story, one whose ambiguities gestured mutely to the black hole that Germany created at the center of the 20th century, to the aftershocks of that event in this country, and to the chances that humans can ever fix what’s broken.

There’s a small botanical garden you can visit today in Nahariya, a tidy enclosure of tropical plants stalked by peacocks and third-graders. I’d passed it hundreds of times but didn’t know, until informed by Rafi Levinson, a friend of my parents, that it began as a park created by a mysterious stranger who disappeared decades before. This earlier park was divided into 12 sections, one
for each of the tribes of Israel, arrayed around an odd structure known as the Tabernacle. The German had created the park with his own hands and money, giving the town a rare public plot of green in a scrappy area where most open spaces were used for cows or cabbage.

There's no trace of Deutecom's name in the garden, or anywhere in the town. But people who were children at the time remember him: A tall, blond man of military bearing, riding erect on a blue bicycle. Aya Megdi, 70, who was raised in a German-speaking home next door, described a man of culture, an architect who spoke polished hochdeutsch. “He was handsome, totally Aryan,” she told me. In his house, which he designed himself, he had books and detailed plans for extraordinary buildings. Much later he’d be described as a kind of lunatic; the most comprehensive article written about him in Hebrew, published 30 years ago, referred to him as an “eccentric.” But the people of the town don’t remember him that way at all. Deutecom was a man with unusual ideas, but he was sane.

In his park he strictly forbade smoking, this at a time when people smoked everywhere—a detail of his character that would recur, in dramatic circumstances, later on. On Fridays in the Tabernacle he’d screen cartoons for the children, usually with a biblical theme. Everyone knew he was Christian, but he asked to be called by a Hebrew name, Gideon. He had a wife back in Germany, and a daughter, and for a while they came to live with him in the town. The girl had Down syndrome, and Aya remembered that she used to spend hours walking around in circles. But after a while they went back home for good, leaving Deutecom with the Jews, with his park, and with the future plans he pursued with dogged and mystifying effort. The children saw nothing strange in any of this, or nothing stranger than everything seems when you’re young.

There were other German Christians around this part of the Galilee in those years. In a moshav south of Nahariya, for example, there were the Nothackers, Friedrich and Luise, who opened a rest home for Holocaust survivors in 1960. Just inland there was the Christian kibbutz of Nes Amim, where German and Dutch volunteers grew roses and tried to participate in the rebirth of Jewish life after the war. (This village, where I once worked in the greenhouses, is a short bike ride from the kibbutz called Ghetto Fighters, founded by survivors of the Jewish resistance. The western Galilee is an interesting and underappreciated part of this country.) The people in the town understood that Deutecom was a man of deep religious faith, and that he’d come to make amends—but whether it was for his people’s crimes, or for his own, it wasn’t clear. The truth is that no one really knew who he was.

What do we know?

We have his name, though there’s dispute about the spelling: The most common would seem to be “Deutkom,” and in a brief dispatch from 1973 the Jerusalem Post rendered it “Deut-Akom.” But in the one example I’ve seen in his own handwriting, he spelled it the way I’m spelling it here. On occasion he was referred to as Erich Gunther, and on other occasions as Gideon Gunther. And there’s the possibility that none of these names were really his at all.

We know where he lived, at 6 Redemption Rd. A few months ago I was in the little house he built, sitting on a couch with Dr. Shaul Shasha, who’d bought the property from the German five decades before. The botanical garden was next door, and out the window glistened a peacock that had just jumped over the wall, as if sending regards from the man I was looking for. Shasha, 83, recalled how Deutecom sold him the house after the fact, around an odd structure known as the Tabernacle. The German had created the park with his own hands and money, giving the town a rare public plot of green in a scrappy area where most open spaces were used for cows or cabbage.

Whatever happened next is clearly at the center of Deutecom’s strange life, but the facts are elusive. According to Litani’s account, he fought in North Africa with Rommel’s Afrika Korps, a version of events for which no source is given, but which might be true. It’s also true, however, that this would be...
a good story to tell a town of European Jews, because it would place him far away from the unmarked graves of their relatives. One can be forgiven for suspecting that a mission to the Jews as exceptional as the one Deutecom was attempting might be driven not by a general sense of responsibility but by the memory of something he’d done with his own hands.

There seems to have been a rough division among residents of the neighborhood: People who escaped to Israel before the war were open to him, while those who experienced the genocide in Europe were not. Aya Megdi said her German father never felt comfortable around Deutecom, but didn’t think it was because he suspected the stranger was a Nazi. It was, she thought, because he was educated and made her father, a farmer, feel inadequate. When I spoke to Effi Wildman, another neighbor who was a teenager at the time, he said his parents avoided the German altogether. They always believed, he said, that he’d served on the Eastern Front. There’s some statistical logic to the idea, as that’s where the bulk of the Wehrmacht was engaged at the peak of the war. That’s also where millions of Jews were shot, gassed in trucks, or deported to death camps by Germans around his age.

Over the past few months a journalist in Berlin, Daniel Mosseri, ran checks on Tablet’s behalf in the archives housing Wehrmacht records. The archivists found no soldier or officer with that name. The same reply came from the archive that keeps the lists of Nazi party officials and members of elite arms of the Third Reich, like the SS and SD. If Deutecom served in any of those organizations, either his file hasn’t been found, or he was there under a different name.

Pursuing this story felt like excavating those burned scrolls in Pompeii that disintegrate when you touch them. The journalist Litani, for example, seemed to have been given a trove of the German’s own documents decades ago—but when I called him at home, his daughter answered and seemed surprised. Her father had died five days before, and they were sitting shiva. When I interviewed the 83-year-old Dr. Shasha in the German’s old living room, he seemed in good spirits. He died the next week.

In the early 1970s the German abandoned his park and Tabernacle. “I think he left disappointed. Not everyone accepted him,” Aya Megdi, the German’s neighbor in Nahariya, said.

He next surfaces in a small agricultural village called Segev, in the hills of western Galilee. Here, too, he planted a garden, this one of cacti, and invited local children to help out, according to a brief account written for a local newsletter by a resident named Yisrael Ben-Dor. He was treated respectfully by his neighbors, Ben-Dor wrote, but didn’t stay for long. He sold his house to a man named Oskar Eder. This Eder would go on to found a coexistence center known as the Valley of Peace, and would convert to Judaism, taking the name Asher. He’d been a Luftwaffe pilot in the war.

Among Deutecom’s papers are sketches of a grand structure he called the Friedens Tempel, or Peace Temple, which he meant to build in Jerusalem. The temple would bring together Jews, Christians, and Muslims, echoing the biblical description of “a house of prayer for all nations.” The sketches are mesmerizing, evoking both the craft of a skilled architect and the intricate madness of a bearded American who once approached me at the Hebrew University library, unrolling detailed maps tracing what he believed to be the true path of the Exodus from Egypt. He’d spent years drawing them. This man, who was well-known around Jerusalem, believed he was King David. He died of exposure in a cave outside the city a year or two later.

When Mayor Teddy Kolleck received the plans, he responded as you’d expect—the mayor of Jerusalem gets temple proposals like other mayors get parking complaints. When the journalist Litani asked Kolleck about it, the mayor said that if he got the German’s request he certainly threw it out: “I didn’t, and still don’t, have time for lunatics.” If Deutecom was discouraged, he wasn’t deterred. That’s how he finally ended up in the hills north of Jerusalem, by the Palestinian town of Silwad, in the territories Israel had captured from Jordan five years before.

This hill, known in Arabic as Jebel Assour, wasn’t the Temple Mount, but from its peak you could see to Jerusalem and across the land—from the Mediterranean in the west to the hills of Jordan in the east, and all the way to Mount Hermon in the north. The Hebrew name of the place, Ba’al Hatzor, appears in 2 Samuel as the scene of an episode that happens not long after one of King David’s sons, Amnon, rapes his half-sister Tamar. Another of the king’s sons, Avshalom, invites Amnon to the hill to celebrate as their shepherds shear the goats, gets his brother drunk, and then avenges the rape by killing him and leaving his body on the hill. Avshalom himself wouldn’t last much longer. I spent an hour or two up there. The hill named for the Canaanite deity still feels like a place governed by the darker gods. As the sun crept down to the western horizon, I was eager to leave.

Today the drive north from Jerusalem to the hill takes you through the West Bank’s impossible landscape, with its unhappy tangle of Palestinian villages hemmed in by army checkpoints and red-roofed settlements, including Ofra, one of the flagships of the religious settler movement. But in 1972 there still weren’t more than a few thousand Jews
living in the West Bank. The future of the territories wasn’t clear. Deutecom bought a plot of land on the hill from a Palestinian family in Silwad, hired a few workers who brought a few donkeys, and began hauling up planks and cement. First he built a shack and moved in. He had a girlfriend in Jerusalem, and sometimes she’d come to stay with him. But mostly he was there alone, by the old cistern and the misshapen oaks.

If he was unaware at first of the growing anger among Palestinians about people encroaching on their land, he couldn’t have remained unaware when his shack was burned the first time. And if he brushed off the first arson, it would have been harder to ignore the second. He asked the Israeli army for help, but the army didn’t have time for the German and his temple. He kept building. He struck people in Silwad as someone with a military demeanor. The townspeople remember him firing flares from the hilltop at night, an image that’s hard to shake—the old soldier staring into the darkness gripping a flare gun, perhaps remembering other nights of fear. Was it Tobruk? Stalingrad? Arnhem? A pit of women and children among Ukrainian pines? Who did he think was coming up that hill?

On Feb. 16, 1973, a 19-year-old named Ahmed al-Zeer was working in the agricultural lands of Silwad when a friend, Abdullah Fardan, walked over to talk about the stranger. They both believed, as al-Zeer later told police, “that we must prevent Jews and foreigners from buying land and building houses near us.” The Arab armies had failed in 1948 and 1967, the Jews had won, and people in the villages felt their backs against the wall. They decided to kill him.

One of them took a hoe and the other an iron pipe. They climbed toward the German’s shack, arriving before sunset, the same eerie time of my own visit five decades later. They struck up a conversation, al-Zeer said in his confession, and Deutecom “received us warmly.” When the Palestinians offered the stranger a cigarette he wouldn’t take it, explaining that he didn’t smoke—a detail like a fingerprint, indicating that this is a real description of the German’s last moments.

The sun was setting. Al-Zeer suggested he look at how beautiful it was, and when the victim turned his head al-Zeer struck him from behind. The German’s hat flew off but he was still conscious, and began to scream for help. Al-Zeer pinned his hands behind his back while his friend used the pipe. After a few blows to the head Deutecom fell silent. “I felt the German stop resisting,” al-Zeer said in his confession, “and let him fall.” The two assailants had the idea that his retinas might contain the last image he saw, and that the Israelis could somehow use this to identify them. That’s why they gouged out his eyes.

The murder was briefly reported in Israel. “Man found dead near Ramallah,” read the Jerusalem Post headline over a three-paragraph story. A scan of the main German newspapers of the time came up with no mention at all. When the police swept through Silwad looking for the killers they arrested al-Zeer, but he didn’t talk and they let him go. The crime remained unsolved. The German’s shack fell into disrepair, and by the time I showed up there were no traces I could find. His park in Nahariya surrendered to weeds, and at some point the Tabernacle vanished, no one remembers exactly when. A new botanical garden was built on the spot. He was forgotten, but not completely.

The person who remembers him best lives where he did all those years ago, in the town of Silwad, at the bottom of the hill. I located Ahmed al-Zeer with the help of a Palestinian colleague. The 19-year-old is now 68, but he seemed even older than that. He spoke in a frail voice, slouched on a couch, his swollen feet resting on a pillow.

He recalled hearing his neighbors talk about a stranger who’d bought land from a villager who shouldn’t have sold it. Maybe this man was building a hotel, they didn’t know. Everyone called him “the German,” but he had a Jewish name, Gideon, and the villagers were certain he was a settler. There were rumors, al-Zeer said, that this man was connected to the Shin Bet or the CIA. It was said that he kept a pistol. Everyone saw the flares he fired at night. Al-Zeer seemed curious about the victim, whom he called Gideon Gunther. He didn’t know much about him.

The men of Silwad tried to warn the neighbors who’d sold their land, but they refused to cancel the deal. “Land is a man’s personal honor, and when they didn’t retract, he had to die to protect our land and our honor,” al-Zeer said. The German’s death sentence came from military commanders in Fatah: “The decision was from the leadership, who said this man has no honor and if you can kill him, do it.” So he did it.

Afterward he escaped to the Gulf and tried to build a new life in Kuwait. When that didn’t work out he joined the PLO fedayeen training in camps in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. In the summer of 1976, three years after the killing, he and two other fighters were trying to cross back from Jordan with a shipment of rifles and hand grenades when they ran into an Israeli ambush. His two comrades were killed but he was only wounded, and his life was saved by doctors at Hadassah Hospital. That’s where the police took his confession, which he says he gave only after the interrogators showed him the signed confession of his accomplice, Fardan.

For obtaining and publishing the text of the original confession we’re indebted, as in so much else in this story, to the late journalist Litani, whose interest in the case turned out not be purely academic: He’d been a press officer in the army’s West Bank headquarters when Deutecom was on the hill, and his fiancé, also an officer, had fielded the German’s appeals for protection in the weeks before the murder. They hadn’t done enough to save him, he wrote. “Since then I’ve been going around with a sense of guilt about this man, whom I never met.”

An Israeli court sentenced al-Zeer to life. But nine years later, when the
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command traded three captive Israeli soldiers for more than a thousand prisoners, his name was on the list and he walked. He ended up in Libya, drifted to Jordan, married, and eventually had eight children. He came back to his town after Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo Accords in 1993, and got a job with the Palestinian Authority, first as a lawyer and then as a military judge.

Twenty years after his return, in 2013, he was in his town's agricultural lands at the foot of the hill when a group of young Israeli men approached from a nearby settlement outpost. At least one of the assailants had an iron bar, and they beat him within an inch of his life. There's no indication they knew who he was. An Israeli human rights group published a photograph of al-Zeer in the hospital, his head bandaged and both eyes swollen shut. That report brought him back to the attention of the few people who take an interest in this case, and eventually led me to him.

He hasn't recovered from the assault. He can barely walk, and moves around his house with the help of his wife. All of this happened a short walk downhill from where he'd once offered the German a cigarette, and suggested he turn around for a moment to see the sunset.

There's no peace temple at Ba'al Hatzor. This country might draw dreamers, but it has other plans. The hill remains an ambiguous place, one that suggests unsettling truths about humans while never quite revealing what it knows.

Point your smartphone camera at the QR code to read the complete interview with Edward Luttwak.

This article was originally published on June 13, 2022.

David Samuels: How well do you actually know Vladimir Putin?

Edward Luttwak: I was in Leningrad with Putin in 1990, and I used to invite him to the only two decent restaurants in town at the time, which were in Finnish-operated hotels called Pribaltika and Pokasia which only accepted foreign currency. At the time, he was a poorly paid municipal employee, right? He socialized with other poorly paid municipal employees.

Even then, when nobody knew that Russia was a capitalist country, you couldn't buy any land for a villa on the Baltic shore, too expensive. Putin and his friends couldn't afford it. So they found land on a less beautiful lake, one farther away from the city, and they established the Ozero cooperative. It was a legal entity, even in Soviet times, called a cooperativa. The members of that cooperative are the people now known as the biggest of Putin's oligarchs and his inner circle, his alternative government.

DS: Why were you inviting him to dinner every night?

EL: I was in Leningrad working for the Italian oil company AGIP, part of ENI. It's a bit of a tragic story. The head of AGIP hired me to go to facilitate the donation to the city of Leningrad of a copy of the Bocconi business school of Milan. They hired me to negotiate that gift with a counterpart, the deputy of Sobchak, the recently elected mayor of Leningrad, who was the first freely elected public official in the Soviet Union. The deputy’s job was to interact with foreigners like me. That was Putin.

Putin and I could speak of course, because he's a German-speaker, as I am. So I was doing this thing for this head of operations of AGIP who then got caught up within two years in a huge political scandal and ended up in pre-trial detention at the San Vittore prison where he hung himself.

DS: What were your impressions of Putin when you knew him?

EL: He was a disciplined person. He was poorly dressed. He was a poor municipal employee, he and his wife. They couldn't go into the foreign currency shop, which meant they couldn't have a decent meal at the hotels, which only took foreign currency.

DS: Now tell me what you thought of him as a working partner.

EL: He seemed quite serious, careful. That was a lot of the original conversations. When I first met him, I met him with the Italian, OK, who came with all the panoply of the chief executive of an oil company, with a sort of magnificent appearance. Putin was very modest. I was modest.

And then the Italian went off and I did all these negotiations. And every evening we would continue working over dinner.
To have an armistice you have to have a cease-fire. The moment there is a cease-fire, you lift all the sanctions, so that the Russians have a reason to respect the cease-fire. Lift them all at once. And that’s how we get out.

DS: Now there is a victory party here in Washington that wants the Ukrainians to first kick out all the Russians, and then Putin will fall, and then maybe we will put the Russian generals on trial for their crimes.

EL: I don’t want any of that stuff. I’m completely opposed to it. They need to have a dirty, contemptible compromise.

This is an excerpt of a longer Q&A with Edward Luttwak that ran on June 12, 2022. To read the full conversation, go to https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/three-blind-kings-edward-luttwak.

Both Sides Now
As the abortion debate heats up, Christian groups in New York—on both sides—stake out positions beyond angry rhetoric and stereotypes

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

With the abortion debate at a fever pitch since the leak of Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito’s draft decision to overturn Roe v. Wade, Christian groups in lower Manhattan are responding—on both sides. The Roman Catholic Sisters of Life is helping women keep pregnancies, even in the darkest circumstances, while Judson Memorial, Middle Collegiate, and First Presbyterian Churches advocate for abortion access in addition to a host of progressive social justice causes. Between slogans like “Keep your roses off my ovaries” and “Life begins at conception” that appear on signs at rallies and protests, religious perspectives on abortions and the people who have them—nearly two-thirds of whom claim a religious affiliation—are often more nuanced than activist messaging and stereotypes suggest.

The Sisters of Life is a women’s religious order that operates Visitation House, a hub for pregnant women, mothers, and their children, tucked away in the undercroft of St. Andrew Catholic Church. It is located in Foley Square, also known as Federal Plaza, home to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, the Second Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals, and NYPD headquarters. I arrived there less than a week after the site played host to protesters reacting to the leaked Alito draft decision. “Abort SCOTUS” read a bit of graffiti in the square.

Visitation House is one of a handful of Sisters of Life locations, with a staff of 11 sisters on site. It has been at Federal Plaza only around four years, and has a homey, improvised feel: A large white event tent in the middle covers long, set tables, and functions as a dining room, while hinged wooden boards with cloth stapled over them serve as dividers to create receiving rooms and meeting spaces. My guide, a soft-spoken woman called Sister Amata Filia, showed me the church’s old gift shop, now serving as their “mission control” center, an office space with young sisters at work behind computers. There are plans to renovate the old rectory to have more permanent offices and spaces, but it’s been slow going. “We just continue to kind of make it work,” she said.
As is frequently the case when children are involved, what began as improvisatory has somehow become the modus operandi at Visitation House. “We’re always amazed because sometimes we feel a little hesitant about it like, ‘Oh don’t mind the mess,’” said Sister Amata, “But I mean, almost always, the moms come in here and they’re like, ‘Wow, I feel so much peace here, this is so nice.’ Most of them are coming from tiny little apartments or shelters, or just places that they don’t even have room to move around or the kids to play. Hopefully it’s more the relationship they’re receiving, too, they feel at home here even if the externals aren’t perfect.”

Over tea and cookies in one of those small makeshift rooms, Sister Amata explained what happens when a pregnant woman comes to Visitation House. The women usually phone ahead to schedule an appointment—Visitation House is open Monday through Thursday, with Fridays and Sundays being reserved as days of prayer for the sisters. Women find out about the Sisters of Life from social workers, priests, friends, or somebody in their building who has previously been helped by the sisters. “It’s a lot of word of mouth,” said Sister Amata.

“Sometimes they’re even someone going into say, Planned Parenthood for their abortion appointment, and it’ll speak to somebody who’s praying outside who gives them a brochure and says, this is another option for you, and they’ll come over and see us [and] explore other possibilities.”

When I asked how often this last scenario occurs, Sister Amata said, “More than you would expect. Several each week. Especially in recent years, I think, because I think the presence out in front of the clinics has gotten greater and more steady, and I feel like there’s a lot of good resources out there now to train sidewalk counselors to perhaps do outreach in a way that will actually reach women and not just push them away further, when it’s done in a prayerful spirit.”

Sidewalk counselors differ from the agitating protesters known for carrying upsetting photos of mutilated fetuses or yelling fire-and-brimstone warnings at women. They aren’t necessarily the ones outside with rosaries (or inside), either. The women who come to Visitation House are often referred by trained volunteers from Sidewalk Advocates for Life, a national, cross-denominational Christian organization providing training for what they call sidewalk advocacy, which they say is intended to emphasize “the peaceful, prayerful, law-abiding methods of this ministry with love as its centerpiece.” A Sidewalk Advocates for Life-trained sidewalk counselor with whom I spoke said counselors can take a range of approaches to speaking to women approaching the clinic, from holding signs to approaching the woman (New York state prohibits obstructing access, causing damage, or issuing threats outside of clinics, but does not require buffer zones).

Those points of contact can take the form of a phone call from the clinic with a woman, when Sister Amata said the woman will talk to the sisters for a few minutes. Sometimes these women will actually come to Visitation House in person. When it comes to how many women choose to keep their pregnancies, Sister Amata said, “Probably half the time. Especially if they can come in.” The aim, she said, is to “get them to the point where they’re open to at least just coming for a visit to hear us out.”

She said the women don’t have to be Catholic, nor are they expected to become so. “Faith is never something that we push on anyone,” Sister Amata said. “We serve anyone of all backgrounds, all faiths, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultures.” And they get them. “We really do see a lot of everything. From the Upper East Side married couple who has it all, but received an adverse prenatal diagnosis, and they’re being pushed by the doctors to have an abortion.” (For these types of situations, Sister Amata mentioned a neonatal hospice program at New York Presbyterian.)

Initial visits can take hours, according to Sister Amata. “We’ll just sit down with them, kind of like this,” she said, gesturing to the tea tray between us, “have, like, a tea party, basically.” Then, said Sister Amata, “We’ll just listen to them, hear their story, what are they experiencing, what is the situation, what are their fears, what are the pressures maybe that they’re experiencing. But beyond that, what are their dreams? Their goals for life? Because this new life given to them doesn’t necessarily have to be the end of all of that. So we kind of just try to receive them where they are, and just hear what’s going to be helpful for you, and also help them kind of almost discover it for themselves, like, well, what is your heart saying about this? Because more often than not, they want to choose life, they just feel so overwhelmed by the circumstances, or it just doesn’t seem possible, or the people who ought to be supporting them aren’t, and so we just try to gently fill in maybe the gaps for that, and you know, offer referrals to other places. But also a promise to continue to walk with them for as much as it’s helpful for them.”

The focus isn’t on the fetus. “We rarely, especially at the very beginning, talk about the baby directly,” said Sister Amata. “Our main focus is actually on the mother and on helping her see her own goodness, her own dignity, her own strength, because if she believes in herself, she’s going to be a good mother to this child, she’s going to have the faith it takes and the courage it takes to do whatever it takes to welcome this life into the world. But it’s when she feels alone abandoned, you know, unworthy, that’s when she’s more likely to despair.”

Statistics from the pro-choice Guttmacher Institute support Sister Amata’s claims about the women’s concerns. Abortion patients disproportionately tend to be poor or low-income, and among the primary reasons U.S. women gave for obtaining abortions between 2004 and 2010 were not being financially prepared, and not being the right time for a baby.

A legion of volunteers, whom they call coworkers, enable the Sisters of Life to offer women more than a listening ear. Sister Amata said the sisters can connect women with these volunteers for a variety of things. She cites assistance ranging from professional services and help with resumes, to picking up and dropping off car seats (there were several in one of Visitation House’s four well-stocked store rooms), throwing baby showers, or even meeting for coffee and conversation once a week. I saw about four volunteers, when I was there on a
weekday afternoon: lay people, Black and white, women and one man, sorting and organizing.

Like the sidewalk counselors, coworkers are trained. Their program includes modules on reflective listening and understanding the perspective of a pregnant woman. Recently, the Sisters of Life, in partnership with the University of Notre Dame, released Into Life, an adapted online version of their coworker training, intended to encourage productive conversations both with and about people who seek abortions.

The Sisters of Life have what Sister Amata called “a principle of nonabandonment.” “After the baby’s born,” she said, “we’re not just going to be like, ‘See you, goodbye, we’re done with you!’”

Sister Amata said while they can’t give direct financial assistance, they can provide families with gift cards along with items from their Visitation House storerooms. (“Don’t go buy the diapers, we’ll provide that, and you use that money for your rent, you know what I mean?”)

In unique situations, she said they’ll do “a direct ask” among their volunteers. “We’ve had coworkers donate their frequent flyer miles so we could move a mother out of New York to a maternity home in a different place,” she said.

Sister Amata estimates of the thousands of people on their email list, there are about 1,000 active volunteers in the tri-state area, not all uniformly pro-life or even Catholic.

Throughout my visit, the sounds of women’s voices were ambient, speaking both English and Spanish. I saw two young women draped over chairs, chatting quietly with iced coffee in hand, and a sister in the order’s signature blue and white habit leaving an occupied meeting room with finished plates of food.

I overheard a sister recommending to a mother a parenting book which I had meant to ask Sister Amata whether she was familiar during our interview. As I left, a young child’s voice resonating from somewhere in the building, I walked past a stocked changing table, and an empty stroller parked by the door.

That same week, I met with Greg Stovell, senior pastor at the 304-year-old First Presbyterian Church of New York City.

“Stovell described meeting with women either before or after their procedures, usually after, and often as many as 10 or 15 years later.”

Like the other Manhattan pastors I interviewed, he was eager to share with me his church’s place in American history. “Rebels since the beginning,” he said, the church was the preferred place of worship for patriots during the Revolution. He also showed me the font where Theodore Roosevelt was baptized as an infant.

First Presbyterian’s ornate, wood-carved interior and stained-glass windows evoke a traditional Scottish kirk, while the reception area where I met Stovell was bright and polished, with an airy modern interior. It’s an apt metaphor for Stovell’s description of his congregation: “Very traditional service, but incredibly progressive.” He said the congregation is “not just blue,” but “electric blue.”

First Presbyterian belongs to Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) branch, one of the largest branches of Presbyterianism in America, with a more theologically liberal orientation. Even still, Stovell said, “PCUSA is a really big tent. We can just go across the river and the church will be 100% different from this one.” He characterizes the overall persuasion of PCUSA (“if we’re going to do labels”) as moderate or centrist right, “all the way to way left.” This, Stovell said, makes a one-size-fits-all doctrinal stance on abortion a complicated prospect that can vary by congregation or pastor. He said while PCUSA congregations have tended to be pro-choice, congregations out near Dallas or Houston, for example, “tend to be more pro-life.”

Stovell said his particular congregation at First Presbyterian hosts a variety of initiatives: groups for artists, Bible studies, and an online current events group that started to keep up with the candidates in the run-up to the 2020 elections, “modeling how Christians can speak in a civilized way on politics,” that now looks at things like local and national elections.

They don’t just talk about events, however. Since he came on board about a year and a half ago, Stovell said advocacy work takes the form of letter writing, women’s marches (“most of the sanctioned, well-organized ones,” he specified), and a weekly soup kitchen, in cooperation with nearby St. Joseph’s Catholic Church. Other initiatives include work with mission partners for things like coat drives, immigrant and refugee ministry, and LGBTQ rights work. Stovell said prior to his time there, pastors have served as liaisons to Planned Parenthood, he thinks primarily in a counseling capacity. “Our main ministry when it comes to reproductive rights right now has to do with pastoral care,” he said.

Stovell described meeting with women either before or after their procedures, usually after, and often as many as 10 or 15 years later. Stovell said the women usually reach out to the church directly, a fact he attributes to its Fifth Avenue location and proximity to college campuses. Nor are they exclusively church members. “Everybody’s different,” said Stovell. “In some cases it’s an assurance that it is their choice, and others, it’s just pastoral care, it’s just listening, praying with them. In very few cases they have questions about what the Bible has to say. But in most of those cases, they don’t really want to know exactly what the Bible has to say, they want to know how to strengthen their faith as they’re going through the sometimes effects, sometimes trauma, sometimes processing decisions.”

In this way, his approach is not so different from Sister Amata’s. “Oh, no,”
involved in the abortion issue is not so
35 years in the position. “For us to get
Moody, who stepped down in 1992 after
cooperation of Judson pastor Howard
character, which runs contrary to the
She attributes the church's freewheeling
Judson's well-known performance space
for more space for artists, the genesis of
According to Hastings, this focus is the
heart for the needs of the people, just go
Judson was a key part of the creation of
She said in Judson's DNA is “having a
She said in Judson's DNA is “having a
Abigail Hastings at Judson Memorial
Church, located in the heart of the NYU
CCS chapters, including the one in New
Howard used to say the church exists
And that orientation means that you’re constantly
By 1970, CCS had known chapters in 26 states.
“Howard used to say the church exists
After Roe v. Wade, Hastings said many
CCS’s legacy survives in faith-based repro-
reproductive justice groups like SACReD
and the Religious Coalition for Repro-
delivered abortion access for many lower-
ended abortion access for many lower-
surprising because you know, Howard
would look around and say, 'We need
Hastings said. The issue came to
Moody’s doorstep “literally,” according
to Hastings, when a former Judson pas-
tor referred a young woman in search
of an abortion to the church for coun-
seling in 1957. The difficult, emotional
experience of trying to help the woman
procure an abortion, which was illegal
at the time, opened Moody’s eyes to the
reality of the issue. Less than a decade
later, an interfaith discussion group of
clergy Moody had been meeting with
decided to form a coalition to help
women access safe abortions, as well as
to lobby for legislative reform. Judson
Memorial Church housed the call center
for the CCS’s work of referring, aiding,
and advising women seeking abortions,
as well as assisting those women who
desired to keep their pregnancies. In
1969, there were even confidential
plans for an abortion clinic, which they
called a Reproduction Crisis Facility, in
the church house behind Judson's site
on Washington Square. CCS was more
than a New York phenomenon, howev-
er. By 1970, CCS had known chapters in
26 states.

“Howard used to say the church exists
for the world,” said Hastings, “And that
orientation means that you’re constantly
saying where can we give help? Being in
the Village, we’re bohemian and may-
be freer thinkers, but it means we were
able to take on issues that other churches
could not or would not want to touch.”

A 2019 post on Judson's Instagram
account shows the church participating
in Stop the Bans Day of Action, an ad-
advocacy event held by NARAL and other
high profile pro-choice organizations in
response to Alabama's ban on abortions,
except in the case of risk to a woman's
life or a life-threatening fetal abnormal-
ity. “Thank God for Abortion,” reads a
banner hanging from the church. Below
the words, a drawing of a dove hovering
over outstretched hands. That same day,
Senior Minister, Rev. Donna Schaper,
appeared in a separate post at a Planned
Parenthood rally in Washington, D.C.,
in front of the Supreme Court. “I stand
with Planned Parenthood” reads her
pink fan.

For Moody and his colleague, CCS
staffer Arlene Carmen, Hastings said, “It
didn’t really matter what the issue was, if
they could do direct service, they would,
but more importantly, they were always
looking at public policy, they were al-
ways looking at, how can you change the
laws, so that we’re not doing this kind of
Band-Aid ministry, but can really make
effective change for the largest num-
ber of people, which needs to be done
through legislation.” It’s a worldview
that persists at Judson, Hastings said.
Jacqueline Lewis, senior minister at Middle Collegiate Church, is a Presbyterian-ordained minister whose congregation is affiliated with the Reformed Church of America, which has its roots in early Dutch settlers to North America. About 20 years ago, Middle Collegiate also aligned itself with the UCC. “Faith means justice,” she said. “As a child, I learned that faith meant mercy. As a child, I learned that faith meant God will always love you.” Lewis said that for her, this translates into putting compassion first, “opening doors to people to get what they need.” As a result, she said, “when a pregnant person decides that they need an abortion, they are making a choice because they are created in the image of God with agency.”

Like Sister Amata and Greg Stovell, Lewis has counseled women about abortion, both before and after. Women who are victims of rape or incest, or women “who just cannot have a baby right now,” she said. “Just can’t do it, don’t want to do it.” Lewis speaks of a “growing understanding” of the reasons why women get abortions: “We support a person’s right to make autonomic decisions for their own life and their own circumstances,” which she calls “an act of faith in God.”

Middle Collegiate is, she said, the oldest continuous Protestant church in North America, dating back to 1628. Today, its building is surrounded by fencing and construction work as the members rebuild from a fire in December 2020. As they work to repair their building, she said they are also working to repair their church’s historical complicity in taking the island of Manhattan from the Lenape tribe, and the city’s debt to the labor of enslaved people. Lewis said these reparations have taken the form of food pantries, clothing drives, after-school programs, of responding to the needs of victims and families during the AIDS crisis in the East Village, centering anti-racism in their work, support for LGBTQ rights, and most recently, assisting Ukrainian refugees. Lewis includes the church’s efforts to uphold Roe in recent years in these restorative efforts. “In these last few years when we have felt the threat against Roe v. Wade,” she said, “we stood against the justices who were against the women.”

On May 9, the church’s Instagram account posted attendee information for “Leaked SCOTUS Draft: A Space for Processing and Action,” hosted by Lewis and other Middle Church clergy. Members were invited to join them “to process the recent leaked SCOTUS draft and how together we can act toward justice and care for one another well.” Planned small group discussions were centered around worries, triggers, and information-sharing about actions being taken in response. “Come, share with family, and let’s talk together about how we’re going to keep each other safe.” A couple days later, followers were invited to join them at noon on May 14 at Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn. “Say it loud,” the caption read, “The majority of the U.S. supports abortion rights!” From there, they would march across the Brooklyn Bridge to the large protest at Foley Square, where the Sisters of Life and the courts share a front yard.

“Our justice is activism,” said Lewis of Middle Collegiate. “But it’s also tikun olam. How do we really work to repair the world? In our congregational life, in our families, in our writing, speaking?” In response to recent abortion controversies, Lewis said, “We’ve been on the steps of the Supreme Court, walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, we’ve been in all of these protests for the last two months, we’ve joined with our colleagues to write letters, we’ve been in the Zoom room speaking with activists across faiths, so we’re continuing to pressure.” The next step, Lewis said, is preparing to bring women to New York who need access to abortion: housing them, helping them financially, “to make a tabernacle for people who need to come,” in the same way congregation members have been able to make sanctuary for Ukrainian refugees and immigrants.

COVID-19, followed by the fire, have had a surprising effect on Middle Collegiate, which currently holds services at the East End Temple. Lewis estimates their membership numbers have grown from about 1,300 to around 1,900 members globally since March 2020, as people tuned into broadcasted services. “People are looking very much to operationalize what they think is fierce love in action,” she said. While Lewis said they are looking to open branches in California and as far as Malawi, “we’re deeply local still. We still feed people. We’re still making grants to people who need help because of COVID, we just made a grant to someone to help her pay her mortgage.” They continue to donate to racial justice programs and activists.

Today’s siloed media environment frequently prohibits the type of nuance and subtlety that a topic like abortion demands. Hence, people who believe themselves to be peaceful “Witnresses for Life” become the other side’s “anti-choice fanatics,” and people of goodwill who believe in abortion access become the “pro-death” side against which you must prepare your children. The Sisters of Life, however, are not merely pro-life any more than the pro-choice Christians at Judson, First Presbyterian, or Middle Collegiate see themselves as enemies of a gospel message that obliges them to care and advocate for the most vulnerable.

The range of approaches to abortion in Lower Manhattan alone—from legislative activism, to support for pregnant women, from addressing broader community quality of life issues, to improving abortion access—reflect the broader opinions of Americans in general around the issue. As many as 90% may oppose overturning Roe, but with regard to specifics (60% support for first trimester abortions drops by over half for second trimester procedures), the nation appears more conflicted. Life is hard and people are complicated, facts that are often overlooked in a heated national debate centered explicitly around both. But beyond the noise and behind the scenes are people of faith, hard at work in the name of compassion. ■

This story is part of a series Tablet is publishing to promote religious literacy across different religious communities, supported by a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

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With two weeks of school left, New York City Mayor Eric Adams has removed the mandate that children ages 2 to 4 need to wear masks in “early childhood settings.” Adams claimed his administration has “always said that the science will guide us out of the pandemic,” but the New York City COVID-19 case rate was around 7.5% this week, more than double the 3% rate in April, when the administration decided cases were too high to allow toddlers to take off their masks. Extensive research has shown masks worn by children in real-world settings do not effectively limit the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, young children are the least at risk for severe illness because of COVID, while wearing masks threatens children’s “learning and psychological development,” according to the World Health Organization.

Sabers out and rattling, China’s defense minister, General Wei Fenghe, announced on Sunday that his country would be building up its nuclear arsenal and that such a buildup is justified by the United States’ policies in the Pacific. Wei’s comments come less than a month after President Biden, perhaps unwittingly, upended the long-standing U.S. policy of “strategic ambiguity” regarding Taiwan by announcing that, if the island nation was invaded by China, the United States would come to Taiwan’s defense.

Bitcoin’s value continues to plunge, dropping 20% since Friday, bringing it to about 67% of its high last November, when it was valued at about $68,990 per unit. The crypto space’s total market capitalization, worth about $3 trillion at its peak last fall, has lost about $2 trillion since then, with a total value today of about $950 billion.

Long heralded as a thriving region for the U.S. middle class, the Sun Belt is rapidly becoming unaffordable, with home prices in cities from Florida to Arizona to Nevada up by more than 40% compared to last year. This is largely a result of the Sun Belt’s successes; over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work options and the need for more space drove many middle-class buyers to previously affordable and livable Sun Belt cities like Tampa, Phoenix, and Las Vegas. With many of these homebuyers abandoning the more expensive coastal markets like San Francisco or New York, it remains to be seen what the American middle class will do once it is finally priced out of America altogether.

Those who come down with COVID-19 can have greater protection from reinfection than those who receive one, two, or even three doses of the vaccine, according to a study published in The New England Journal of Medicine, indicating that natural immunity “protection [is] higher” than immunity in vaccinated but “uninfected persons.” The study, which was conducted by a team of researchers from Israel, raises questions yet again about the U.S. pandemic response—specifically whether people who have come down with COVID-19 should be required to get vaccinated or boosted at all.

A.B. Yehoshua, a writer who chronicled Israeli life with a fierce sense of empathy, died in Tel Aviv on Tuesday at the age of 85. The author of 11 novels and several short-story collections and plays—a man who “wrote in the shadow of Faulkner, with an admixture of Joyce,” as Harold Bloom put it—Yehoshua was known as an attentive narrator of his country’s lived history, offering deeply nuanced portraits of men and women navigating Israel’s birth and growth.

On May 2, 2022, the U.S. Army’s Fourth Psychological Operations Group posted a recruitment video titled “Ghosts in the Machine” to YouTube and Twitter. Departing from the optimism of traditional recruitment material, the video suggests that we live in a time of pervasive darkness and paranoia.

Rain and thunder play ominously on the ad’s soundtrack, followed by an eerie whistling motif and nightmarish lyrics about “footsteps in the night” and “wolves hiding nearby.” An old TV shows a black-and-white cartoon of a clown dancing. We hear a cacophony of news reports over a montage of empty city streets, a conductor raising his arms, a chess match in progress, the Chinese army on the march, soldiers about to storm a house, desolate underground subway tunnels, and a foggy bank of woods where a pendant decorated with a ghost hangs on a string from a scraggly bush. A legend on-screen asks, “Have you ever wondered who’s pulling the strings?” As the video builds to its climax, an actor paints his face clown-white, and mysterious masked figures emerge from the misty forest. Meanwhile, the TV playing the cartoon catches fire. “We are everywhere,” the screen threatens as martial drumming swells.

Uncle Sam, once a sturdy and optimistic figure, has adopted the aesthetic of acid-taking conspiracy theorists as the uniform of a new global information war.

—John Pistelli

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I
t was a sunny Wednesday morning in February, and 43-year-old Ariel Rosenberg, better known to the world as Ariel Pink, had an empty schedule. The former indie rock icon had descended into a state of professional living death, a condition that looked as irreversible to him as actual death. His career was now a list of accomplishments that didn’t matter anymore. He drew no encouragement from his 800,000 monthly Spotify listeners, or the 20,000 listeners—now up to a healthy 120,000—for a recent single he had done nothing to promote and that the music press had ignored. His fortunes were disconnected from his run of four consecutive albums that had received Pitchfork’s coveted Best New Music distinction, all of which had cracked the Billboard 200. He had been shunned and unwanted despite past collaborations with pop stars like Miley Cyrus and Azalea Banks, which were only footnotes in a vast catalog spanning a quarter-century, an output whose sound and sensibility had gone from that of an unknown teenager tinkering with an eight-track tape recorder to the defining rock ethos of the 2010s, simultaneously unsettled and propulsive, meaning and meaningless suspended inside layers of kitsch and haze and nostalgia. It was like none of it had ever happened.

“I definitely feel older than most people, I suppose,” he said as he stared into the morning sunlight from his living room in Los Feliz, his back to the beanbag chair, disco light, and electric cradle. Rosenberg talks in halting murmurs and in clear, paragraphlike spurts. He has a slight, even boyish frame, and his eyes possess a sharp, vulpine quality, giving off the possibility of being wired to a mind that’s only glancingly similar to yours. His hair was reaching toward shoulder-length but wasn’t shaggy—with no shows or video shoots on the horizon it had returned to its natural dirty blond. “It already feels like it’s a has-been sorta thing, like I had my moment,” he continued. “I’m an artist, you know,” Rosenberg told me in a latter interview. “My consideration is not the customer. I don’t really care about the customer.”

Rosenberg’s career collapsed when he attended the January 6, 2021, rally at the White House, an event which he has been at pains to explain is distinct from the violent siege of the U.S. Capitol several hours later. Amid a media fury, Mexican Summer, his label and owner of most of his discography, announced they had dropped him. An appearance to plead his case on Tucker Carlson’s Fox News show, along with harassment allegations from an ex-girlfriend, sealed Rosenberg’s ostracism. He can no longer tour, for fear that venues will be boycotted and that promoters will refuse to work with him. Longtime friends and collaborators vanished. Ill-wishers have photographed Rosenberg and his wife, Lyndsie Earle, in their neighborhood and posted their stalker images on social media. Earle says her husband has received “hundreds of death threats” since January of 2021. Just going out in public carries potential consequences. “I’ll go somewhere and people tweet about it immediately,” Rosenberg told me.

Rosenberg’s personality, like his music, doesn’t entirely fit together, although perhaps no one’s does under close enough scrutiny. “The thing is,” one acquaintance of Rosenberg’s told me in the spring of 2021, long before I knew I’d be writing about him, “Ariel Pink dropped acid every day for like, 10 years. He was probably on acid when he went on Tucker.” Maybe that explained his jumpiness, along with his crazed look of existential-level torment, that made the interview such colossally awkward and compelling television. But Joe Kennedy, Rosenberg’s former guitarist, assures me that an Ariel Pink whose brain is constantly being fed mind-altering drugs is “just in people’s imaginations.” No drug of any kind ever came up over my hours of speaking with him, not even weed. In conversation, he veered between otherworldliness and cold rationality, like someone who had asserted a logic and control over himself that made sense only on its own terms, and possibly only to him.

“I know he’s just fucking with people sometimes,” says Earle. “Sometimes! And sometimes he’s serious. Sometimes he is serious but doesn’t mean exactly what he’s saying. That’s one of the more complicated things about him.”

From one angle, such fluidity springs from open-mindedness, sometimes even depth. But this is not the angle much of American culture takes right now. What’s left of the culture, and especially what’s left of a corporatized and conformist alternative cultural industry, now defaults to party-line intolerance when it encounters things it can’t integrate.

Cancellation, the most important recent artistic movement native to the United States, is the enforcement of a sweeping new values system whose power has nothing to do with how many people buy into it, and certainly not with the quality of the choices it makes. Rather, it is an action-oriented aesthetic that joins the perceived self-interest of upper-level management to the higher idealism of the artists and institutions at the bottom of the multibillion-dollar American cultural ecosystem. At every stage of the culture industry, from artists to the entertainment executives they despise, and from moguls and ownership to the rank-and-file labor they exploit, everyone reached the simultaneous conclusion that America’s moral, political, and intellectual space
had become unacceptably or even dangerously permissive. Cancellation came from the pressures of the moment, from an earnest sense of social responsibility, and from a dark and eternal human need to control and exclude from which artists are not immune. The arts were deemed to be infested with racists, misogynists, transphobes, and other enemies of progress whose work or behavior felt suspiciously off in the fevered, life-or-death struggle that Donald Trump, white supremacy, the patriarchy, the coronavirus, TERFdom, rape culture, and the impending climate apocalypse all unleashed. A culling was overdue.

At the receiving end were the Ariel Pinks of the world, who never cared if they fit in even before the cancellation craze, and proved incapable of protecting themselves once it came for them. Rosenberg’s career is the story of how indie rock purged monsters that the culture had wrongly tolerated—or perhaps it’s the story of how even the most supposedly open sectors of the American creative scene abruptly slammed shut, losing any remaining patience for the complexities and cognitive dissonances that form the bulk of human existence. Both are really the same story, of how American culture got so stupid and so boring so quickly.

Did it matter, I asked Rosenberg as we smoked cigarettes out on the stoop, that his music had been so good—was the quality of his art any consolation now that so much of his life and career had fallen apart? Of course it wasn’t. “I’m being erased from history,” he calmly stated, as if reporting the temperature. “And it’s not gonna take much time.”

Los Feliz is a postcard sent from a much better world, at least for an East Coast visitor: Palm trees of Siussian proportions tower over neat little villas clinging to the zig-zag hills. “This is the East Side,” Rosenberg said. “The West Side is even more of a parody.” Rosenberg likened present-day LA to “a police state.” “The whole American experiment is done as far as I’m concerned,” the musician said as we walked through the streets.

Rosenberg grew up in Pico-Robertson, one of the centers of west LA Jewish life. His father is a gastroenterologist from Mexico. Rosenberg describes his mother as a “Deep South Baptist.” The couple divorced when Rosenberg was young; he says he “never saw them get along.” Rosenberg attended Temple Emmanu-uel Community Day School until he was 12, a nonreligious Jewish school “run by people into the kibbutz idea.”

Rosenberg appeared on Tucker Carlson in a conspicuous Magen David necklace, and his time at a liberal day school belonging to a shrinking strain of American Judaism proved formative to his self-understanding. “The message wasn’t worshiping God,” he said of his early education. “The gist of it was: Be different. You’re special because you’re different. Embrace your difference, your specialness. Embrace that everyone might be against you. You’ll use it to your advantage.” Rosenberg also appreciated Judaism’s emphasis on human fallibility. “We worship the story of us failing God over and over again,” he said. “We read it every year. We communicate the story of how we fucked up in God’s eyes.”

Rosenberg said he showed no special musical talent in childhood. But he had a musical imagination, even before he started playing the bass, the first instrument he taught himself. He would rummage through the bargain bin at record stores, and pick out albums he’d never heard of according to “a broad assessment of what the music would be, based on the limited facts in front of you.”

He spent most of his college years at CalArts, where he roomed with the future musician John Maus, and also met Tim Koh, who became Rosenberg’s bassist. (Rosenberg told me he dropped out just short of graduating and never finished his degree.) The education most applicable to Rosenberg’s future came through his high school job at the long-defunct record store Second Time Around, where he would plunder crates of unwanted vinyl, “sifting through trash, becoming a hoarder of sorts … I was ready to do that the rest of my life.” I asked him to name an artist he’d discovered during this early phase of creative life. He replied with someone I’d never heard of: Tod Dockstader, a pioneering yet now largely unknown ambient electronic composer of the 1970s and ’80s who had made a living writing transitional music for network television and crafting the soundscape of Tom and Jerry cartoons.

As Rosenberg tells it, he discovered his creative mission when he was still in his late teens, one based on a desire to disappear into the discarded music of record store bins. In other interviews, Rosenberg has mentioned being bullied as a child—maybe he savored the freedom and safety that disappearance could offer. “I wanted to be a forgotten person. I made music that was forgotten by design,” he told me. Liberated from the judgment of present or future generations, he could build his own realities and his own aesthetic without any embarrassment or help. “I wanted to not be subjected to standards of good and bad,” he told me. “I wanted to do something exceptional, with its own metrics of how it’s supposed to be processed or consumed.”

The oldest recording of Rosenberg’s I could find on the internet is an 85-minute tape made in 1996. It has a Dockstader-like quality, with droning overdubs interrupted by flashes of melody and song structure. Between 1998 and 2003, Rosenberg made hours of low-fidelity recordings that he’d produced alone, playing guitar, consumer-grade synthesizers, and bass onto heavily overdubbed cassette tapes. This cache of songs, which formed the great majority of his released material up until 2010 and included music he reworked for later recordings deep into the next decade, ranged from dark bubblegum pop to nine-minute, one-man progressive rock symphonies, to psychedelic freak-outs that are even harder to categorize, the music’s almost assultive strangeness hanging in fearful symmetry with its creator’s songwriting gifts. Almost nothing followed a typical verse-chorus-verse structure. His work was full of interpolations, abruptly dropped melodies, genre parodies, and sharp turns, riven by long canyons of atonality and excess.

Rosenberg’s work baffled even the most weathered experimentalists. Kurt
berlain assumed was also the work of Cham-
by Le Orme, a 1970s Italian prog rock
check out two vinyl records: An album
employee suggested Shags Chamberlain
local music authority and record store
label the following year.

Worn Copy
Tracks, the band's new record label.
imal Collective-related release on Paw
became the first non-An-
The Doldrums
popped one of the discs into their tour
Baltimore powerhouse ran out of mu-

2003, Rosenberg gave CD copies of his

gaville, a retreat in rural Virginia where

day," says Alex Lee Moyer, a filmmaker

turious role," Heasley further explained.
Within a matter of months, The Doldrums became the first non-An-
imal Collective-related release on Paw
Tracks, the band's new record label. Worn Copy, another early Ariel Pink
cassette, got an official release from the label the following year.

In Melbourne, Australia, a respected local music authority and record store
employee suggested Shags Chamberlain
count check out two vinyl records: An album
Le Orme, a 1970s Italian prog rock
group, and Worn Copy, which Cham-
bel the following year.
In Melbourne, Australia, a respected local music authority and record store
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Le Orme, a 1970s Italian prog rock
group, and Worn Copy, which Cham-
bel the following year.

Heasley, frontman for the beloved art rock band Lilys, first met Rosenberg
in Philadelphia in 2000. What struck Heasley most was Rosenberg's ability to
record in his bedroom at a studio level of sonic fullness without losing “the
familiarity and comfort of eight-track cassette recording.” Heasley had tried to
recreate the “monitoring environment” Rosenberg had made for himself
in California, using roughly the equipment Rosenberg himself had used. He
couldn’t do it.

Jason Falkner, an accomplished song-
writer and guitarist and future Ariel Pink collaborator, first saw Rosenberg
play a nearly empty room in Los An-
geles in 2001—at that point, Ariel Pink
stood on stage alone, singing over back-
ing tracks. Falkner was blown away.

“There’s a whole cauldron of stuff going
on in that early music that is just unique
and strange and scary and beautiful at
the same time. It just had all of these
types of contradictions.” No one in the
LA of the early 2000s was making any-
things like it. “He was definitely on an
island,” Falkner recalled. “Ariel kind of
created a scene here that didn’t exist.”

Rosenberg’s art traced a journey that is
impossible now, in a time when mu-
ic is digitally compressed to the point
is impossible now, in a time when mu-
ic is digitally compressed to the point

“Rosenberg had a full band, Chamberlain

I asked him about those sessions, Rosen-
berg couldn’t recall what music they’d

“I had these little melodies in my head.
It’s not rocket science. It’s not a crazy
formula,” Rosenberg explained between
kisses on his 6-month-old daughter’s

“In my mind it’s a totally different
beast than it is for the rest of the world,”
he said of his music. “It’s a wishy-washy
machine organ-pump sound that’s out in
the stratosphere. There’s no instrument
that can make it. It’s this undulating, or-

ical musician. “All the melodies were
in his head and the things he’s able to
hear are very complex and harmonical-
ly rich,” Joe Kennedy confirmed. When
Rosenberg had a full band, Chamberlain
explained, he would teach the songs by
humming each part for each individ-

tarian,” says Kennedy, an “antagonist,”
adds Chamberlain.

“He accepts he is only going to be him.
Playing with that is his agent provoc-
ateur role,” Heasley further explained.
He spoke to me by phone from Yo-
gaville, a retreat in rural Virginia where
he has occasionally lived and worked.
Meditation is a needed psychic respite
from Heasley’s more than 30 years as a
cultishly followed psychedelic rock ad-
venturer. The man behind Lilys, more
than just about anyone, would know
whether there’s any balance to be had
in a life like Ariel Rosenberg’s. “He’s
Rosenberg and I wound through sunny Los Feliz. For about an hour, it proved difficult to keep Rosenberg focused on anything other than the collapsing state of his music career, of America, and of humankind in general. The post-January 6 freeze-out had been more complete than nearly anyone realized, he explained as we stalked the empty LA sidewalks. It wasn’t just that he was unwelcome wherever he went. His friends had left him, including some close ones.

Take John Maus, for instance. Maus, who roomed with Rosenberg at CalArts, is an even more idiosyncratic figure than Rosenberg. One of the most astonishing live performers of his generation of indie artists and something of a recluse, he holds a philosophy Ph.D. and spent years building his own analog synthesizers for his 2017 album Screen Memories, only to later declare that their impact was often unhearable even to him. Maus and Rosenberg traveled to the January 6 White House rally together, standing at the fringes of the crowd. Rosenberg thinks that Maus—who, unlike Rosenberg, disavowed any support for Trump in the days after January 6—now lives in fear of his career being destroyed over his perceived political beliefs.

But Maus had tested the waters of uncanceling Rosenberg. Rosenberg says that Maus invited him to work as the sound engineer for his headlining set at Substance, a three-day festival held at the Belasco in LA in November of 2021. “I told John immediately: I appreciate the invite but I’m not sure that I’m even allowed in the building, man.”

Rosenberg was broadly correct. “We noticed Ariel Pink is on the John Maus guest list for Substance,” read a message that Restless Nites, one of the festival’s promoters, sent to Maus. “We’re fans of John Maus of course, but adding Ariel to the mix will only raise complaints and concerns. The potential optics of Ariel being at Substance is too triggering for people and something we feel could affect the perception of Substance overall. We need to protect Substance as well as the audience and performers, and the Ariel situation feels like a can of worms we don’t want to open. We basically would like Ariel off the guest list and not [to] attend Substance.”

The message was careful not to categorically bar Rosenberg from coming, and also to give no specific explanation as to why Rosenberg could be considered threatening. Maus explained to Rosenberg that as much as he’d like to cancel his set out of principle, he still needed the money. “I said, I’ll pay you the money,” Rosenberg recalled. “I know they’re not paying you that much.” The two hadn’t spoken since. (Christopher Tipton, a U.K.-based promoter who helped manage Maus’ Substance appearance, confirmed much of Rosenberg’s account by email: “If I remember correctly the festival did object, but didn’t outright ban Ariel’s attendance,” he wrote. Tipton added that Rosenberg working sound had been “mooted but not confirmed.” When reached by phone, Maus told me he “had to check with Ariel” before talking to me. Maus couldn’t be reached after that, and Rosenberg told me he never called. Repeated emails to Restless Nites, and to three of their top executives, were not returned.)

“Artists are slaves,” Rosenberg said later in the afternoon. “They’re stupid. They think they have their own agency but they’re very naive. They’re perfect vectors for influencing people, and they’re very influenceable.”

Humanists cling to the hopeful illusion that art is inherently redemptive—any ordeal can be made worthwhile so long as art results from it. Artists themselves tend to know better. They aren’t moved by the things we think should move them. Love, God, light, nature, tradition, community, justice, wisdom, and truth are only sometimes the causal bedrock of books, films, and music, but frequently it’s resentment, paranoia, failure, narcissism, discomfort, appetite, boredom, and compulsion that better explain their existence. Artists often look into themselves, and look out at the world, and see things very differently than we imagine they do.

As we wandered his neighborhood, Rosenberg strayed into conspiracy theory. The pandemic was, more likely than not, an intentional means of experiments on the human race through vaccination—perhaps Bill Gates was involved. Big tech and big business and mainstream politicians had allied to destroy what was left of the country. Rosenberg mentioned something called Agenda 21, which I decided I wouldn’t Google. How seriously should I take any of this? I wondered. I settled on “not very.” This was a crankish rant, assuming he believed any of it. (In a later interview, Rosenberg told me he got vaccinated in the summer of 2021, before traveling to Hawaii.) And crankism is common enough, even and maybe especially among artists, that a life without exposure to it is probably a sign of prejudice rather than virtue.

At last we got back to the apartment, and I all but demanded Rosenberg explain what art can do to make life in the hell-world he imagines us to be living in any better. “Nothing,” he replied. “In fact, people should protest by not making art. I think to make art in this day and age is irresponsible.” A thin smile emerged, as if he relished trying out this extreme argument. Did he mean it moments later, when he said that artistic creation wasn’t a sublime unity of internal or external forces, but something
more like a purge? “I’m trying to get it out of my system so that I don’t have to do it anymore,” he said of his music. “I’m trying to exercise it so that I can move on to some other hobby.”

The closest analog to Ariel Rosenberg, and maybe the person who best explains his defamiliarizing churn of motives, is his friend and occasional collaborator, R. Stevie Moore. Moore, the Nashville-born son of Elvis Presley’s former bassist, has self-released an estimated 500 records since the late 1960s, using his own recording equipment and playing nearly every instrument.

Rosenberg first encountered Moore’s work in 1999 during a hunt for Cure bootlegs. He found a copy of Everything You Wanted To Know About R Stevie Moore But Were Afraid to Ask, a compilation of highlights from the 1970s, when Moore sounds as if he’d discovered post-punk entirely on his own, in between detours into deranged rockabilly, virtuosic heavy blues, and songs that were too slapdash to be entirely serious, but too good to merely be jokes. On the cover, Moore’s eyes blaze through a pair of heavy glasses and his mouth is open to maximum width. “It looked like a Thomas Dolby kind of thing. Who is this mad scientist? It can’t be real,” Rosenberg recalled thinking. And then he thought: “I totally identify with this guy.”

Rosenberg mailed Moore a copy of The Doldrums. The two became correspondents, and then friends—Rosenberg was one of Moore’s biggest advocates, insisting he was a wrongfully overlooked, low-fi trailblazer. Rosenberg and Moore recorded an album together in 2013, titled Ku Klux Glam. It is a work of cranking spontaneity, and the record, I suggested to Moore, where Rosenberg seemed like he was having the most fun. “Others have said that,” Moore agreed. “But that’s all tongue-in-cheek because a lot of his gloominess is a put-on. Maybe—we just don’t know! He’s a good actor as well as a musician and composer.” Although, Moore added: “Sometimes you act without even realizing it.”

For a certain generation of music fans, the image of a post-millennial psychedelic freak is epitomized by Anton Newcombe in the cult classic “Dig!,” a 2004 documentary in which the Brian Jonestown Massacre frontman comes across as a megalomaniac wannabe cult leader at war with the music industry. But the free-spirited pop savants of the 21st century were the spiritual children of R Stevie Moore, working alone with whatever instruments or computer programs they had, uploading their creations onto MySpace or Soundcloud or Bandcamp, or maybe just hoarding them in caches of unreleased WAV files or cassette tapes. From Chief Keef to Bradford Cox, the creative rebels of the era were often intractable figures in their non-musical lives, artists whose selves were contained somewhere deep within their work and possibly nowhere else. This obscurity explains why enigmatic pop musicians from the cultural fringes connected in an age when the twin forces of social polarization and social media were beginning to sap much of the spontaneity out of American culture. Artists who seemed to come from nowhere—who were deep in conversation with their own manias or their own genius—were the only ones who still sounded fresh and interesting.

In December of 2019, Moore announced on his website that he was retiring. He would be releasing no more music, playing no more shows, and giving no more interviews. He made an exception to speak with me about Rosenberg. Moore said they shared an urge to create, without the fear of a record label—or of anyone—saying no to their creations onto MySpace or Soundcloud, or maybe just hoarding whatever instruments or computer programs they had, uploading their own, in between detours into deranged rockabilly, virtuosic heavy blues, and songs that were too slapdash to be entertaining but too good to merely be jokes. On the cover, Moore’s eyes blaze through a pair of heavy glasses and his mouth is open to maximum width. “It looked like a Thomas Dolby kind of thing. Who is this mad scientist? It can’t be real,” Rosenberg recalled thinking. And then he thought: “I totally identify with this guy.”

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It now makes sense that, after a five-year break from songwriting and nothing but negative reviews from Pitchfork, Ariel Pink would finally ascend to indie rock’s highest levels of popularity in 2010. The indie infrastructure was mostly still intact: Streaming hadn’t gutted artist pay; cops and yuppies hadn’t destroyed the New York DIY scene. The Goldenvoice-AEG-LiveNation cartel that controls big- and even medium-ticket American live music was years in the future. But the encroachments of the coming world were already obvious. The Williamsburg waterfront had begun its transformation from America’s underground rock hub into a horrific living version of The Sims. By 2015, Death by Audio, the Williamsburg scene’s beer-soaked mainstage, would be demolished to make way for Vice’s headquarters, not long before Disney invested $400 million in the once-subversive alternative media leader.

In the previous era, the Strokes had been the emblematic cool kid rock band, classicist Manhattan preppies promising a return to a better age. Today, the ideal rockstar is someone like Big Thief’s Adrianne Lenker, a harmlessly critical darling who went to music school and who doesn’t threaten anything or anyone. The early 2010s belonged to artists like Animal Collective, Deerhunter, Beach House, and Ariel Pink, genius-freaks who emerged from basements and bedrooms and Ford Transit vans from places like Baltimore and the Atlanta suburbs to warn us about how internet clout wars had drained the world of beauty and wonder, in the case of “My Girls,” Animal Collective’s 2009 hit, or about how millennials were treading water in an ever more meaningless world, in the case of “Nothing Ever Happened,” Deerhunter’s early masterpiece.

Ariel Pink’s breakthrough was a five-minute song called “Round and Round,” the fifth track on Before Today, his first record on 4AD. Pitchfork named it the best song of 2010, ahead of Robyn’s “Dancing On My Own.” The progression from soft disco to an ecstatic sing-along chorus, held together through high-arcing guitars and the dadaist ring of an antique telephone, sounded like it came from beyond a world that the young consumers of indie rock were already beginning to
distrust. Like a lot of Rosenberg’s best songs, “Round and Round” contains a disquiet that somehow moves both with and against the music, a melancholy hidden in the synths and guitar reverb and whispered lyrics. “I was like wow, he totally did it,” Joe Kennedy, Rosenberg’s longtime guitar player, recalled of his first time hearing “Round and Round.” “He figured it out.”

Before Today is a strange record, with re-workings of earlier numbers and multiple cover songs, including one of an Ethiopian jazz instrumental. “From the inside it almost doesn’t seem like a full album worth of material,” Kennedy said. The record’s self-assured looseness was part of what made it special. Rosenberg remembers the recording process as a chaos of musicians and producers quitting or getting fired. He expressed a stunning lack of fondness towards his most celebrated record. “I won,” Rosenberg said of his battle with his critical detractors at Pitchfork, when asked to reflect on what’s still his best-known release. “And they gave me a 9.0.”

In retrospect, 2010 was the tail-end of the height of the final era in which American indie rock still really mattered. According to the Puritan hindsight of the present day, it was a time when the wrong things were valued and the wrong people rewarded, many of them allegedly horrible men, agents of abuse and patriarchy whose awfulness was embedded in their very music. This increasingly common line betrays a revealing need to establish the present-day’s superiority over an era when the art, the parties, the drugs, and the creative environment were all much better than they are now. A misfit record like Before Today could still crack the 160s of the Billboard chart, helped along by music critics whose analysis wasn’t hamstrung by questions of social virtue. Pitchfork once called “Round and Round” “one of indiedom’s most unifying and memorable songs in 2010.” Today, no one talks about “indiedom.”

More controversies were still to come, of course. Mature Themes, the 2012 follow-up to Before Today, proved that the earlier record hadn’t been a fluke, and that the bedroom pop savant could execute on the scale of traditional albums played by entire rock bands. Pom Pom, Rosenberg’s third and final record in his contract with 4AD, would be the most ambitious release of his career and as close to a confessional album as Rosenberg has ever made. “I died unknown,” begins “Dazed Inn Daydreams,” the set closer, and my personal choice for the greatest of all Ariel Pink songs. Then comes a chorus of dreadful enormity, a heavier variation on a tune Rosenberg had written over a decade earlier and the cry of someone gazing into their own obsolescence with exhilaration and terror. “I used to pray, but now I scream—Lord help me, no more daydreams,” Rosenberg bellows in harmony with drummer Don Bolles and the French singer SoKo, with Jason Pierce of Spiritualized blasting thunderbolts of guitar. (The song’s Grant Singer-directed music video, in which the ‘70s LA glam rocker Rick Wilder plays a future vision of a forgotten Ariel Pink, was a co-production of Urban Outfitters. The video disappeared off of the chain store’s YouTube channel sometime before mid-2021, according to both a Reddit thread and the Wayback Machine. Multiple calls and emails to Urban Outfitters’ public relations department went unreturned.)

From the vantage of 2022, an even more revealing song is “Sexual Athletics,” which opens with a sing-song of obnoxious carnal boasts before the track slows and we discover the pathos beneath the speaker’s appetites: “All I wanted was a girlfriend, all my life” Rosenberg whimpers. “Put Your Number in My Phone” pulsates with dark sexual desperation, held within one of the best pure pop melodies of Rosenberg’s career. “Black Ballerina,” about a comically doomed strip-club visit,
would be an act of self-cancellation if it were released today. Male songwriters have always interrogated their own complexes toward women, even at the risk of revealing themselves to be pigs—Blood on the Tracks hasn’t dimmed in status, while perhaps the best record of 2021, Tyler, the Creator’s Call Me If You Get Lost, is a concept album about obsessively trying to sleep with a best friend’s girlfriend. But codes of public behavior were rapidly changing, at least for rock musicians, as Rosenberg soon discovered.

4AD arranged a media day in the run-up to Pom Pom’s release, in which journalists were given 15-minute blocks with Rosenberg. The very first interview was with an Australian outlet. He began talking about being recruited to help with Madonna’s upcoming album. “They need something edgy. They need songwriting. She can’t just have her Avicii, her producers or whatever, come up with a new techno jam for her to gyrate to and pretend that she’s 20 years old. They actually need songs. I’m partly responsible for that return-to-values thing,” Rosenberg said, in full Ariel Pink mode.

Madonna’s music publisher had in fact invited him to an early “songwriting camp” for her upcoming record, a rudimentary stage of the modern album production process in which scores of possible authors are gathered to develop material that the pop star might eventually record—pop albums now being industrial-scale operations, the work of hundreds of people. Rosenberg was giving the Australians a punched-up version of what he’d actually been told.

But the comments, which could be twisted into a male dismissal of Madonna as a brainless sex object, were an irresistible grandstanding opportunity. “Ariel Pink’s delusional misogyny is emblematic of the kind of bullshit [every] woman in this industry faces daily,” tweeted the electronic musician Grimes, from a level of fame far beyond Rosenberg’s. In return, Rosenberg called her “stupid and retarded.” The British magazine NME’s review of Pom Pom serves as a final, indiscernible word on the dystup, calling Ariel Pink “a genius, a freak, a trailblazer, a creep; maybe a misogynist, or maybe just misunderstood.”

But back then the incipient moralism of the 2010s still felt both harmless and necessary, and it didn’t have the ability to end anyone’s career. In late 2014, Pitchfork published an “op-ed” by the rock musician Alana McArdle, titled “Ariel Pink’s Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore.” “While he brings himself a lot of headline-grabbing attention, he’s actually bringing a spotlight to the very real and pervasive racism and misogyny that is deeply embedded in indie rock to the surface,” she wrote “All that needs to happen now is that we all recognize this.” McArdle would have to wait a few years for the culture to catch up with her. At the time the article was published, Rosenberg still had one more Pitchfork Best New Music ahead of him.

His contract with 4AD satisfied, Rosenberg switched labels, signing a one-record deal, with an option for a second record, with Brooklyn-based Mexican Summer. The label occupies an important middle tier of the indie economy—they produce artists that go on to bigger deals at more established outfits, but they also attract better-known names who want the kind of focus and attention that only a smaller shop can provide.

Mexican Summer had another advantage for signees. Though the label frequently laid off staff, mostly paid in the $35,000-$40,000 a year range, its co-owner is Andres Santo Domingo, the New York-raised scion of Colombian beer magnates. Despite being worth some $1.6 billion, Santo Domingo isn’t a total absentee at Mexican Summer. “He was a really interesting guy,” one former employee recalled to me. “Nobody knew him. He would come to the office once a week and yell on the phone in Spanish for 20 minutes and leave.” (For what it’s worth, Santo Domingo was the co-chair of a Conservation International gala honoring Joe Biden in 2018, and his wife donated to Biden’s presidential campaign.)

There was excitement at Mexican Summer when it landed Rosenberg. The label offered to buy, and then rerelease, from the three records 4AD owned. The Doldrums, Worn Copy, and others would be remastered and reissued, with fancy vinyl and new liner notes. For about $10,000 a record, Rosenberg sold his licenses to some of the work he cared the most about.

Dedicated to Bobby Jameson, the only record of new material Rosenberg released with Mexican Summer, is named after an LA musician and Frank Zappa affiliate who nearly achieved stardom in the 1960s before drifting into alcoholism and petty criminality, affecting an absence from the public eye so total he was widely presumed to be dead. After learning that one of his albums from the ’60s had been reissued without his permission, Jameson resurrected, and built a late-in-life following as an autobiographical blogger and YouTuber who raged against the unfairness of the music industry. It is perhaps overly psychologizing to speculate that Rosenberg sees Jameson as a possible alternate version of himself. Less speculatively, the record is another of Rosenberg’s explorations of whether art, or really anything, can still be meaningful even if it proves temporary and forgotten—its title track evokes the unnerving clash of possibility and existential dread someone might experience while driving down Sunset Boulevard in the late afternoon.

As with Pom Pom, the album’s rollout was marred by a characteristically strange blowup. During the recording, Rosenberg had been in a relationship with Charlotte Ercoli, a much younger woman who had directed one of his music videos and contributed backup vocals on the album—it is Ercoli’s voice joining Rosenberg’s in the chorus to “Feels Like Heaven,” a sinister slow-dance and album highlight. The tour to promote Bobby Jameson began with four nights at The Chapel in San Francisco.
Francisco in October of 2017, with John Maus as the opener. “Maus was getting a lot of hype at the time,” Kennedy recalled. “Ariel and John have this very intense kind of friendship where they’re best friends, but there’s some kind of element of competition between them ... they get into these super theoretical kinds of discussions that turn into arguments. It was always kind of tense when John was around. And those four days were kind of like the peak of it.” Rosenberg had been drinking heavily the night before that first show. His vocal cords were shot, and he had to go on after Maus, who is difficult or even impossible to match as a live performer.

Ercoli, who often appeared with Rosenberg’s touring band, joined him onstage for the San Francisco shows. Early in that first concert, Rosenberg seemed to be trying to push Ercoli into the crowd. Then he appeared to pin her to the stage, kissing her in a way that more than one eyewitness found to be aggressive. A few people standing near the front walked out in apparent disgust. The rest of the audience found the incident to be an unremarkable and possibly premeditated element of the larger performance. It didn’t become any kind of controversy until the music press discovered a Reddit post from a scandalized audience member, which Pitchfork didn’t pick up until four days later.

Rosenberg apologized for what he presented as a consensual stage antic that went too far: “My behavior onstage was gross and I can’t defend it,” he tweeted. “Wow,” Ercoli tweeted at the time. “Turns out a girl can’t have fun with her boyfriend on stage without being victimized by feminists. Could not be more bummed.”

The tour went on, as if the San Francisco crowd had witnessed nothing more than an extreme version of what they’d come to see anyway. But this had always been the problem with Ariel Pink, in the minds of his detractors: He had constantly been allowed to hide his alleged piggishness behind his artistic persona, without ever suffering any consequences. Should the consequences have included the total destruction of his career? If that’s what some people wanted, they wouldn’t have to wait long.

Rosenberg told me his motives for attending the January 6, 2021, rally at the White House were simple: “I was there for the last opportunity to see the best fuckin president ever.”

It’s possible aspects of Rosenberg’s individual politics mesh with that of the former president. It’s also possible Rosenberg grew into a greater political awareness as the Trump era evolved, and as more and more aspects of American life became battlefields in an unending, all-inclusive civic crackup. None of the friends or collaborators I talked to remember Rosenberg showing any real interest in conservative politics, or any other kind of politics, before the Trump presidency. Rosenberg told me he had only voted for president twice: Once for Ralph Nader in 2000, and then again for Trump in 2020. Kennedy was on tour in Europe with Rosenberg during election night in 2012, and says his bandleader didn’t seem to care or even know about it.

Alex Lee Moyer, the filmmaker and longtime friend who met up with Rosenberg and Maus on January 6, speculated to me that he was part of a segment of admirers “who kind of see Trump as an artist.” This is the most narratively satisfying explanation for Rosenberg’s loyalty to the ex-president, as it motions towards the uneasily close kinship between art and political hucksterism. The real explanation, in Moyer’s view, is less poetic. “He just really supports Trump,” she says. “And not in an edgy way. More in like a boomer kind of way. He really looked at it like Trump is the president and he was honored to see the president speak.”

Rosenberg traveled to Washington with John Maus, and says he covered the costs of their Airbnb while Maus paid for the plane tickets. Moyer, who was in the capital to film the scheduled Stop the Steal rally outside the White House as part of a documentary about the conspiracist broadcaster Alex Jones, was under the impression Maus was tagging along with Rosenberg. “I think John just wanted to do some freak tourism,” Moyer said. The president began speaking at noon, kicking off an hour-long rant in which he promised never to concede the election and urged further protest, with the aim of stopping Vice President Mike Pence from certifying the electoral vote count at the Capitol later that day. Rosenberg then decided it was time for a nap—but not before Moyer took a picture of Rosenberg and Maus in her hotel room at the W, a block over from the White House, and posted it to Instagram.

Crowds of violent demonstrators gathered at the Capitol later in the afternoon. Maus accompanied Moyer to the Capitol, joining her as she filmed—Moyer posted a short video of the musician pointing toward crowds of Trump dead-enders who might be
worth documenting. There was never any evidence Rosenberg was anywhere other than the W Hotel during the Capitol attack. But by the end of the day, the music press had used Moyer’s Instagram picture to craft a narrative connecting the alleged face of male toxicity in indie rock to an event already being likened to Pearl Harbor and 9/11. On the night of January 6, Moyer was surprised to be fielding questions from Pitchfork about Rosenberg’s alleged presence at the Capitol riot. “He’s sort of a grumpy old man,” Moyer noted. “If you’ve met Ariel once, you can tell he’s not really a storm-the-Capitol kind of guy.”

The next morning, Rosenberg received panicked text messages from Mexican Summer label chief Keith Abrahamsson. “There’s this thread from Keith that’s just going like ‘dude, thanks for telling us. Like, Jesus fuck, I’m pissed man. You should’ve let us know.” Rosenberg thought Abrahamsson was angry about his presence at the White House rally, which tens of thousands of other people had attended. He didn’t think he owed his record label any explanation for his decision to attend a political event at which the president of the United States had spoken. Rosenberg had tweeted to confirm he had attended the rally to support Trump. (Maus, in contrast, reacted to the growing furor by tweeting a link to a 1937 papal encyclical condemning Nazism.) “At this point I hadn’t read any articles or anything like that, so I didn’t know exactly what Abrahamsson was referring to,” Rosenberg claimed.

The “articles” were early reports that Rosenberg had been at the Capitol, based solely on Moyer’s Instagram photo placing him in Washington. “Surprise, Surprise, Ariel Pink and John Maus Attended Trump’s Capitol Rally,” a January 7 blog post on New York magazine’s website still reads, despite that claim being false. “Yesterday, right-wing extremists broke into the U.S. Capitol Building and stormed the Senate floor in a shameful and violent attempt to stop the official certification of Joe Biden’s election win. Hours later, images surfaced showing that musicians Ariel Pink and John Maus were in attendance,” Vice reported, with Rosenberg’s denial buried later in the article. Pitchfork’s post quickly clarifies that Rosenberg was not at the Capitol. Spin, however, made it sound like Maus and Rosenberg had practically led the riot. “One thing you probably didn’t expect to see as democracy in the United States was under siege were two musicians from the 2010s taking part in the rioting during the violent insurrection January 6 on Capitol Hill,” the music magazine reported. “Yet, there were indie rockers Ariel Pink and John Maus, front and center on the scene.”

On January 8, Abrahamsson texted that the outrage hadn’t died down and the label would be dropping Rosenberg, without saying what that meant for the Ariel Pink records for which Mexican Summer still held licenses. “I said that’s fine man, that’s the way it goes, I understand. Just give me the music back and we’ll be fine. And then he’s like, well that’s ours to choose, Ariel,” Rosenberg recalls. “I’m like, what? Wait, I don’t understand this. You want to say you’re not working with me anymore, why would you wanna keep my catalog?” Abrahamsson repeated that the records belonged to the label. Rosenberg threatened to sue. “And that’s the last time we texted.” (I reached Abrahamsson by phone in mid-April. He gave me a blanket “no comment,” and said he did not want to hear any of what I planned on asking him. Then he instructed me never to call again.)

On January 8, Mexican Summer issued a now-deleted tweet, announcing: “Due to recent events, Mexican Summer and its staff have decided to end our working relationship with Ariel Rosenberg AKA Ariel Pink moving forward.” This wasn’t entirely true, since the label still owned the masters on the majority of Rosenberg’s discography, including his most recent release. The tweet pointedly avoided saying which “events” led to Rosenberg being dropped.

“Literally overnight everybody disappeared,” Rosenberg recalled. The musician received just a single serious offer of help—from Greg Gutfeld, the Fox host and longtime fan. “I knew he was being canceled over nothing,” Gutfeld recalled. “These losers embraced a modern McCarthyism.” Rosenberg said Gutfeld helped connect him to Harmeet Dhillon, a California lawyer and Republican power player, whose staff compiled a chart of media that had misreported Rosenberg’s presence at the Capitol, free of charge—they found over a dozen articles, from publications including the LA Times and USA Today, that linked Rosenberg to the violence on January 6. Gutfeld also connected Rosenberg to Tucker Carlson.

People around Rosenberg were split as to whether the Carlson interview was a good idea. Rosenberg believed he had no other choice. No one with any platform of any size was willing to hear him out—except for the person with the highest-rated show on cable television. In the interview, Rosenberg looked de- spondent as he explained that his career was over. He reaffirmed his support for Trump, but clarified that he accepted the legitimacy of Joe Biden’s victory in the 2020 presidential election. Still, among the people whose minds he most needed to change, the interview solidified the impression that Rosenberg was an extremist whose politics were unthinkable in the modern-day indie rock scene.

I wanted a supporter of Ariel Pink’s exile to justify his career freeze-out. Several prominent music critics who had once written positively about Rosenberg’s work gave me a series of
no-comments, a remarkable evasion in light of their job being to publicly comment on music. “I hate to see the guy get off on having his name in my mouth here and there,” one of them explained. Management for Weyes Blood, whose 2017 joint EP with Rosenberg had been removed from streaming after January 6, said she was too busy in the studio even to answer questions by email; the members of Animal Collective, whatever they thought about all this, also didn’t have time to talk.

The only reply for attribution came by email from Ramona Gonzalez, an LA musician who performs and records under the name Nite Jewel. In the late 2000s, Ariel Pink was the driving force of a burgeoning LA avant-pop scene. In a 2016 interview, Gonzalez cited him as one of her chief inspirations. “I appreciate Ariel’s iconoclastic behavior because it’s so different to everyone else’s bullshit positive attitude, which is just a way to make more money for themselves,” she said. But 2016 was a long time ago.

Gonzalez’s response to me is perhaps uncharitable, but it is at least a morally coherent explanation for Rosenberg’s post-January 6 treatment, one based in the unavoidable reality that art is created and consumed in this world, rather than in some idealized or better version of it. Here it is in full:

“His music, which defies the pomposity that is particularly prevalent in indie music nowadays, in many ways defies popularity. This is a natural outcome of a commitment to art. Nonetheless, it is hard for an artist to wane in relevance. Ariel has come up with all kinds of reasons to attribute a natural fading into the background of his musical project, and gone as far to self-sabotage and destroy his legacy entirely to soothe or avoid a graceful exit. Now Ariel will forever be known as ‘the indie rocker who went on Tucker Carlson.’ He has not only destroyed his musical legacy as a result of his vanity, but the legacy of our musical community and the artists that comprise it. Finally, I will always love Ariel’s music. I will never and have never supported Ariel’s politics. Unlike his music, his political ideology is as mainstream, vapid and idolatrous as it comes.”

On the day Rosenberg appeared on Carlson’s show, Pitchfork published an article about a judicial ruling denying Rosenberg a restraining order against Charlotte Ercoli, his former collaborator and ex-girlfriend. Rosenberg claimed that Ercoli had been spreading malicious rumors, including to Mexican Summer management and possibly to the media, falsely accusing him of various sexual improprieties. A Los Angeles County judge rejected the application on the grounds that discussion of potential sexual harassment committed by a public figure was constitutionally protected speech.

Pitchfork obtained Rosenberg’s request for the restraining order, along with Ercoli’s motion to strike, and the judge’s final ruling, documents which anyone with a credit or debit card can purchase on the Superior Court of Los Angeles County’s website (Rosenberg seemed unaware that most restraining order cases in California are not under an automatic seal). Ercoli’s filings asserted that the San Francisco incident had been an act of intentional assault, that her tweet addressing the controversy had been written under pressure from Rosenberg, that Rosenberg had “bullied [her] into [having] unprotected sex,” and that he had spread nude photographs of her without her consent. The Pitchfork story was a regurgitation of various court documents, buffered with some quotes from Rosenberg’s lawyer. The article did not quote Ercoli or Rosenberg, and mentioned no attempts to independently verify whether the claims in Ercoli’s filings were true.

According to both Rosenberg’s and Ercoli’s filings, Mexican Summer was aware of her allegations, which she communicated to Abrahamsson in a July 2020 letter. There is no evidence he ever acted on the letter. Rosenberg denied all of Ercoli’s allegations to me. Ercoli declined to comment for this article. Earle says she has firsthand experience of what domestic abusers are like, and insists that her husband isn’t one. “I worked really hard to escape the abuse cycle,” she told me. “That stuff is not to be made light of. I lost years of my life to it.”

“I can’t say whether Ariel was more or less misogynistic than other men in indie music,” Ramona Gonzalez wrote to me. “Ariel and I had a respectful, peer relationship. However, that doesn’t mean it didn’t exist just because I didn’t experience it.”

Some of the canceled have tried to bargain with the mob, issuing obsequious promises that they will “listen” and “do better.” Others have leaned into their unpersoning, making their pariah status part of their relaunched public image. Still others have created a subculture of the canceled. In March, Buzzfeed reported on a Peter Thiel-funded Manhattan film festival that served as a gathering for arts figures who had run afoul of the new orthodoxies. A rough cut of Moyer’s Alex Jones film screened as part of the event. An Ariel Pink song plays during the credits of the movie, but the quasi-redpilled arts community is not Rosenberg’s crowd. He has no crowd now—he hasn’t apologized or opted for a public heel turn or sought out others who the cultural-industrial complex now scourns. Instead, in the months after January 6, his goal was regaining control of his albums from Mexican Summer, something he succeeded in doing after nearly a year of hard negotiation between their lawyers (Mexican Summer still owns Dedicated to Bobby Jameson, and will begin paying royalties to Rosenberg once the album’s revenue surpasses its production costs).

A number of people I spoke with noted that Rosenberg had opportunities to squirm his way out of cancellation—he could have claimed he was in Washington not to support Trump but to assist Moyer, whose previous film Rosenberg had sound-tracked. He didn’t try to remake himself as a right-wing celebrity.
“I could be situated to be useful in the right-wing cause,” Rosenberg mused. “The problem is I’m not big enough to matter.”

In early February of 2021, Lyndsie had married her final semester of art school. I had succeeded in prying Rosenberg away from his theorizing about Agenda 21 and the vaccine scourge. I told him I shared his feeling of technology stifling us, of the culture losing its fun and possibility, of the old music scene having been better, of things generally getting worse. He mentioned a song called “Artifact,” which he said he wrote in 2003, a jangling apocalyptic ballad that appears on Worn Copy. The lyrics ask if art can counteract time’s warping effect on memory, and wonder whether anything can hold transcendent value as the world sinks into an unrecognizably meaningless version of itself.

“[A]m the son of the future,” Rosenberg began reciting, his head in a crouch, looking at the pavement. “Twenty-five years from now, try recalling the Golden Age, when we heard these words for the first time. Please come back to the exact spot … Never forget the Golden Age.” He spoke faster and faster, in time with the rhythm of the words, as if he was remembering it all in the moment, surprised at how much of the song was returning to him at once. He batted his forefingers, like he was conducting himself.

“Neither teachers nor dads could see the world that they brought you to was bad. This is an artifact of that. This is an artifact, artifact of that—When the terrorists spread the plague through computer screens …” “Oh, wow,” I exclaimed at the words “computer screens.” He didn’t stop. “… And they erase what was left of the West. Just a shopping mall.”

A smile crept across his face, at what might have been the closest thing to a performance of his music that he’d given to a stranger in months. “In 25 minutes. The world’s gonna crack. It’s all gonna crack. Remember this tune made you laugh. But these days a laugh’s merely an artifact.”

Rosenberg finally looked up at me. “I wasn’t saying anything prophetic,” he said. “I was stating the obvious.”

This article was originally published on June 15, 2022.

“I could be situated to be useful in the right-wing cause,” Rosenberg mused. “The problem is I’m not big enough to matter.”

In early February of 2021, Lyndsie found out she was pregnant. The couple was married in Hawaii a few months later. Rosenberg estimates he spent $80,000 resolving his situation with Mexican Summer, costs only slightly defrayed by the maybe $15,000–$30,000 in royalties he says he still receives from 4AD in an average year. Few journalists called. Aside from the odd podcast appearance, the Carlson interview had been his final public word on his career implosion.

In March of 2021, Rosenberg received a phone call from Chloe Chaidez, a musician he had first met after a Charli XCX show in 2013, when Chaidez was in a band opening for the pop artist and recent Ariel Pink collaborator. In early 2021, Chaidez had founded a record label and was figuring out what to do with a group of Mexican American skaters she had met at the El Sereno skatepark and fashioned into a punk band called the Vampiros. “They’re Playboi Carti meets the Sex Pistols,” she said. It turned out the Vampiros were Ariel Pink fans and didn’t care he’d been at the White House on January 6. “That night I think I woke up in a drunken haze and was just like, I’ve gotta text Ariel. I’ve got his number.”

“I was happy somebody found me useful.” Rosenberg recalled. “I thought it was a prank.”

Chaidez, the Vampiros, and Rosenberg wrote and rehearsed an album’s worth of songs. “You could tell he was a little bit broken but also that he needed to unleash a lot of energy creatively,” Chaidez said of the recording process, which took place before the birth of his daughter. Rosenberg is unsure when the album will be released. He says he’s thinking about touring next year, even if he suspects it will be hard finding venues willing to book him that are of large enough size for the tour to be profitable. He estimates he’s spent about $15,000 of his own money making and releasing the record.

The Key of Joy is Disobedience is an oddity even in Rosenberg’s catalog—half of it is in Spanish, sung by members of the Vampiros. None of it, except for a heavily distorted “fuck Donald Trump” dropped at the tail end of one of the middle tracks, refers to his cancellation in any way. It isn’t a broadside against his critics, or a justification of his actions. One song, “Footsteps,” is a shoegaze pocket symphony, Chaidez singing in a clean and expertly isolated vocal track that the production rests gently above the instrumentals, with Rosenberg whispering from nowhere to join her on the chorus. It’s slow, patient, ethereal, possibly capturing the mindset of someone mellowed by oncoming parenthood. It is the product of an inner voice that somehow endured through everything.

Simon Halliday, who is the head of 4AD, and thus a figure of considerable authority in the indie rock world, thinks that fans and the broader music industry will be ready to welcome Rosenberg back one day. “I think he has an audience. His figures are solid and people are still checking him out. He’s still popular, in a way.”

Kurt Heasley has invited Rosenberg out to Yogaville in Virginia, but isn’t sure if he’ll ever show. R. Stevie Moore and Rosenberg remain in contact, although Moore says he’s “caught some flack” for keeping up the relationship. Moyer believes Rosenberg is at the mercy of forces that can’t really be predicted, and that no one person can control. “What happens with him and his career depends on what happens in this country in the next two years,” she says. “His destiny is a little bit tied to all of our destinies.”

Outside his apartment, Rosenberg told me he writes the lyrics last. “It’s sort of like a chore,” he explained as the shadows spread across Los Feliz and the sun disappeared behind the mountains. “I don’t want to do them. Whatever comes out first is what makes it to the tape.” This was narrowly true—former bandmates recalled Rosenberg jotting down lyrics over dinner during the recording of Pom Pom. It also felt impossible, and almost like a deception. The words of his songs are often too deliberate to matter that little to him, as Rosenberg himself sometimes hinted.
Behind the Blood Ban

Donor discrimination has deep roots in antisemitism

BY JACOB FERTIG

The Austrian government announced last month that the country would soon put an end to its lifetime ban on blood donations from gay and bisexual men, joining the U.K., Israel, Greece, France, and a slew of other countries that recently eliminated their de facto “gay blood bans” under pressure from LGBTQ+ activist groups and COVID-19 strains on national blood supplies.

But in the United States, the ban remains in effect as the pandemic rages on.

Starting in 1982, gay and bisexual men were barred for life from giving blood. But in 2015, trailing the passage of the Marriage Equality Act, the FDA reduced the ban on MSM—men who have sex with men—to one year, meaning a male donor had to abstain from having sex with men for one year before he could donate blood. Blood donations in the U.S. regularly met demand, even with the ban.

Then came the coronavirus, and like many other sectors of the health care system, transfusion centers and blood banks struggled to cope with unprecedented shortages. In response, the FDA released an emergency recommendation relaxing the MSM ban to three months, in hopes of encouraging more donors.

The abbreviated ban went into effect in June 2020, but to no avail. Facing an ongoing blood shortage, activists, lawmakers and medical professionals in 2022 have urged the FDA to scale back the ban even further.

The blood ban was born in the early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the U.S. But to fully understand how policies like this one came to be, one must look to a more distant time and place.

The story begins in 1900, when Karl Landsteiner, an Austrian Jew who converted to Catholicism to evade persecution, made safe blood transfusions possible through his discovery of blood types. Prior to this incredible breakthrough, blood compatibility was overlooked in medicine and transfusions often ended in death.

It’s no coincidence that Landsteiner made this discovery. In countries like Austria and Germany at this time, antisemitism helps explain the disproportionate role of Jews in the development of serology, the scientific study of blood serum. In her book In Search of Aryan Blood, Rachel Boaz writes that specializing in one area of clinical medicine gave Jewish doctors the opportunity to enter into private practice, whereas general research work could only lead to a university position, where Jews were restricted by conservative leadership.

At the same time as Landsteiner’s world-changing discovery, a new book written by a young doctor was selling out all over Germany. The Operated Jew chronicles the efforts of a German Jew, Itzig Faitel Stern, on a quest to shed his Jewishness. And what’s his plan, exactly? “To buy some Chreesten blud!” Stern says. (This very specific spelling comes from an English translation of the book.)

After undergoing extensive plastic surgery to remove his stereotypically Jewish features, he attempts to pay six Germans for a liter of their blood each. The German donors decline when they learn their blood would be given to a Jew.

Stern’s pursuit of German blood to remove his Jewishness exemplified the idea that identity is rooted in physical blood. And though the burgeoning serology field should have shed new light on the matter, it only further fueled the racial propaganda of the late 19th century. “Scientific” antisemitism took center stage, thanks to a strong foundation of Christian antisemitism and the popular belief that medicine was independent from politics, religion, and ethics, and therefore a fairer basis for discrimination.

Another book titled The Sin Against the Blood, by infamous Nazi Artur Dinter, hit the presses in 1917 as Germany’s WWI-induced blood crisis soared. The book follows an Aryan German man and woman whose children are born with stereotypically Jewish features. It is uncovered that the woman, although Aryan-presenting, has some Jewish ancestry, and when her husband leaves her for a more suitable partner, his new offspring again appears Jewish.

The pseudoscience of the novel pushes the now-laughable notion that, after having sex with one Jewish person, this Aryan man’s blood is forever tainted by the blood of a Jew—that Jewishness is a sexually transmitted disease that should be avoided at all costs.

The Sin Against the Blood went on to sell a million copies in Germany between WWI and WWII, and underpinned the racial theories that spread across Europe and garnered support for the Nazi party.

As the WWI death toll rose in Germany, the national birth rate dropped and syphilis—which caused stillbirths and birth defects—ravaged the population. Racial theorists panicked, predicting a deterioration of the Aryan race. To prevent Jews and other ethnic minorities from tainting the Aryan gene pool, blood screenings became commonplace.

The first “Jewish blood ban” case was documented in 1935 when Hans Serelman, a German Jewish physician, donated his own blood to save the life of a German soldier rushed to a nearby Jewish hospital where Serelman worked. German physicians reported Serelman to the Gestapo for injecting Jewish blood into a German patient, and Serelman was charged with the crime of “race defilement” and sent to a concentration camp. In the trial, Serelman admitted to previously transfusing his own blood to save the lives of other patients when no other blood was available. In every instance, Serelman’s blood recipients survived because of his scientifically safe but socially risky actions.
Blood transfusions and sexual contact between Germans and Jews became outlawed in Germany, and soon after, Austrian transfusion sites began using only blood certified as “gentile” for transfusions performed on “German-blooded” patients. These very policies inspired the Nazi party to create the Mischling Test used to determine whether a person was deemed a “Jew” or a “Mischling” (mixed-blood) in Nazi Germany, and therefore sent to a concentration camp.

Blood discrimination does not stop here, of course. Thirty years after Landsteiner’s blood-type discovery, Charles R. Drew, a prominent African American physician credited as the “father of the blood bank,” discovered a methodology for collecting, processing, and storing blood plasma. Drew led the effort to transport desperately needed blood and plasma to Great Britain during WWII. The program became a model for the Red Cross to mass produce dried plasma in 1941, with Drew as assistant director. But just two months after launching the program, the Red Cross decided to segregate blood from Black donors. The official policy was “for reasons which are not biologically convincing but which are commonly recognized as psychologically important in America.” In response, Drew resigned from his post, penning a letter to the director of the federal Labor Standards Association: “I think the Army made a grievous mistake, a stupid error in first issuing an order to the effect that blood for the Army should not be received from Negroes. It was a bad mistake for 3 reasons: (1) No official department of the Federal Government should willfully humiliate its citizens; (2) There is no scientific basis for the order; and (3) They need the blood.”

Unlike the blood segregation that targeted Jewish and Black communities, the MSM blood ban initially came out of a genuine public health crisis. In the early 1980s, the policy was born from a fear of a then-unknown affliction decimating entire communities in a matter of a few years. When the FDA first announced the 1982 blood ban, it included other demographic groups where HIV was prevalent, such as Haitian immigrants. In response, leaders of Haitian American organizations protested the discriminatory policy, saying the move would only stoke stigma and bias. Once the scientific community identified HIV and came to understand the virus, how it was contracted, and how to prevent its transmission, the FDA quickly developed and licensed 10-minute HIV testing kits for blood donations. By December 1990, the FDA lifted the ban on Haitian donors, and added new risk-based screening questions for all prospective donors in its place. By 1999, every blood center in the United States was using nucleic acid testing for all blood donations, regardless of the race, gender, or sexuality of the blood donor. Our science has advanced to the point that the blood ban is no longer about thwarting certain viruses; it’s about thwarting certain people.

As the “gay blood ban” is lifted across the world, U.S. policymakers and practitioners should similarly distinguish between science and stigma, weighing not just the social cost, but the medical cost of preserving the MSM ban. We are confronting a pandemic that demands more blood than we have available. Even before COVID-19, fewer than 5% of eligible Americans donated blood products. The Williams Institute found that an additional 360,000 men would likely donate 615,300 additional pints of blood each year if the current MSM ban were lifted. In many ways, this moment harks back to the fear, isolation, and grief that Jews know all too well. And once again, we have to reconsider and scrutinize the policies that led us here and find a course of action that saves the most lives.

This article was originally published on June 14, 2022.
My father all his life lived with the deprivations and the small-time pleasures afforded to a rabbi and school principal: meals of smoked whitefish, blintzes, and sour cream at dairy restaurants; pastrami, chulent, salami, and a Heineken beer in a frozen mug on shabbas. He never much aspired to greater luxuries—or so it seemed.

Every 10 years or so, he would spring for a new Chevy—and it was a Chevy Biscayne, mind you, the bargain-base model of all GM cars: no air conditioning, no chrome, vinyl seats, only two tail lights in the back instead of the three for the higher-end Impala and Chevy Caprice. My father’s car when I was very young was a light blue ’59 Chevy with gigantic tail fins that looked like cat whiskers. The only frill was an AM radio. It was a source of rabbinical pride, as if to say, waste not, want not. It was the world to come that mattered—Olam hazeh—this world, in the language of the holy rabbis of the Mishna—a mere prozdor, a corridor for the world to come.

This is something that I discerned both from and about my father even when I was quite young. He had a different relationship to material things than most people did. For the most part his money and his love flowed easily toward me and others and he was content with what he saw as his place in the world as husband, father, rabbi, and provider.

My father didn’t possess his possessions. Nor did they possess him. He watched over them, stewarded them for the imaginary “next” guy. To him, there was always a “next guy”—a pitcher had a catcher.

About the time I got married, I sensed my father, though happy for me, was intensely sad and I feared he would go into a depression. “Why not have an analysis, Dad?” I asked.

“Analysis … what for? All is well,” he replied. “And besides,” he added—not in these exact words, because he was far more well-spoken and sophisticated than that, “it’s for rich big shots who don’t know who they are. I know who I am.”

“It will help you have a bigger life,” I persisted. “It’s like living in color—Kodachrome, Dad. Besides, we’ll have a better life together.”

I referred him to an analyst affiliated with the institute where I had been studying, a gentile, an Italian, a former U.S. Marine, no less. The rabbi and the Marine, they hit it off. They admired each other instantly. It’s a stereotype, but Jewish men often admire Italian men for their virility and Italians admire the Jews for their erudition and scholarship.

As in most analyses, the inadvertent, unexpected tangent becomes the central topic. “What kind of car you driving, Chaim?” the analyst asked my father early in their experience. “A Chevy,” he answered. The analyst, Ted, gave him a look that said something like, “This is the beginning of the 21st century; you still want to be driving a Chevy?”

“It’s reliable, cheap, dependable,” Dad said in that earnest Mr. Goodwrench sort of way when called upon to defend the status quo.

“Is that the car you want?”
“No,” he confessed, “it isn’t the car I want. I actually want a Cadillac.”

“Why don’t you get a Cadillac, then?” My father paused and reflected. He was momentarily lost for words.

Solemly, earnestly, my father launched into the apologetics of everyman’s life: “My mother, my mentors, my teachers, they would not approve. My father, Abe,” he continued, “was an immigrant housepainter and wallpaper hanger who couldn’t even dream of driving the Chevy I have today. It would have been a Cadillac to him.”

Though my father’s parents were decades long in the ground, they lived on and on. In the language of psychoanalysis, they were his ego ideals, internal objects to please. They still had immense power over him, to bless, approve, and admire him—and he them.

But there was one more wrinkle, and this was of most interest to me.

My father explained to his analyst (and to me): It was simply not the way of rabbis to drive a Cadillac unless you were some kind of Madison Avenue rabbi type such as those churned out by the “Seminary” or HUC. “My rebbe and my chaverim, his rabbinical friends, would disapprove,” he said flatly, referring to a man who lived close to his heart and who represented all that was right and just and good. “They may not say something directly, overtly out loud, but they will inwardly denounce me as a prozdor, a rabbi who is soft on Satan and yields to the status quo.”
the yetzer hora, the evil one who brings man to sin—not a real man, much less a real rabbi.”

My father was now faced with a crisis. He needed to please his mother, his father, his rebbe, but he had reached a point where he might just have to please himself—but could he? A psychic house divided. This human crisis fell right into the fertile crescent of psychoanalytic work.

I was unequivocal: “I think you need to get the car, Dad. It’s what you want.”

“You think so?” he asked like a kid anticipating a bright red bicycle for Christmas. I would bring him color brochures, extolling the Sedan DeVille: a stately navy car pictured near a verdant green golf course, whitewall tires and fancy hubcaps.

“But why do you want me to have this?” he asked me. I mumbled something about how it would give me pleasure to see him happy in something shiny, but I was overly invested in this car thing and I scarcely knew why at the time.

I had been raised in the semicloistered atmosphere of my father’s rabbinic household and yeshiva. I say “semi” because we were part of the world of culture, too. My big sisters had posters of Donny Osmond and David Cassidy in their room and my parents, in a nod to the times, bought them green industrial carpet, and bare walls, save for an image of a 19th-century Jewish sage—something for a seminarian, out of James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

Consciously, I didn’t mind these disparities. I longed to be like Dad. He was different from other dads in a good way. He worked for the Lord and as he saw it the Lord looked out for him. It’s not that Dad was some kind of sidewalk preacher, but my father absolutely believed he had a personal relationship with the God of Israel and the God of mankind. He had a duty to serve and serve he did, teaching His word. He officiated at religious rituals and occasions, the words of Torah and the ancient rabbis flowed easily and always from his heart and from his lips. Between us there was no daylight. His God was my God.

But as I got even just a smidgen older, say like 8, I had mixed feelings. It all could be true, I thought, as I would listen to him preach or teach. I was proud to be part of a family of rabbis and learned men, and to be counted among the Lord’s children, but at the same time, it was not as exciting or even inviting as my father made it out to be—at least at that age. It seemed to me that while Jefferson Airplane and David Cassidy were not the right answer exactly, the world might have been made for something more exciting than Psalms and rabbi-ing and ministering. But what exactly was life about?

That question has different answers at different times, but the only answers I had were prefabricated and formulaic: Life was about the next world, piety, Torah study. No, life was about this world, a hot rod, a muscle car, and a pretty brunette.

In the meantime, desire built in me by the hour. The lusts I had as a young man seemed limitless to me—too much for anyone I knew and too much for me. I had to play a good game as the son of a rabbi—I certainly knew the tone of being Jewish—but deep down I was a redneck who wanted his pizza and a motorcycle and a girlfriend named Trixie who worked at the Dairy Queen.

Sons often don’t realize this, but fathers grow and evolve at the same time.
they do. My father’s wishes, desires, and entitlements developed over time. Though his faith was constant, his personality and philosophy were always under revision.

I could scarcely know it then, but in my father’s Cadillac conundrum were my own issues with materialism. What does a Jewish man do with his wants and needs, not to mention lusts? I was hungry for a verdict, a rabbinic ruling so to speak.

In trying to force his hand—"Yes, Dad, you must get the car"—I missed a chance to feel him, to imaginatively place myself in his head. The question of pleasing himself decentered him (as it did for me as well) and brought him to trepidation. If he didn’t please his mother and father and the Lord, who was he? What would become of him?

I joked about the Caddy to my friends: the leather seats, the power windows, why these were like the honeyed fleshpots of Egypt. While Judaism has no beef with wealth per se, that big Cadillac engine smacked of Satan.

But this was serious. My father had his whole life been in the employ of the Lord, charged with a mission: to safeguard and rescue the Jewish people through education. It was a calling to save and he would in turn be saved as well. My mother, too, who had survived the Blitz in London possessed the mental framework of rescue.

Now in the analyst’s office, he was being asked (and, by extension, so was I) to consider life not in terms of being saved—Oh Lord, please save us!—but in terms of being pleased.

I confess that after many years, this notion frightens me deeply. I will hide behind ideology, psychoanalysis, the Monroe Doctrine—anything, but consider a world where I would be permitted (or permit myself) to please myself.

The prospect makes me both dizzy with pleasure and nauseous at once. Such a world would begin with theft and end with debauchery; I would damage everyone, even the name of the good Lord, and I would be shunned by Him and His people for all eternity.

At that time of my father’s “Cadillac question” I was drawn to a novel that frightened the daylight out of me. It was An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser. I was astonished to find that Dreiser understood something about my position. His novel centered on Clyde, the son of a sidewalk preacher who yearned for—well, everything. He wanted and wanted and wanted. Yes, preacher’s kids are perhaps more materialistic than most. They hear their parents preach the gospel of sacrifice and sacrament, but they pick up all that their fathers and mothers disavow.

No Sedan DeVille, no money, no woman was enough for Clyde. No sooner did he get the farm girl pregnant than he went after the shapely, high-society Sondra Finchley. In a fix with the farm girl who no longer appealed to him, he plotted to have her finished off on a boat ride on the lake. At the last minute he backed away from his plan, but nevertheless, he accidentally hit her with his camera. The poor girl lost her balance, which caused the small boat to capsise. Clyde tried to save her, but he couldn’t and she drowned. Though technically innocent of murder, he wasn’t believed and was summarily sent to the electric chair.

So this, I believed, is what happens. Satan sold you a Cadillac and you lose your soul and your life and you wind up in the electric chair. I was haunted by this but I could not reach the “pious, proper” conclusion. There was no way that I would reject the material things I wanted—no, needed.

Satan had to be put in his place. He had to be proved wrong in order for me to live. And who better to fight Satan than the rabbi himself. If a father teaches his son to please God, then he might teach him also to please himself. The yetzer hora be damned! You can get the car and still have a soul—maybe an even better soul. That was my hopeful thinking.

The Cadillac came, all right. The navy Sedan DeVille sat a little out of place in front of my father’s attached rowhouse in dowdy Kew Gardens Hills. We reverently touched the hood ornament and the Cadillac logos on the steering wheel and other places, but like Adam who tasted the forbidden fruit, we were convinced that nothing had changed. Nobody got sick or died. Shrimp didn’t appear on the menu and Dad did not—heaven forbid!—start to flirt with the woman down the block. The Cadillac corrupted nobody: Chaim 1, Satan 0. Game, set, match.

I got my verdict, my rabbinic ruling, and one would think that would have settled it, but a verdict on Satan can never be settled for eternity. For me, a new struggle with Satan was to begin—one of my own. Despite his destructive powers, I wanted and needed him right next to me—I bought a big red Suzuki motorcycle—but only small portions did I accept from him. (No Dairy Queen girl for me!) So far, we’re in a dead heat. "Me tahlgar nisht arum oif fremder garten: One doesn’t wander in strange gardens where he doesn’t belong. But one is allowed to take a walk. Or even go for the occasional drive."

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Tablet explores the past at tabletmag.com/sections/history
Spinach and Chickpea Tajine
with Green Olives and Preserved Lemon

BY PAOLA GAVIN

INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound spinach
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 ½ cups cooked and drained chickpeas
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon paprika
- ¼ teaspoon ground turmeric
- about 1/2 cup hot water
- 16 green olives, pitted and halved
- the rind of 1 small preserved lemon, finely chopped
- 1 lemon, cut into wedges, to serve (optional)

PREPARATION

Step 1
Wash the spinach and cook in a covered saucepan for 5 minutes or until tender. Drain and roughly chop.

Step 2
Heat the olive oil in a heavy-based saucepan and add the onion. Cook over a moderate heat until it starts to soften. Add the garlic and cook for 1 more minute. Add the chickpeas, cumin, paprika, and turmeric and stir well. Add the spinach and hot water and season with salt and black pepper. Bring to a boil, then cover and simmer for 5 minutes. Add the olives and preserved lemon and simmer for a further 5 minutes to blend the flavors. Serve hot with lemon wedges on the side, if desired.

Yield: Serves 3 to 4

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