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ARTS & LETTERS

The RFK Jr. Tapes

The Democratic presidential candidate and America's most prominent 'conspiracy theorist' talks about his family, the military-pharmaceutical complex, and our new system of social control

BY DAVID SAMUELS

I first met Bobby Kennedy Jr. when he showed up one summer afternoon in 1976 at the door of my ordinary suburban home in the company of a friend from Harvard named Peter Shapiro, who was running for a seat in the New Jersey State Assembly. I was 9 years old, and not particularly thrilled about our family's recent move from Brooklyn to a street of empty suburban lawns whose nearest point of interest was a candy store a mile or so down a steep hill. The two polite, handsome young men in navy blazers, both in their 20s and well over 6 feet tall, promised a whiff of something different.

I don't recall if I had any idea that the young Bobby Kennedy's uncle had been president, or that his father had run for president; as a first-generation American, I knew that important people went to Harvard, and being a Kennedy was like being a movie star. The two young men on my doorstep, politely asking if my parents were home, immediately appealed to my imagination as connections to a world that I hadn't seen before, but which might be fun. So I gladly took them to Tory Corners, the Irish working-class district nearby, and spent the rest of the afternoon handing out buttons and

leaflets for the Shapiro for Assembly campaign.

Peter won that race, and a year later, at the age of 26, he ran for the newly created job of Essex County Executive, and he won that race too, becoming something of a rising figure in national Democratic politics—a future Jewish president, even. In 1984, he won the Democratic nomination for governor before losing in a landslide to the popular Republican incumbent Tom Kean, effectively ending his political career. In between, though, I became something of an in-house mascot—the joke being that I was the only person involved in Peter's campaigns who was younger than the candidate.

For his part, Peter graciously embraced his role as my patron, offering me summer jobs in the County Executive's office, writing me a letter of recommendation to his alma mater, and hooking me up with a job in Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's office in Washington. The highlight of my employment there was the week I spent with my friend RJ, a sophomore at the University of Massachusetts, scrubbing the senator's house in McLean, Virginia, from top to bottom—in preparation for what turned out to be a party celebrating the 20th anniversary of the John F. Kennedy Library. The guest list for the

event consisted of the extended Kennedy family, including the late president's widow, who was remarkably friendly and kind; a few of the senator's drinking buddies, including Sens. John Tunney and Chris Dodd; House Speaker Tip O'Neill; President Ronald Reagan and his wife, Nancy; and me and R.J. Having acquainted ourselves with the lay of the land, R.J. and I then returned to the senator's house late one night with two fellow interns and some bottles of Andre sparkling wine and got drunk in his hot tub, an act that the senator would have no doubt got a kick out of. When I call myself a Kennedy Democrat, those are among my reasons.

Family patronage and largesse are not what people generally celebrate as the strengths of American democracy these days, though I would venture that the current emphasis on tribal warfare and jailing one's political foes is in fact an inferior model. I would also suggest that it is an empirical fact that far more significant legislation of far more benefit to poor and working people passed the U.S. Congress in the 1970s and even the 1980s than is ever proposed, let alone passed into law, by the tribunes of TikTok and Fox News. Before it was transformed into an instrument of billionaire oligarchs and their nonprofit bureaucracies and the American security state, the Democratic Party proved itself capable of delivering tangible benefits to tens of millions of ordinary Americans in the places where they lived—whether that meant urban church parishes or the Ozarks. Once upon a time, the Democratic Party aimed to make the lives of ordinary people better, by working through the institutions that they built and valued, rather than subjecting them to tedious lectures about right-think and using the government as an instrument to punish anyone who said the wrong words the wrong way. The party's message was that everyone could find a welcoming place under its roof, and have their foundational beliefs honored and respected—the job of the Kennedy family being to sprinkle some handfuls of fairy dust over the whole affair. It was a job that the family took seriously for decades, sending their children to spend summers in Africa or Appalachia, or

helping out with the Special Olympics, and other good works, while helping eager outsiders get a foot up on the ladder.

Everyone knows how the story ended, of course. First JFK and RFK were assassinated. Then, Teddy drove off a bridge in Martha's Vineyard, killing a young staffer. His failed presidential run against Jimmy Carter in 1980 felt like an obligatory coda to the end of Camelot, before he continued on to a distinguished career in the Senate. Various third-generation Kennedys came and went from Congress and various statehouses. In the 1990s, John Kennedy, the former president's olive-skinned, extraordinarily handsome, and personable son, briefly captured the country's imagination, before dying with his very blond, very thin wife in a tragic plane crash.

Today, there are dozens of Kennedys with Ivy League degrees, quite a few of whom have had perfectly acceptable and even laudable careers at the middle rungs of the American governmental and corporate and nonprofit bureaucracies. As the family legacy faded, the torch was picked up by others. Bill Clinton presented himself as a wonky hillbilly successor to the Kennedys, inspired by his youthful encounter with JFK to pursue a life of public service, while selling out the American working class to the globalist gods. Barack Obama bought an enormous mansion on Martha's Vineyard, but otherwise displayed little interest in the Kennedys and their mythos. Obama's political chi came from his cool mastery of the politics of race and empire and his disdain for the American working poor, whom he redefined as white bitter-enders who clung to religion and guns. So much for the Kennedy family and the 20th-century Democratic Party.

With one exception. Anyone who hung around Kennedy political circles knew that in the collective opinion of the various longtime family friends, and speechwriters, and political consultants, and other hangers-on, who in one way or another saw themselves as custodians of the family brand, there was one member of the third generation of Kennedys who was said to have "it"—the family's electric brand of political magic. Not

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Jews of Rage

The anger that fills the Yiddish original manuscript of Elie Wiesel's 'Night' is muted in the book that became the classic account of the Holocaust

BY NAOMI SEIDMAN



Joe, the eldest of RFK's children, who was dull and plodding; not Kathleen, a dedicated public servant who lacked personal charisma; not Caroline, who took after her mother; not John-John, who was a playboy; not Teddy Jr., who battled cancer and lost a leg; or Patrick, who was honest and sweet-natured but inherited his father's problems with substance abuse and spoken language.

The heir to the family's political mantle in the third generation of Kennedys was always Bobby. It was Bobby who became the leader of his tribe of orphaned brothers and sisters after their father's death, trying and failing to make up for the absence of a charismatic father and the near-total absence of adult supervision. A friend who was close to the family in those years recalls visits to their home in Hickory Hill, Virginia, as like visiting a zoo—quite literally, with live sea mammals in the swimming pool, and animals of all shapes and sizes, frequently untamed, roaming freely throughout the house. Bobby's hawks nested in the eaves and children climbed in and out of windows. Eventually, the friend's mother forbade further visits, on account of it being too physically dangerous.

If the Kennedys were a kind of American royalty, then Bobby was their Prince Hal—charismatic and beloved, yet also dangerous and frequently out of control, a fatherless child who was trying to emulate the adult father figures who had been taken from him before he could truly understand who they were or what their brand of world-shaping masculinity meant. In 1983, Bobby was found nodding off in an airplane bathroom, and then pleaded guilty to heroin possession. The death of his brother David, who worshipped Bobby, a year later from a heroin overdose, made an uphill climb back to respectability seem even more unlikely, even after he got clean, and his decades of hard work as an environmental lawyer for Riverkeeper and the NRDC established him as one of the most effective environmental activists in the country.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Bobby kept his name alive in political circles through a familiar striptease dance with the New York press, which was no doubt orchestrated in part by

his best friend from college, Peter Kaplan, the sharp-eyed editor of *The New York Observer*: A dutiful accounting of his environmental good works ridding New York's waterways of deadly toxins, a dash of Kennedy fairy dust, a tour of his falcons—falconry being a lifelong hobby, pursued with characteristic dedication—and a tantalizing hint of a possible future race for some political office that would re-up his star power and help promote his advocacy. Of course, he never ran—which prevented the publication of the inevitable attack articles ripping him to pieces. Running would have been messy. His sister Kerry was married to the governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo—heir to another political dynasty whose name meant more in New York state than the name Kennedy did.

Then it all came apart. In 2005, Kerry and Andrew Cuomo divorced. In 2010, Bobby separated from his wife, Mary Richardson, who had been Kerry's college roommate at Brown and appeared to be suffering from substance abuse issues; a judge awarded temporary full custody of their four children to Bobby. In 2012, Mary Richardson hung herself. In 2013, Peter Kaplan died of cancer.

Meanwhile, Bobby Kennedy Jr. found success as an environmentally friendly venture capitalist along with a new cause: vaccines. In 2005, Kennedy wrote a blockbuster *Rolling Stone* magazine article titled "Deadly Immunity," which presented compelling evidence of an ongoing vaccine safety cover-up led by U.S. national health bureaucrats, including transcripts of a 2000 CDC conference in Norcross, Georgia, where researchers presented information linking the mercury compound thimerosal with neurological problems in children. At its root, the case Kennedy made in his article was no more or less plausible and empirically grounded than the cases that he and dozens of other environmental advocates had been making for decades against large chemical companies for spewing toxins into America's air, water, and soil, and then lying about it.

Yet the resulting journalistic-bureaucratic firestorm proved that vaccines were different. It also offered a preview of the COVID wars, with pressure

campaigns by vaccine believers attacking five fact-checking errors in the article—a number that was hardly unusual for a long and complex reported article in a venue like *Rolling Stone*. The campaigns led to various emendations of the article by its online publisher, Salon, which eventually retracted the article in 2011. In that year, Kennedy founded the World Mercury Project, which would be renamed the Children's Health Defense, to keep pressing his assertions about empirical links between vaccinations and the explosion of neurological issues in children. For anyone who knew Kennedy, his family, and his own record as an environmental advocate, the fact that he would sink his teeth in rather than let go was pretty much a foregone conclusion.

And so began the strangest and in many ways also the most promising chapter of Bobby Kennedy's life. Stripped of the protection that the Kennedy name had once offered him, he was no longer the future secretary of something in some future Democratic presidential administration; he was a leper, banned from social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, repeatedly attacked by network television personalities and by members of his own family as an "embarrassment" and a "moron." Meanwhile, his book attacking Anthony Fauci, the high priest of the COVID order, became an Amazon bestseller.

It is therefore easy to welcome the news that Robert F. Kennedy Jr., an heir to the political dynasty that sprinkled fairy dust on the 20th-century Democratic Party, is running for president. The collision he's about to cause between the world of official group-think and the world of normal-speak—where most Americans weigh what might be best for themselves and their children—can only be good for American democracy, and for the American language.

It doesn't take an alarmist to recognize how fast and far the term "conspiracy theory" has morphed from the way it was generally used even a decade ago. Once a description of a particular kind of recognizably insulated and cyclical counterlogic, "conspiracy theory" has

become a flashing red light that is used to identify and suppress truths that powerful people find inconvenient. Whereas yesterday's conspiracy theories involved feverish ruminations on secret cells of Freemasons, Catholics or Jews who communicated with their elders in Rome or Jerusalem through secret tunnel networks or codes, today's conspiracy theories include whatever evidence-based realities threaten America's flourishing networks of administrative state bureaucrats, credentialed propagandists, oligarchs, and spies.

Whenever a hole appears in the ozone layer of received opinion, it is sure to be quickly labeled a "conspiracy theory" by a large technology platform. The lab leak in Wuhan was a conspiracy theory, as was the idea that the U.S. government was funding gain-of-function research; the idea that the development of mRNA vaccines was part of a Pentagon biowarfare effort from which Bill Gates boasted of making billions of dollars; the idea that masking schoolchildren had zero effect on the transmission of COVID; the idea that the FBI and the White House were directly censoring Twitter, Google, and Facebook; the idea that the information on Hunter Biden's laptop showing that he received multi-million-dollar payoffs from agents of foreign powers including China and Russia was real. The most offensive thing about these falsehoods is not the fact that they later turned out to be supported by evidence, which can happen to even the most unlikely seeming hypothesis. Rather, it is that the people who labeled them "false" often knew full well from the beginning that they were true, and were seeking to avoid the consequences; that is how a truth becomes a "conspiracy theory."

At this point, the fact that Robert F. Kennedy is the country's leading "conspiracy theorist" alone qualifies him to be president. He is privileged, or cursed, to understand the landscape of American conspiracy theories, real and imagined, from the inside, in the way that even our greatest novelists have failed to do.

America's last great generation of fiction writers were divided on the subject of conspiracy theories into three

well-defined camps. The first camp, consisting of Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Don DeLillo and their fellows, accepted an American reality defined by pop psychology, celebrity, and the power of individual narcissism—i.e., a somewhat more sophisticated version of the official American narratives presented on the nightly news and in *Time* magazine—with writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison doing their part by filling in the endlessly fascinating subject of race. It was no accident that both Mailer and DeLillo were driven to write endlessly long, fictionalized biographies of Lee Harvey Oswald that concluded that Oswald acted alone, while neither Morrison nor Walker displayed the slightest interest in who shot Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X. For his part, Roth wrote two overtly political American novels, which concluded respectively that Richard Nixon was bad and that Charles Lindbergh was an antisemite. For all of these writers, the official version of American history was the necessary overarching framework for social, familial, and individual microhistories—though in his more overtly Jewish books, like *The Counterlife*, *The Ghost Writer* and *Operation Shylock*, Roth managed to escape the official version of Jewish history and became a much more interesting writer.

The second camp of American novelists were those who saw strange shapes moving beneath the murk. These included Thomas Pynchon, of course, but also William Gaddis; realists like Robert Stone and James Ellroy; and Ralph Ellison, the author of the single greatest 20th-century American novel, *Invisible Man*, a book which absorbed the literary energy of his great predecessor, William Faulkner, who as a Southerner necessarily dissented from the official version of everything. On one level or another, for all of these writers, the conspiracies were real, and the official version was a lie for squares. The third camp, the absurdists, who included Joseph Heller, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, Barry Hannah, and others, tried and in most cases failed to break the deadlock through deadpan comedy.

RFK Jr. has been, by degrees, a James

Ellroy character, a Robert Stone character, a William Gaddis character, a Thomas Pynchon character, and perhaps now, a Ralph Ellison character, in that it may be fundamentally impossible for any American to see him straight. But it is very clear to which fictional camp his character belongs. He believes that conspiracy theories are not only real but define American reality. He grew up believing that the CIA most likely assassinated his uncle Jack, and lately, he has come to believe that it also assassinated his father. To walk through American life for the past 50 years believing that the government killed the Kennedys was to be fundamentally at odds with the gestalt; to believe in these conspiracy theories while also being a Kennedy must have been even stranger, to the point of making it impossible to be entirely authentic in public. Now that conspiracy theories have gone mainstream, who better than RFK Jr. to authentically understand and communicate with a public that is rightly suspicious of the poisons in its water and air, the dishonesty of the public health bureaucracy, and the toxic nature of official discourse.

At the age of 69, the latest Kennedy to run for president is a vigorous outdoorsman who looks at least 15 years younger than his calendar age. Reporters at his announcement last week were quick to notice the preponderance of swooning MILFs in the audience; projecting the kind of masculine charisma that is impossible to find on either side of the political aisle these days, Kennedy exudes the rude physical health of an older male supplement model. The contrast with the geriatric president and his denatured courtiers, or the paunchy, cheeseburger-addicted ex-president, could not be greater.

The idea of a Kennedy leading a *Jacquerie* against the new authoritarianism of the best and the brightest may seem odd, or it may seem like a fitting last hurrah for the 20th-century Democratic Party, whose postwar incarnation become more or less synonymous with the Kennedys. It is too early to say whether his challenge to the unpopular Biden will turn out to be a mirage, or whether Kennedy—who after all these years has never held elective office at

any level of government—is truly interested in becoming president. Still, this is a very much an era of black swans, and much stranger things, and worse things, have happened in America recently, by contrast with which the news of a Kennedy running for president seems quite normal.

I met up with Bobby Kennedy Jr. in the backyard of his house in Santa Monica recently for a talk that lasted for the better part of five hours. What follows are some edited excerpts from that conversation.

St. Francis and the Lepers

David Samuels (interviewer): I was an intern for your uncle Teddy in the 1980s, and in that period he had some pretty obvious drug and alcohol issues. And when he'd speak often there'd be this kind of Kennedyesque word salad that had no syntax to it that would come out of his mouth, particularly if he'd been drinking heavily. And you'd look at him and you're like, what's the mythos of this busted-up family all about?

So this was in 1985, at the height of the AIDS crisis, and one day they brought in a group of AIDS patients who were being left in locked hospital wards to die because even doctors and nurses didn't want to touch them—that's how bad the public ignorance and hysteria was about that disease at the time. And I remember that in the office, we were all freaked out that they were coming in and we were reviewing our playbook: What happens if one of them touches the furniture? What happens if one of them sips from a cup?

Then these people come in. Many of them looked like hell, weak, frail, with lesions on their faces. They looked like cancer patients. So we're all kind of standing there, five or six of us, and we don't want to get too close to them. And there was just this weird moment of silence, in which no one even thought to invite them to sit down.

And then Teddy comes out of his office. They start saying, "We're being left in these hospital wards to die, and we're here to talk to you," because he

"I like snakes and I like poison snakes, and I like constrictors. I would bring them home, and he would not let me feed them mice because he thought it was cruel."

was the head of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which was in charge of hospitals. He takes one look at them and you could see the response in his eyes. He walks over and puts his arms around the two patients who looked the worst, and suddenly he is hugging them. He starts reciting this mantra of "My brother Jack, and my brother Bobby," and talking about how everyone is equal, and deserves to be treated with decency and respect.

In that moment I realized that for him, it was entirely real. He understood that his mission in life, however flawed he was as a person, was to extend this mantle of protection. I remember walking out of there feeling stunned.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I did a little book, a children's book about St. Francis of Assisi, and one of the turning points of his life was leprosy. People didn't know how it spread. They knew it was contagious in some way. So lepers were pariahs. They were excluded from society and they came to the wilderness and they were required by law to carry bells with them and to ring them as they walked to warn people away from their path. Immediately after his conversion, St. Francis passed a group of lepers on the street, on a road, and he got off his horse and he hugged and kissed one of them. He faced the thing

that was his greatest fear because that love and compassion overcame that biological impulse of revulsion for risk of infection, which is hardwired into us from evolution.

DS: Was St. Francis important to your dad?

RFK: Yes. At home in Virginia, there was literally a shrine on the second-floor landing. Then there was a shrine on the third-floor landing. Then there was one in the garden.

My father's middle name is Francis. My middle name is Francis. He's the most popular saint, so it's not unusual. But, for me, he had a special meaning because of his involvement with animals.

DS: Do you remember your dad with animals at all?

RFK: My dad would not let us have live feeders at home. I like snakes and I like poison snakes, and I like constrictors. I would bring them home, and he would not let me feed them mice because he thought it was cruel. He couldn't stand it.

DS: Did you explain to him, "Dad, that's what they eat"?

RFK: Yes. And he was like, "No."

He did let me have the hawks, though. But unless you go out hunting, you're feeding just meat to the hawks. I wasn't feeding them live animals.

I remember one time he found an evening grosbeak on the tennis court. He was sitting next to the tennis court. He had tweezers, and he was trying to straighten out its beak, which is not supposed to be straight. It looks crooked. I told him, that's how it's supposed to be.

He just had a natural compassion, and he couldn't stand cruelty to animals or to human beings. He couldn't bear it. It was unbearable to him.

DS: Do you remember ever seeing him cry?

RFK: My dad? No.

DS: Your father was a very gifted man, obviously, and a complex man, who didn't fit neatly into any boxes. He was attached to the Catholic Church, in an age when normal members of the elite had disdain for religion. And he was not a big believer in big government. He was a champion of communities solving their own problems locally. Thinking back to your early

memories of him—of what he wanted from you, what he taught you—what do you remember?

RFK: I think the most joyful thing is the amount of time that we spent outdoors, not only just every day playing sports and competition, but also taking us on wilderness explorations a lot. We went on all the big Western rivers, on the Snake, the Colorado, the Little Colorado, and the Green, the Salmon, upper Hudson, and many others, at a time when people weren't doing that. Our lives were very, very rich, and we were very, very lucky.

But I'll tell you another memory about my dad. It happened just before he left for the campaign, so a few months before he died. He called me into his office and he gave me a copy of Camus' book *The Plague*. He asked me to read it, which he'd often do. He would give me poems or books or whatever, and asked me to read them. But this one he gave me with a particular intensity. I didn't read it till after he died. When I did read it, I read it with an interest where I was trying to figure out why he gave it to me. What was the lock that this was the key for?

The book is about a doctor in a quarantine city in North Africa, and there's a plague attack in the city, and nobody can go in or out. They never tell you what the plague is, but they know it's contagious. They've never seen it before, and they have no idea how to treat it. A lot of the book is the doctor's conversations with himself, because he knows that if he leaves and goes out and starts ministering to the sick, he's almost certain to die. In any case, there's very little he will be able to do, because there's no treatment known. He's convincing himself to stay locked up where it's safe. Ultimately, he makes a decision to leave and go do whatever help that he can, because that is his duty. That is the duty of all humanity, but particularly doctors. That's the subject of the book.

Camus was an existentialist, and one of my father's favorite writers. The existentialists were the legatees of the Greek and Roman tradition of stoicism. The Stoics had that same philosophy, which is that you find meaning in your life. You bring order to a chaotic universe by

doing your duty and not complaining about it. The iconic hero of Stoicism is Sisyphus, and Camus also wrote a book about Sisyphus.

DS: Do you know where Camus wrote that book?

RFK: I assumed it was in France. In Algeria?

DS: When he wrote that book, Camus was in hiding in a mountain village in France, because he was a member of the French resistance. In that same village, about a thousand Jews were being hidden. A friend of mine was a child who was hidden in that village, which was actually a group of three Huguenot Protestant villages, where they saved about 4,000 Jews by hiding them in their homes.

So Camus would wake up every day in hiding, but he was also aware of this whole other population that was in hiding in that village. It's all abstracted in *The Plague*, but when he wrote it, he was living through something very concrete, which was Nazi fascism, and the very real fear of what would happen to him, and to the other hidden people in that village, if they went outside.

RFK: That's a great story.

Anyway, the message of Sisyphus is that Sisyphus, of course, is cursed to push a boulder up a hill and to never get it all the way over the ledge. It always tumbles back on him at the top, and he's supposed to do that for eternity, which you would consider something that would be a rather miserable existence. But in the minds of Camus and the Stoics, Sisyphus is a happy man because he undertakes his duty. He's always pushing to get uphill, to make it, to improve the situation. He puts his shoulder to the stone, and he does what he's supposed to do.

That, I think, really describes my father's own decisions that he made in his life—particularly at the end of his life, his lethal decision to run for president. It gave me, I think, some important insight and direction that taught me how to live my own life.

Homing Pigeons

DS: When did you first become interested in environmental law?

RFK: I was interested in the outdoors my entire life. I was obsessed with wild-life. I was in the woods every day of my life. At school, I was really ADHD. So I was always behind at school and I would sit in the back of the class and just think about getting back into the woods to check my traps and lines. I started seriously raising and breeding homing pigeons when I was 7.

DS: How do you acquire your first pigeon?

RFK: It was a guy who lived next door to us, a farmer who was interested in animals, but he ran cock fights, rooster fights, and other stuff. And he was walking distance from my house, a couple across some cornfields, and he sort of took me under his wing. My mother ended up suing him, or he sued her. She stole some horses from him that he was mistreating and it was a big publicity case when my father was attorney general.

But before that, I had this relationship with the guy where he turned me onto reading and raising homers. We would put them on the train down to Delaware along with all the other pigeon fanciers and the homers would come back and when they came back into my coop, I would rush down to the post office and get them time-stamped. That's how the system worked.

DS: What made you connect your love of the outdoors to practicing law?

RFK: When I was a kid, I wanted to be a scientist or a vet. Then when my dad died, my priorities reoriented and I felt kind of an obligation to pick up the torch. So I went on a different path, which ended up in law school. And then when I was getting sober, after I went to law school, I kind of had to reorient myself around in ways that were sort of more true to myself. So that's when I said, "OK, I'm going to do environmental stuff."

DS: Did you have a mentor in the process of understanding environmental law and how to use it?

RFK: I had a couple of mentors. One was John Adams, who was the head of NRDC [Natural Resources Defense Council]. And then Robert Boyle, he was a *Sports Illustrated* outdoor writer and editor for 60 years. And he

founded the Hudson River Fishermen Association, and it was just a bunch of commercial fishermen and recreational fishermen—they were almost all former Marines.

In March of 1966, the Penn Central Railroad was vomiting oil from a four-and-a-half-foot pipe in the Croton-Harmon railroad. And the oil went up the river and made the tides black and the beaches and made the shad taste of diesel. So the fishermen couldn't sell them at the Fulton Fish Market in the city. And all the fishermen came together.

There's a fishing village on the Hudson called Groutville. It's 30 miles north of the city on the east bank of the river. And there the only public building was the American Legion Hall. Groutville had the highest enlistment rate per capita of any community in America and most of them are Marines. And they got together in this American Legion Hall in March of 1966 to talk about blowing up the Penn Central pipes, and also about floating a raft of dynamite into the Indian Point Power Plant, which at that time was killing a million fish a day on its intake screens. Somebody suggested they put a match to the oil slick coming out of the Penn Central Pipe and burn up the pipe. And somebody else said they should roll a mattress up and jam it up the pipe and flood the railyard with its own waste.

And then Boyle stood up. He had written an article about these fishing clubs made up of these weirdos and oddballs, these very colorful characters, for *Sports Illustrated*. But in researching the article, he had come across an ancient navigational statute called the 1888 Rivers and Harbors Act that said it was illegal to pollute any waterway in the United States, and you had to pay a big penalty if you got caught. Also, there was a bounty provision that said that anybody who turned in the polluter got to keep half the fine.

And he had gone to the libel lawyers at Time Inc., which owned *Sports Illustrated*, and he said, "Is this still good?" And they looked and they said: "In 80 years it's never been enforced, but it's still on the books. So technically it's good."

So when all these men and women, 300 people were crowded in the

American Legion Hall talking about violence because their livelihoods and property values were being destroyed, he stood up with a copy of that law and said, "We shouldn't be talking about breaking the law, we should be talking about enforcing it." And they resolved that evening, they were going to start a group that was then called the Hudson River Fishermen's Association. They were going to go out, track down, and prosecute every polluter on the Hudson.

Eighteen months later, they collected the first penalty in United States history and the first bounty in United States history against a corporate polluter. They got to keep \$2,500 from Anaconda Wiring and Cable, who were dumping toxins in Hastings, New York. Then they sued American Filter in 1973. They got \$200,000 and they used that money to construct a boat. And they then began patrolling the river and they hired me using bounty money in 1984. They were still called the Hudson River Fishermen's Association and it was not that well organized. I mean, they had a charter that required them to have a mixer, a dance for fishermen once a year.

Then we started methodically suing every polluter on the Hudson. We brought a couple hundred lawsuits, and we collected I think over \$3 billion in remediation and penalties. Hudson today is the richest waterway in the North Atlantic, produces more pounds of fish per acre, more biomass per gallon than any other waterway in the Atlantic Ocean, north of the equator. It's the last major river system left that still has strong spawning stocks of all of its historical species of migratory fish.

Regulatory Capture, Pollution, and Vaccines

DS: What did you learn about corporate America from your decades leading that group—which eventually became Riverkeeper, right?

RFK: The way that Riverkeeper began was when Art and Ritchie Garrett, both former Marines, went to the Corps of Engineers and they went to the State Conservation Department to beg them to stop Penn Central Railroad from vomiting oil into the Hudson. And

the colonel who ran the Corps of Engineers, whom they visited 11 times in Manhattan, he finally told them, these are important people—meaning the Penn Central Board of Directors, we can't stop them. [The Garretts] realize, "Oh, OK, government is in cahoots with the polluters." If you're a big shot, you can destroy people's livelihoods. You can privatize the commons, you can poison the fish, and nobody's going to stop you because you own the regulatory agencies.

DS: What does owning regulatory agencies mean?

RFK: There have been hundreds of articles, and I've written books on regulatory captures. There are a lot of mechanisms by which powerful economic entities in a society are able to capture the regulators that are supposed to be protecting the public. It happens in every country. I mean, you see less of it in Canada than you do in New York, for example, or Louisiana. But it's happening everywhere.

There are huge economic incentives to pollute. So the polluters are able to figure out ways to turn those agencies into sock puppets for the industry that they are supposed to regulate.

DS: And when you go to Monsanto or Exxon or any of these companies that you sue and say, "Hey, you guys, you're dumping this shit into the water and it contains mercury or whatever that could be harmful to kids, so why don't you stop it?", what kinds of responses would you get?

RFK: The official response from those entities is sophisticated. And you're usually dealing with lawyers, who are very guarded.

The interesting question that I think most Americans have is: Why would a corporation like Monsanto or General Electric poison all the fish in the Hudson if it's their fish too? And that question was answered by Sinclair Lewis, who said that it's impossible to persuade a man of a fact when the existence of that fact diminishes his salary. There's an economic law called "tragedy of the commons," which basically says an individual following their own economic interests will capture and kill the last

fish in the ocean no matter what it does to the rest of society.

So those people are able to put blinders on to persuade themselves that they're creating jobs, that they're doing good things, and they judge themselves by their intentions rather than their actions. And ultimately their ultimate redoubt is, I can live in Aspen, or I can live in Hawaii, or I can live in a gated community, and the mayhem that I'm creating for other communities will not reach my door.

DS: So the idea that large pharmaceutical companies might be using additives or using processes that could cause damage to children didn't come as a shock to you.

RFK: What was a shock to me was the economic entanglements between the pharmaceutical industry and the regulatory agencies—which were, to me, unprecedented in my previous experience. The EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] is a captive agency, but it's captured by the coal industry, the oil industry, and by the chemical industry. When we tried the Monsanto case, we got papers where the head of EPA's pesticide regulatory division had a secret communication with Monsanto where he was telling them, "I'm going to kill this study and you need to give me a medal when I've done it." He was not working for the public. He was working privately and secretly for Monsanto. And that's pretty common. That's basically typical regulatory capture.

But with pharma, you have the entire agency that is dependent on pharmaceutical revenue.

DS: We need this study, and we need it done in a year, and here's your million bucks.

RFK: Right. We need this drug approved in a year, so we're going to pay you extra to fast-track it. And that money, the regulatory agencies become dependent on it.

At NIH [National Institutes of Health], as it turns out, they're doing very little in the way of basic scientific research. What NIH should be doing is saying, OK, what's the answer to this interesting question: Why is it that in my generation, I'm 69, the rate of autism is

1 in 10,000, while in my kids' generation it's 1 in 34?

Now, I would argue that a lot of that is from the vaccine schedule, which changed in 1989. But what nobody can argue about is that it has to be an environmental exposure of some kind.

DS: I saw a number the other day, it said that 45% of American children now suffer from a chronic disease.

RFK: It's more than that. The 2006 study is 65%. I think 45% suffer from obesity, at least in some states. It's 40, 47%, I saw, in Oklahoma, Mississippi, and West Virginia.

And you know it has to be an environmental exposure because genes do not cause epidemics. 1989 was the year that a lot of these changes happened. The food allergy stuff suddenly became epidemic. Rheumatoid arthritis became epidemic. Juvenile diabetes, a whole host of allergic-type disease like anaphylaxis, eczema, food allergies, peanut allergies, etc., asthma, went to 1 in every 4 African American kids in cities. You had this explosion of neurodevelopmental disorders, ADHD, speech-related, language-related, tics, Tourette syndrome.

In fact, Congress said to the EPA, tell us what year the autism epidemic began. The EPA is a captured agency, as I said, but it's not captured by pharma. They came back and said, "1989, it's a red line." What happened in 1989 was some kind of ubiquitous exposure that affected every demographic from Cubans in Florida to Inuit in upper Alaska, affecting boys at four times the rate of girls. What happened?

Phil Landrigan, who's probably the premier toxicologist alive, and who has been the expert in a number of cases for me, and who does not agree with me on vaccines—he did a peer review article that said these are the 11 things that fit that timeline. And it was like glyphosate, neonicotinoid pesticides, ultrasound (which was interesting), cell-phones, plastics, bottled water plastics, and a few others.

Now, if you're the head of NIH and you're trying to protect American health, you say, "OK, this is helpful. It's got to be one of these 11 things. Let's design some studies to figure out which

one it is, and we'll make some policy recommendations."

Did that ever happen? No. The opposite happened, which is: The NIH will ruin your career and bankrupt your university if you try to do that study.

DS: If you were saying, "My name is Bobby Kennedy, and I'm representing an organization called Riverkeeper, and we are taking on Monsanto, which is a big company that is dumping chemicals associated with birth defects into your water," people look at you and say, "Good for you, Bobby." So why do you think emotionally, psychologically, that once you took on this other set of big companies, pharmaceutical companies, which work with a different set of chemicals, and started accusing them of some similar practices, suddenly that made you into a dangerous weirdo?

RFK: Well, it's actually even a narrower question than that, because if you ask any Democrat or liberal, are the pharmaceutical companies greedy, evil, and homicidal, and are they committing mass murder with a lot of products like Vioxx, which killed 120,000 people, every Democrat and every liberal will tell you, "Yeah, those companies are pure distilled evil."

DS: The opioid crisis kills 56,000 young Americans every year, and they knew it.

RFK: Right. Everybody knows big pharma is crooked. So if you're a Democrat and a liberal, you have to say yes, they are crooked in every aspect of their business—except for vaccines.

I think the three big pharma companies have paid \$35 billion in criminal penalties and civil damages over the last decade or so. So they're chronic felons. Why do you think that just with this one product they found Jesus and they are going to behave?

So, Are You an Anti-Vaxxer?

DS: An "anti-vaxxer" is a very bad thing to be, in any kind of polite society. Of course, the alternative is to accept that it's absolutely normal for there to suddenly be 27 mandatory vaccines in the state of New York, half of which no one ever contemplated 10 years ago. Also, you must believe that every one of those vaccines is immaculate and

perfect, because the companies making them would never, ever lie to us—and if you don't believe that then you are also against vaccinations for polio. Which is absurd.

RFK: It strikes me as a religious type of belief. Ultimately, they require you to suspend critical thinking and to believe a trusted authority. I think that's a biological impulse that people have that comes to us from the 20,000 generations we spent wandering the African savannah. Little groups, where there's a boss, and you had to obey them or you would perish. The people who are imposing these orthodoxies are pressing all of those buttons.

DS: Pro-vaccine means you are part of the group. If you are not, then you are no longer part of the group.

RFK: And then you find the person who's not in that group who you can say is evil and a threat to everything we believe in. So you point to Donald Trump and you say, either you believe him or you believe us.

DS: Although of course Trump is the one that brought us the COVID vaccines, right?

RFK: He brought us Fauci. He brought us the vaccines. He allowed Fauci to kill ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine, and he brought us the lockdowns and all that. But they ignore that. And they say, OK, Fauci is good, Trump is bad. And anybody who tries to depart from that orthodoxy is dangerous. And you have to discredit them. You cannot debate them. The heretics must be burned. They must not be allowed to speak.

DS: Do masks work to stop COVID?

RFK: The Cochrane collaboration, Cochrane Library, which is the premier authority for scientific clinical reviews, came out this week and said that masks, both the masks, the N95 and the regular surgical masks, are useless. And we looked at the studies, the existing literature, at the very beginning, and we collected it all in one place and saw the same thing. What Tony Fauci said originally was true: Masks don't work against respiratory viruses during a pandemic.

The weird thing, which surprised me, is that my assumption was that the cloth masks, of course they don't work,

“I want my doctor wearing a mask in the surgical theater, because I do not want him sneezing into my open chest cavity. But as it turns out, the science doesn't even support that!”

because the holes in them are 200 times the size of the virus. But then I started actually reading the literature and there's this huge 1982 study, it's either University College or Royal College of London, they said, we've been using masks in the surgical theater and elsewhere for 80 years, but there's no study of how effective they are. Let's do one. For six months, nobody's going to wear a mask. As it turns out, the infection rate went down, even in the surgical theater.

I mean, my assumption is, I want my doctor wearing a mask in the surgical theater, because I do not want him sneezing into my open chest cavity. But as it turns out, the science doesn't even support that! It was an exercise not in public health, but in control.

DS: Or in public reassurance that then became control.

RFK: Right.

DS: Don't worry. You're not helpless. Recite these words three times and sprinkle some rose water, and you're going to be OK.

RFK: They became these instruments of moral signaling or sanctimony, that I'm wearing a mask, meaning I'm compliant. I'm showing my willingness to obey. It struck me from the beginning, that convincing populations to put on masks, there was something creepy about that.

Because, if you look at the ambition or the intention of every totalitarian system, it's ultimately to end the capacity for group action, for communication, to control all communications and every aspect of human behavior, from monetary exchanges to political organizing to sex. This is the ambition, the intention, of totalitarianism. And what is more repressive than forcing somebody to cover their mouth and their face. “No,” it says, “you cannot communicate.” God or evolution has equipped the human face with 42 different muscles for expressing all kinds of subtle skepticism.

DS: My entire life as a reporter, I never interviewed anybody over the phone for exactly this reason.

RFK: You want to look in their face.

DS: Ninety percent of the information that you're going to get about somebody's going to come from their face, from the way they move their body. That's how humans communicate.

RFK: I also think that the very skilled use of fear has the capacity to disable critical thinking and make people run for the safety of authority. If you read the last chapter of my Fauci book, I go through all these tabletop simulations, which I uncovered, and there's plenty of them that were organized by the CIA beginning in 1999, almost every year since, involving that model, which is the use of a pandemic to clamp down totalitarian controls and to obliterate the Bill of Rights. And they do it again and again and again, and it's astonishing.

None of them talk about, how do you boost immune systems? How do you stockpile vitamin D? How do you link frontline physicians to figure out what therapies and repurposed medications are working and efficacious against the disease? It's all about, how do you immediately impose censorship? How do you get people locked down in their homes, when all of the manuals on pandemic management say you do not do mass lockdowns. How do you do social isolation and impose all these social controls?

It was training frontline physicians in every country in Europe and Canada and the United States, Mexico, and Australia, that when the pandemic comes,

the response to it is to impose totalitarian control and some censorship.

DS: It's like a Rorschach test, right? This is who these people are, deep down. And this is what some part of them, at least, is looking to do.

RFK: This is exactly what they did in COVID, in all of these liberal Western democracies. Trudeau was a huge protector of civil rights and human rights. All of a sudden they all pivot in lock-step and do the same thing: Masks, lockdowns, mandatory vaccines.

DS: I agreed that it was a really weird thing to watch, especially after the first two, three months. You're like, why is this happening this way? Why does it keep going?

RFK: And the marginalization, the vilification, and delicensing of physicians and scientists, and people, regular people, said, hey, I just got injured by the vaccine. My daughter died. My son died. I'm paralyzed.

DS: He was an athlete in high school, and now he just suffered a heart attack.

RFK: On the field. And those people are punished and they're vilified rather than treating them with compassion.

The Military-Pharmaceutical Complex

DS: I want to keep going for a little while about the pharmaceutical complex itself and the responses to COVID. It's clear that there was a large-scale Pentagon bio-weapons program. Bill Gates was brought in as a partner for the investment in that program. Research for that program was offshored to labs in China. It seems obvious now that the virus likely escaped from one of those Chinese labs. And that there was funding for exactly this kind of research from the U.S. government at that specific Chinese lab that the virus escaped from. So why isn't there an effort to create some kind of chain of legal responsibility for the enormous amount of damage that was done, the same way you would do if Monsanto was dumping toxins in the water?

RFK: First of all, it wasn't just the military that ran the funding for the Wuhan lab. It was the military and the intelligence agencies. The EcoHealth Alliance was a CIA front. USAID, which was the

biggest funder of the Wuhan lab, has a long, long connection to the CIA, and they had a much bigger investment in it than NIH did. So you have all of these U.S. military and intelligence agencies who are running the lab, and then killing the investigation. So there was a State Department investigation immediately, and *Vanity Fair* documented how people with intelligence agency credentials from the nonproliferation branch of the State Department ordered the investigation to stop specifically because it would implicate the U.S. military and intelligence agencies.

DS: But I'm asking you, as someone who participated in 300 environmental lawsuits, why isn't this a lawsuit?

RFK: Because if you look at how it was done, they gave themselves complete immunity from liability. You can't sue them. If you look at actually who produced this vaccine, it was not Pfizer and it was not Moderna. It was military contractors, and it was the Pentagon. They did it under a series of provisions that were created after 2002, between 2002 and 2019, that allowed the Pentagon to evade any regulatory authority.

DS: I'm not talking about the vaccine, though. I'm talking about the damage done by the virus itself, which is a man-made creation.

RFK: Oh, I misunderstood your question. I think there will be litigation on that, eventually. I feel we have enough evidence now that if I were allowed in front of a jury, that I could convince virtually any jury in our country that we made the virus, that this was a U.S. government and Chinese government collaboration.

Church Was Something That Was Miserable for Me

DS: Would your father wake you up to go to church? Was that a thing you did with him?

RFK: My father? We went to church almost every day.

DS: Really?

RFK: Yeah, particularly in the summer. We went every day in the summer. Sometimes twice.

DS: And he'd go with you, once or twice a day?

RFK: Yeah.

DS: What do you recall that being like? Because that's pretty intense.

RFK: Church was something that was miserable for me.

DS: Because you had to sit still indoors? You wanted to be outside?

RFK: Yeah. I would just count it down, in minutes.

DS: What was your dad's attitude?

RFK: I think my mother was the one who was the secret police when it came to church.

DS: You're going.

RFK: You're going. And my grandmother, too.

RFK: My father, when we were in church, they had this odd mixture of piety and irreverence and skepticism towards clerics. Their faith was a paradox. It was not simple, because they came from the Irish tradition, which has a lot of piety, but also a lot of rebellion. It creates cognitive dissonance in your brain if you try to reconcile it, because it makes no sense.

DS: That's why you have to laugh, right?

RFK: Yeah. My father would read the church papers when he was in church. He would look at what the church was saying.

I think they really loved Pope John XXIII. The Catholic Church is a public organism. Its atomistic origins, at their best, are Christ's Gospels and what I think we now call Gnostic Christianity, when it was people meeting in basements and sharing Christ's gospels and the message of love and tolerance and compassion. I think the way that they saw Pope John is that he was trying to restore that aspect of the church.

DS: What kind of lessons or stories do you remember your father telling you or asking you as kids, to give you a sense of history?

RFK: My father came home from the Justice Department and had dinner with us almost every night. He was a very good war historian, and he would talk about the battles that changed history, particularly the battles of the American Civil War and the American Revolution. We grew up knowing all the battles of the Civil War and the Revolution, including obscure characters, because my father was really interested

in all of those things, the War of 1812, etc., but also the Greek wars. We also heard a lot about what they were doing in the White House, the Civil Rights movement, and—

DS: Did he talk to you about World War II?

RFK: Yeah, lots. All the time.

DS: Because he lost a brother in the war. Right? He lost a sister.

RFK: Yes. But also, it was the big event of their entire milieu. He lost his brother-in-law. Kick's husband got killed on the Maginot Line. Billy Hartington, my uncle Billy. My uncle Joe was killed. A lot of their friends were killed.

We also talked a lot about the Germans and about what had happened during the Holocaust. I remember him talking about Anne Frank and asking us, if you were in that situation, would you hide Anne Frank if she came to your door? And we said, yeah, of course we would hide her.

It was kind of like a moral character test. What side do you think you'd be on in that situation? And that made an impression with me, and it stayed with me the rest of my life.

DS: As little Jewish kids, you grow up asking a different question, which is you look at your neighbors and you say—

RFK: Will they hide you or kill you?

DS: Exactly. And only as you get older do you start to realize it's pretty fucked up, because other little kids are not really asking that question about their neighbors.

RFK: I think it's an important question. I like to ask it every day.

DS: Your dad went to Palestine in '47?

RFK: Yeah, in '47. For the *Boston Herald*.

DS: His dispatches are very interesting because he obviously identified with those Palestinian Jews, as they were then known, the Israelis, very strongly. I don't know if it was in part because they were fighting the British, but whatever it was, the fact that they were fighting for their own independence seemed to make an impression on him. Did he talk about that?

I remember in the '67 war, I was at the pool next to him, when I think Johnson called him and told him the war had just begun. It was either Johnson

or somebody from the White House. It may have been McNamara.

And I was the first person my father turned to because I was sitting next to him on the chaise lounge. And he got up and I remember he put on his glasses and he was going to go up to the house. And I said, "What's happened?" And he said that a bunch of the Arab countries had attacked Israel, including Egypt. And it was Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Kuwait.

I knew how tiny Israel was because at that time, everybody took geography.

DS: The great, lost fucking discipline.

RFK: In Catholic school, we had to fill in every African country. We were given a map of Africa, Asia, and we had to fill in all the countries that we knew.

And I just thought how this little, tiny sliver of a country was going to fight against these huge countries with tens of millions of people in them.

And I was like, "Is Israel going to get destroyed?"

And he said to me, he said, "No, the Israelis are tough."

For my father to use that, that was his supreme accolade. The word "tough" was the highest thing that he could say about anybody. So I knew who he was rooting for.

DS: You'd hear about the Freedom Riders or Martin Luther King?

RFK: Yes, all of that. We had the Freedom Riders at our house. There were always Cubans in our house, from the Bay of Pigs. We went horseback riding every morning before breakfast, at 6:00 a.m., when we were in Virginia. We would ride through the CIA, and we would ride around a development there where my father had found homes for a lot of the brigade members. He would go by and we would talk to them. My mom and him would help them get health insurance, help them get kids in school, and find them homes.

DS: These were the Bay of Pigs and then the Operation Mongoose people?

RFK: Operation Mongoose, yeah. My father did not like the CIA guys who were running Mongoose. He had a very antagonistic relationship with them. He liked Harry Ruiz, who was the engineer who had been a part of the Bay of Pigs, who was one of his closest friends.

He had followed Castro, so he had been against Batista.

There were many different components of the Bay of Pigs group. Some of them were old Batista murderers and torturers and soldiers. My father believed that we should be supporting a revolution in Cuba, but he did not believe that we should be assassinating Castro.

Who Killed JFK?

DS: You never heard your father speculate or imagine any kind of connection between Cuba, the Bay of Pigs, and Jack's death?

RFK: Well, no.

My father's first reaction to the day, I do remember.

I got picked up at my school, at Sidwell Friends, and then brought home when Jack was shot. He had not died yet or been pronounced dead. We were brought home. So I was at home with my father when [J. Edgar] Hoover called my father and told him that my uncle was dead.

When I got home, my father was walking in our yard, which was a six-acre farm. He was walking with [CIA Director] John McCone, who I knew because the CIA was less than a mile from my house, and McCone would come over every day. After the office closed every day, he would come and swim in our pool and do laps before he went home. He would say hi to my mom and dad. Sometimes, they'd have cocktails.

My father was walking with him, and my father asked McCone, "Did our people do this?"

My father made three calls. One, he called the CIA, and he asked a desk officer, "Did you guys do this?" He got McCone on the phone. McCone came over, and he asked McCone directly, "Did the CIA do this?" Then he asked Enrique Ruiz Williams.

Harry Ruiz Williams was very, very close to my family. He came on ski trips with us. He was eating dinner at our house all the time. He was the liaison between my dad and a lot of the other community who had a very complex relationship with my family. Early on, we were heroes. Later on, a lot—

DS: You left them to die.

RFK: Right.

But he called him at his hotel. He was there with a journalist, I forget that guy's name, who wrote the official chronicle of the Bay of Pigs, which is called *The Bay of Pigs*, and he was a friend of my dad's, and I grew up knowing him. He and Harry Ruiz Williams were both staying at a hotel in Washington, D.C., at that time. He called them and he said, "Did your guys do this?"

So my father's first instinct was the CIA had done it.

But what happened with my dad is, first of all, he was shattered and just did not pursue it. He was in darkness and, at that point, he didn't care who killed my uncle. He was just—

DS: Gone.

RFK: He was gone, and there was nothing bringing him back. My dad was just trying to survive.

At that point, immediately after Jack's death, my father also lost 100% of the investigative capacity of the Justice Department, because Hoover no longer was reporting to the attorney general. He was reporting to Johnson. So my father didn't have an investigative arm anymore. So even if he wanted to quietly look into my uncle's death, he didn't feel he had a way to do it.

Then as he came out of that darkness and depression, he began turning to the war and to politics, and he went into the Senate in '64.

A couple of years later, like I guess '66 or '67, he was walking through the National Airport with Frank Mankiewicz and Walter Sheridan. And he said there was a magazine stand there that had a lot of magazines with James Garrison on the cover. And he pointed to Garrison, who was then investigating my uncle's death and thinking that the CIA was involved.

And he said to them, "What do you think about him? Does he have anything?"

And they said, "We think he does."

And Daddy said to them, "Will you look into it quietly?"

So they went down, or Sheridan went down there. And what he came back with is that he got a look at Jack Ruby's telephone records right before the

assassination. And he was struck that virtually everybody that my dad had subpoenaed and convicted who was in the Mafia had been in touch with Ruby a month before.

And at that time, you have to remember that nobody knew at that time, the link between the Mafia and the CIA, that there was really just one organization, when it came to certain types of operations.

So my father, I think, at that point, was thinking, "Well, maybe it wasn't the CIA. Maybe it was the mob. And maybe they did it because I was prosecuting him," which was really, I think, hurtful to him.

But then a week before he was killed, about a week before he was killed, he was campaigning here in California and he spoke at a community college in Los Angeles.

And up to that time, when anybody asked him about the Warren Commission, he would kind of mumble.

DS: He wasn't going to say it was right and he wasn't going to go against it.

RFK: Right. Because if he started questioning it, he would marginalize himself and he would lose his capacity to talk about the war and about what was happening in the cities, which are the two things he wanted to be effective on. And he would've looked nutty.

So whenever anybody asked him about it, he would mumble something that was noncommittal. And he said privately to his aides that it was a shoddy piece of work. And my father knew more about investigations than anybody. He had already investigated the mob. A devastating investigation. He had been attorney general. He knew how the CIA operated. He knew how the FBI operated.

DS: And you did pick up from him, when you were a kid, a hostility towards the CIA?

RFK: Yes, absolutely.

So he was at a community college here in Los Angeles. And a student said to him, and this is a week before the primary, he knew he was going to win California. And if he won California, he was going to win the convention, in his head. Because the two guys who stood between him and the White House, he

had already beat both of them. He beat Humphrey in '60, and he had beat Nixon at '60. He knew how to beat them, and he was not scared of it.

And one thing, the night of a primary, something happened he knew was going to happen, which was Richard Daley called him and said, "I'm going to grease the skids for you in Chicago."

So at that point, I think my father knew that he was going to be president. He believed, anyway, that he would be president.

So a week before, he already sees California's going his way.

And a student said to him, "If you become president, will you reopen the Warren Commission?"

And if you listen to the tape, there's a long silence. And then he says, "Yes." And that's it.

I think that would've scared a lot of people because he knew how to do an investigation and he would not have been steamrollered.

DS: He showed that card.

Who Killed RFK?

DS: Do you remember your father telling you that he was going to run for president?

RFK: I remember that whole time, yeah. I remember him staying up all night, writing the speech.

And then I went to the announcement with him, in the Senate caucus room.

And there was a lot of excitement. There were people in the house, all of his aides, and Adam Walinsky and Dick Goodwin, were all there typing the speech all night. Arthur Schlesinger. So yeah, we knew that he was going to run.

DS: Were you guys scared? As his kids?

RFK: No.

DS: You didn't think someone could kill him the way they killed your uncle?

RFK: You know what? I don't think that's the way any of us thought. We all thought, they're involved in a war. And it's like war, where you take your risks.

DS: There was no one among the kids who said—

RFK: There's a lot worse things than dying, by the way.

DS: Well, that's a thing that either your parents teach you, or they don't.

RFK: Yeah. So I think that was the way that everybody looked at it.

DS: The person who ostensibly shot your father here in Los Angeles, Sirhan Sirhan, was ostensibly motivated by the fact that your father was pro-Israel, wanted to sell U.S. fighter planes to Israel. He shot your father on what for him was the first anniversary of the Six-Day War, the '67 war. Or do you understand that event differently?

RFK: Well, at this point, I think Sirhan was part of that ambush of my father. I do not believe that Sirhan actually killed my father.

But for many years, my understanding of it was the conventional understanding, which was that Sirhan had killed my father because my father had committed to defending Israel in the presidential debates.

My understanding of what happened, of the assassination, is more complex now. I do not believe Sirhan actually fired the bullets that killed my father.

DS: Were you persuaded by the evidence of the tape, where you can hear many more shots than Sirhan Sirhan fired from his gun?

RFK: No, the thing that persuaded me, that first persuaded me was Paul Schrade, who was standing beside my father—he was the vice president of the UAW and a very close friend who had discovered Cesar Chavez and introduced him to my father. But he was also shot that night. Five or six years ago, he basically forced me to come over to his house and sit at his kitchen table and read Thomas Noguchi's autopsy report. And once you read that, it's impossible to believe that Sirhan had killed my father.

Because Sirhan fired two shots at my father. He had a revolver with eight shots in the chamber. And he fired two shots. One of them hit the door jamb behind my father and was later removed by the police. The other one hit Paul Schrade. And then his gun was turned. He was pounced on by ultimately six people. A big dog pile, who pinned him on a steam table, and forced the gun away from my father.

Rafer Johnson [who helped subdue Sirhan] talks about how this little man, he had superhuman strength. And they

could not wrest the gun from his hand. And he fired off six more shots. All of those shots hit people. We know who they hit. One person got hit twice, through his clothing once, but the shots were going away from my father.

According to Noguchi's autopsy, my father was killed by four shots fired from behind him.

Sirhan never got behind him. Sirhan was in front of him. And those shots were all contact shots. So they left carbon tattoos on his body, which means the barrel of the gun could never not have been more than an inch from his body, and in some cases were clearly touching his body. And they were fired upward, at upward angle, suggesting the person who fired them was holding the gun close to his body and concealing it while firing it upward.

The fatal shot was the one from behind his ear.

Sirhan never got that near. There were 77 eyewitnesses, and everybody placed Sirhan five feet in front of my father.

DS: So who do you think did fire the shots that killed your father?

RFK: I think the person who did it was [Thane] Eugene Cesar, who was the security guard who had just got the job two nights before. And who was holding my father's elbow. He hated my father, and he—

DS: Why?

RFK: He was very racist. And he thought my father was handing the country over to Blacks.

And he was also a CIA asset. He had top security clearance at the Lockheed plant. And he had just gotten the job as security. And he's the one who steered my father into the ambush. He grabbed my father's elbow.

My father was not supposed to go into the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel.

DS: Don't they usually say that was Fred Dutton who brought your dad into the kitchen?

RFK: But Cesar picked him up at the doorway and guided them into Sirhan's ambush.

And then he pulled his gun.

There were 12 people who saw him pull his gun. My father clearly knew he was being shot from behind because he rotated and pulled off Cesar's tie, his

clip-on tie. And as he fell, he had the tie in his hand.

He fell on Cesar and Cesar then pushed my father off of him and stood up with his gun drawn.

When he was asked later, "Why did you have your gun drawn?" He said, "I was firing at Sirhan," but that didn't happen.

And then he lied about what he did with the gun.

His gun was ultimately recovered. There's people here in Los Angeles who are testing it right now, but it made a long, bizarre sojourn, where it was stolen by teenagers, it was thrown into a lake, and it was sold to another guy. A month after my father's death, Cesar sold it to another guy from the Lockheed plant who was retiring and went to Arkansas.

And he told the police he had sold that gun and he told the guy, "This was used in a crime. Don't ever show it to anybody."

He told the police he had sold that gun in May before my father's death, but the guy from Arkansas said, "No, he sold it to me in July of '68."

Then a bunch of things happened with that gun, that ended up now with a collector here in Los Angeles.

And then the ballistics do not match. And there were more shots fired than Sirhan had. There are too many conundrums to explain that it was Sirhan Sirhan. It doesn't make any sense, when you start looking, at even a cursory examination of what happened that night.

The LAPD brought in a special team to do the investigation. It was called the Special Units Center. And that team were all LAPD officers who had been trained at the farm in Virginia at CIA's headquarters, and then dispatched to duty in Los Angeles, in Latin America for the CIA. And then were brought back to this investigation. Prior to Sirhan's trial, there were 2,800 photographs destroyed by the police and incinerators. And a lot of the material evidence was also destroyed. It was a very bizarre case.

Any lawyer could have gotten Sirhan off anyway, because the ballistics didn't match. But unfortunately, Sirhan was given a lawyer who was also the lawyer

for [famous American gangsters] Mickey Cohen and Johnny Roselli, who had their own involvement in the JFK assassination. And they provided him with the lawyer who told him to plead guilty.

DS: What do you remember about the months after your father being killed? Well, I mean, it was just a wasteland. It was a twilight zone in our house. The older kids were all sent away for the summer. My brother David was sent away. Because my mother had all these kids at a home, and she was trying to figure out how to manage this family.

The horrible story about David was that he had actually seen the murder live on TV, right?

RFK: Yeah. He was in Los Angeles and watched it on TV. And then nobody remembered him for several hours. So he was sitting in a room, alone, watching reruns of my dad being shot. And he kind of never recovered from that.

My brother David went that summer to Delano, to work for Cesar Chavez.

My sister went up to Alaska to work for the Inuit.

My brother Joe was sent to Seattle to work as a guide on Mount Rainier for Jim Whitaker.

I got sent to Africa, with Lem Billings. I spent a lot of the summer with Tom Mboya, who was a Kenyan labor leader who loved my father. He was in line to be the successor to Jomo Kenyatta. And he was then assassinated.

DS: I remember one of your cousins once told me about going to your house, I guess it would've been in the early '70s. And they remembered it as being quite literally a zoo. I remember them saying, "Bobby had animals everywhere. And then kids were climbing out onto the roof from the windows. And my mom was like, 'No more visits because it's fucking out of control.'" Was that the way it was?

RFK: I think my mom liked that chaos and she endorsed risk-taking, and there were a lot of emergency room visits. And then she liked the animals, too. I mean, we had a seal living in our pool for a long time. We had a lot of other animals. We had a full farm yard of cows and coats and geese and ducks and pigeons. We had nine horses. I had a basement filled with possums and

raccoons and coatimundis. Then I had all my hawks.

DS: So what did you need heroin for?

RFK: Listen, I was 16 years old. I would say I was out of control. At that point, drugs did not have the same kind of stigma that they have today. We're talking about—

DS: I had 15 years where I was high every day, so I am not judging you or your 27-year-old self.

RFK: I was what I'd call an addict for 14 years. I was using drugs for 14 years before I got sober.

I became an addict the same reason most people do, which is they have a big empty hole inside, and that was the one thing that would fill it.

DS: How did you get clean?

RFK: I went to 12 steps.

DS: You just went to meetings or did you go to the—

RFK: No, I went to a rehab, but I didn't go to a 12-step rehab. I went to something called Fair Oaks.

DS: I lived with heroin addicts. I don't know how anybody quits heroin. It becomes part of you. Being able to quit that as a young man and stay off it is—

RFK: Those other people who do it probably start off a little bit more reckless than your average alcoholic.

DS: You built an integrated life.

How the Kennedys Gave Us Barack Obama

DS: Tell me more about Tom Mboya

RFK: Tom Mboya was a Luo. I had first met him in 1960, when he came to our house on the Cape, to try to airlift kids to America, to attend college. It's an interesting story because he was then the only Kenyan who had attended college. He'd been to Oxford for two years. He was a labor leader and he had been part of the Mau Mau with Kenyatta. But he came from a little tiny tribe called the Luo. And they're a fish-eating tribe up in Lake Victoria. And they're known as super smart, but also peacemakers.

In 1960, he came to my house because he had realized the British had said, OK, we're going to give you independence. You got five years to get your act together. He had looked around and he said, "There's not a single kid in this country

who has a college education. How are we going to govern ourselves?"

So he wrote letters to 200 American colleges and he said, "Will you give a free ride, a full scholarship to a Kenyan kid? I'm going to choose the 200 smartest kids in Kenya."

He got 200 colleges to agree, including Harvard. And he got all these kids. And then in the middle of the summer, he realized he didn't have any money to get them over.

So he flew over, went to the State Department, said, "Will you give us money to bring these kids over?" And Nixon was VP, running for president, and thought if he airlifted Blacks from Africa, they would kill him in the South. And Blacks in the South were a key vote because they could go either way. At that point, they had been traditional Republicans, but Roosevelt had gotten a lot of them to switch over. But you didn't want to screw around with the whites in the South, who were also up for grabs.

And so then Tom Mboya went to see Martin Luther King. And Martin Luther King said, "Maybe you should go to John Kennedy because he's on the African subcommittee and he's a big African nationalist."

And he introduced Mboya to Harry Belafonte. And Harry Belafonte, who was friends with my parents and Jack, he brought him to our house and we all got to meet him.

Now I had been obsessed with Africa since I was 7. My father had brought home a film called *Africa Speaks*, and put it on our screen in our basement, a 16-millimeter screen. And I had read every book about Africa. I had read all the Tarzan books. I read *The Blue Nile*, *The White Nile*, everything. So to meet a real African was a huge thrill.

Then I went over in '64 with Sargent Shriver, and we spent a lot of time with Tom Mboya and his son,

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Bobby. We went and I spent the summer over there.

And then when my father died, I spent the summer there and we spent most of the summer with Tom Mboya. And in August of '69, Tom Mboya was assassinated, by Daniel arap Moi.

DS: Who then became president for Life.

RFK: Right. So then in 2004, I gave one of the keynote speeches at the Democratic Convention in Boston. I was living with Larry David, at that time, in Martha's Vineyard. And they asked me to give this speech on the environment, which is now a big Democratic issue.

DS: Right. Along with Barack Obama.

RFK: Yeah. So Larry and I flew up. And Larry gave me a ride up in his plane. And then we spent the day on the floor of the convention.

And in the green room, before I spoke, we met Barack. And I spoke, and then he spoke. And we saw him speak, and he just blew the roof off the thing. Nobody ever heard of him. He'd only been one year in the Senate. But then we talked to him afterwards and we were having a lot of fun. And we said, "Where are you headed?"

And he said, "I'm going to Martha's Vineyard to raise money in Oaks Bluff," which is a Black community, full of millionaires, on Martha's Vineyard.

And we said, "We'll give you a ride down there."

And we went and had dinner with him. And while he was at dinner, I sat next to him and I was asking him about his background. He said his father was Kenyan.

And I said, "Do you know which tribe he is from?"

And he said, "Yeah, he was Luo."

And I said, "Oh, have you ever heard of Tom Mboya?"

And he said, "Tom Mboya is the reason I'm in this country."

DS: Wow. Right.

RFK: Because Obama's father Barack was the first guy that Tom Mboya brought over on what they call now the Kennedy airlift.

Jack was so impressed with him. He gave him \$200,000. But he told him, "You can't tell anybody." Then

Nixon found out about it and Nixon then branded it the Kennedy airlift.

The New American System

DS: Are we still living in the same country that you grew up in, in which your family saga was one of the structuring myths, is this that same country still, now?

RFK: I think democracy's taken a lot of hits.

DS: I think that a new system is being put in place. I can feel it and I see it. Where do you think it comes from?

RFK: Eisenhower made this famous speech on my seventh birthday, in 1961 on January 17th, where he warned against the subversion of America's values and democracy because of the military-industrial complex, which includes the intelligence apparatus. Also, he specifically mentioned the federal science agencies, which he included in that definition.

I would say that my uncle came into office three days later and spent the next three years fighting a battle against his own military and intelligence apparatus to make sure that Eisenhower's predictions didn't come true and that my uncle died in that process.

Then my father campaigned five years later for president against the Vietnam War, against the domination of American democracy by the military-industrial complex, and he died in that endeavor.

Since then, we've seen the steady subversion of our democracy and the transformation of America into an imperial state abroad and a surveillance state and security state at home. I think the biggest tectonic changes happened because of the Vietnam War.

Then on 9/11, when the Cold War was over at that point, and we were all supposed to now finally get the peace dividend, instead that peace dividend was diverted to a new battle against an invisible enemy called terrorism. That was also the beginning of the biosecurity state, which is a more potent enemy to justify this huge diversion of a big slice of our GDP to the same people, the intelligence agencies, the military agencies, and the associated industries,

including the pharmaceutical industry, which is now the biggest industry in the world.

They're all tied together. They now control the media as well through a lot of different mechanisms, including just pharmaceutical advertising, which dominates the news reporting shows of our country. If you look at Anderson Cooper, he is not working for CNN; he's working for Pfizer.

DS: There's one actor that's left out of your story, which is the actor that I got to see destroy the landscape of what was once American journalism: large technology companies.

RFK: I should have included those. When I talk about the intelligence apparatus, that's part of it. Because those companies were, generally speaking, many of them were funded and seeded by In-Q-Tel. The entire grid is a creation of DARPA and of the Pentagon. Most of those CEOs have client contracts with the CIA and with DARPA and the Pentagon.

DS: In return for which they were granted monopolies.

RFK: Yeah. Exactly.

DS: Which is a lucrative thing to have, if someone's going to grant you one of those.

So was it a plan? Personally, I think the technology developed on its own, and you had a remarkable amount of stupidity among the class of people that had owned things like newspapers before.

RFK: It's hard to know, because so much of it is obscure, how much of it was purposeful. I have no way of saying whether it was purposeful or not, so I stay away from those kind of predictions, because a lot of it does look purposeful.

DS: The way I understand it from my own reporting and life experience, it's like if you cut a channel where there's water, it's going to flow through the channel. That doesn't mean that anyone necessarily cut the channel with the forethought that that particular water was going to come on that day and go in there. By the same token, once you cut the channel, you know that water is going to go there and not go somewhere else. Does that qualify as a conspiracy or not? The answer is,

“it depends how tight you try to draw those connections.”

RFK: I think that’s a good way, a workable way, of looking at it. I don’t have any other way. CJ Hopkins did a great article this week on sort of breaking down the psyops of COVID-19. Without slipping into speculation and conspiracy theories, but repeating what Noam Chomsky said many years ago that during an interview when a news-caster said to him, well, I don’t share your beliefs about how things work. Chomsky said to him, and if you did share my beliefs, you wouldn’t be sitting where you are sitting. Because the system has a way of weeding out people who aren’t going to question the permissible assumptions.

DS: You used a phrase in a recent essay you wrote, which I liked, which was lockdown liberalism. I’m a liberal. At least, I used to call myself a liberal, back when I knew the tenets of my creed. They were free speech, personal freedoms ...

RFK: My body, my choice.

DS: Right. So how do you understand it now? I mean, it’s weird how fast it all flipped.

RFK: Again, I think it was this kind of response that is ultimately rooted in the same neuronal pathways that evolved during the tribal era of human evolution, which were then exploited.

DS: You think this is all one big stress reaction being exploited? By whom?

RFK: If you read these tabletop exercises, there was clearly an agenda to push to use a pandemic, either real or imagined, to expand the power of the military and intelligence and medical cartel apparatus. We did things that just made no sense. None of the medical interventions worked. We were killing people by denying early treatments that were very, very functional. I mean, we had the highest body count of any country in the world. Our death rate was 3,000 COVID deaths per million population. Nigeria was 14. Nigeria had a 1.3% vaccination rate.

DS: You’re imagining there’s a group of people that are sitting there itching to have control over information anyway, and this is the excuse?

RFK: I think it’s what you said before,

which is that the natural ambition of power is to increase its reach. That you don’t need somebody sitting in a back room saying, let’s have a pandemic and then let’s use it. There are companies, and there are institutions that will just automatically know to use that to increase their power and wealth.

DS: But how did liberals become the people who—

RFK: Were most subsumed in the orthodoxy?

DS: Yeah.

RFK: Again, I think that there were a lot of tribal buttons pushed, so that this became, you had to choose between us and Trump.

DS: It’s easy to forget how critical the independent institutional press was to 20th-century American democracy, and how different that press was from the state-run bullshit farms we have now. An independent press with its own sources of revenue based in a specific city, embedded in the structures of that city, whether that’s unions, politics, religion, everything else, is an organic thing, with a life of its own. You can’t tell the people of your own city, who pay for your newspaper, that their kids aren’t getting sick, or that vaccines work when they don’t, or else they won’t buy your newspaper anymore. Now we’ve replaced that landscape, which was founded on trust, with a new AstroTurf-ed landscape of monopoly information platforms which are all being censored and marionetted in real time by the U.S. government. Where the White House is literally making phone calls saying shut down this guy’s Twitter account. That’s a weird transformation that happened pretty fast.

RFK: I watched the gradual capture of liberals in a way that is probably less comprehensive than what you just said. Just briefly on the vaccine issue, it used to be, even in 2018, Republicans and Democrats were evenly divided on that issue. You could go to Democrats here in Sacramento and talk to them about it. And what happened was, Obama needed the pharmaceutical companies on board for Obamacare. And so he made the deal that, OK, we’re not going to negotiate over drug prices and

Medicare if you support Obamacare. Because he didn’t do that, that was selling his soul to the devil. But if they didn’t do it, they couldn’t have passed it. And pharma signed on to Obamacare, and suddenly it became permissible for pharmaceutical companies to donate to Democrats. And before that, Democrats can only get money, big money, from unions and from trial lawyers. But there were no companies that they could get it from.

Suddenly the Democrats were all getting money from pharma, in fact, most of the money. And it’s now the biggest industry in the world.

And then Trump runs, and says three times during that campaign, “I think vaccines are causing autism.” So then it became a Trump issue. And they put it in the same dumpster that you put his climate change pronouncements.

Anne Frank and the 24/7 Automated Smear Machine

DS: Does it hurt you when you are painted as a nut? Or do you not give a shit?

RFK: I wouldn’t put it in either of those ways. I would say that the way that I do decision-making is to just say that what other people think of me is not my business. It doesn’t mean that I don’t care, but I’m just not going to pay attention to it. I’m going to make decisions based on science and reason. If you can show me the evidence, you can change my mind, and I’ll admit that I was wrong, happily.

But don’t try to do it through bullying or through intimidation, because I’m just going to say, “No, show me the evidence.” I try to live my life in a way where I only got an audience of one—which is my conscience, my higher power, and my wife—and I try to live a life of integrity.

DS: Now, when you made your semi-infamous Anne Frank comment, in which you suggested that modern-day totalitarians have tools at their disposal that even the Nazis didn’t have, your wife publicly repudiated that.

RFK: Yeah.

DS: That had a little bit of a Soviet feel to me. I was like, “it would hurt if my wife said something like that in public.”

RFK: I encouraged her to do that. In fact, I had given her language that was even stronger than what she said.

I made two statements. One is, I think it was 2016, a reporter in Sacramento asked me something and I said I had used the word “a holocaust,” not “the Holocaust,” but “a holocaust.” I love language, and I use language with particularity. And to me, I was not comparing it to the Nazi Holocaust, but to the biblical use of the word holocaust, which means a sacrifice, like Abraham and Isaac. That’s the sense that I was using holocaust, a burnt offering, that our children are being sacrificed to some idea of a greater good. That’s how I intended it.

But, people came after me and said, “Oh, he compared it to the Holocaust.” And then you get involved with, OK, you’re hurting people who are sensitive about this so what do you do?

DS: You’re not actually hurting people who are sensitive about it. You activated an automated outrage machine that was looking for a gotcha.

RFK: I’m living in a world, David, where nobody prints my replies or explanations. The only thing that they print is that I say I’m sorry. And that’s the only way to end the controversy, because I can sit there all day and make rational arguments, and nobody’s ever going to hear them. It’s like talking into a fucking tin can. That is the environment, the ecosystem in which I live—one where my words are never used unless there is some way to twist them to use against me. So I ended up having to apologize for a mischaracterization of what I said.

And then the same thing happened in Washington. They say, people said I compared Anthony Fauci’s countermeasures to the Holocaust. But if you listen to what I said, I was talking about totalitarianism in general, about the communist regime in Eastern Germany, and the Nazis, and how the ambition of every totalitarian regime is complete control, and how they’ve never been able to do it but now there’s technology out there that allows for that.

DS: Which is a factually correct statement.

RFK: It’s factually correct. They can look through buildings now. They

know your GPS even when your phone is turned off. So I was making this point about turnkey totalitarianism that they’ve got now in place, and if they want to clamp down there is no way to fight them. And it’s a really important point, but—

DS: But instead of responding to that point, it became “oh, now this vile anti-vaxxer has desecrated the sacred memory of Anne Frank.”

RFK: Right. So then I come home, and my wife is losing jobs. My wife was raised in a trailer in Frostburg, Florida, and came up with nothing and drove out here in her Toyota Tercel with literally no money and built a career in which she is now flourishing. And my job as her husband is to protect her. And all of a sudden I say something that is then mischaracterized on CNN, and people are now pulling jobs away from her, including a job that she really loved, that she lost.

So, my response to that was, whatever I have to say, I will say. I don’t care how it hurts me. I don’t care if it damages my credibility. I don’t care what it sounds like, I’m going to say it. And I gave her a script that was much tougher than what she actually ended up saying.

DS: What do you understand about an information ecosystem that’s demanding that people denounce their spouses in order to continue working? It’s sick.

RFK: Well, it’s not journalism. It’s a propaganda system. It’s a social control system. It’s an information control system. And that’s what we’re dealing with.

At this point, I try to maintain a spiritual center that makes me impervious to most of that. I never make predictions, because I don’t have expectations. And as long as I don’t have expectations, I never have disappointments. And because I don’t get disappointed, I never get crushed.

I was in the environmental movement for many years, and I had many friends who were soul-crushed. If you’re an environmentalist, every victory you have is temporary, and every loss is permanent. You lose a species, it’s not coming back. You lose a piece of landscape, it’s gone forever. And people would get just destroyed by the losses, and burn out. And I learned at

that time that the only thing I control is this little piece of real estate inside my own shoes. And that’s literally the only thing I control.

So I have to let go of the outcomes and not get invested in them, and I just have to keep fighting. The outcomes are in God’s hands. They’re not in my hands.

DS: Was that a lesson that came out of recovery?

RFK: A lot of my lessons come out of recovery. I go to a lot of meetings, I go to nine meetings a week, and that keeps me spiritually centered. I do an hour of meditation every day, and I do it while hiking in the wilderness with my dogs. And I do other stuff. I know all my strength comes from that spiritual center, and that is the one thing that I really need to put effort into.

Dating Larry David’s (TV) Wife

DS: So how are you feeling these days?

RFK: I’m in a good place right now. I have kids who are all doing well at this moment, knock on wood. And I can’t imagine having a better partner in my life than my wife. I feel like she’s really almost just a gift to me from the divine. She’s the most honest human being I’ve ever met. I’ve never seen her do anything even a little bit dishonest, or self-promoting, or pretentious, or guileful. She makes me really happy. And so, I feel like I do have to pay attention to her.

DS: I know that feeling.

RFK: Right? And so, I would be pretty badly off if she were pissed at me for something. That’s my Achilles’ heel.

DS: That’s good. That means you care.

RFK: Yeah. Oh, well. I’m dealing with an audience of one. If the world hates me and she loves me, I’m OK with that.

DS: Now, you mentioned that you were close to Larry David. Did he introduce you?

RFK: Yes. He brought her on a couple of ski vacations. For a celebrity ski event, a big fundraiser for NRDC. He would come to it every year. And I was living with him on the Cape in the summers, and then we would vacation together.

DS: How did you guys become friends?

RFK: I became friends through his wife, through Laurie. I met her because she

was on NRDC's board. And then we became very close, and we raised our daughters kind of together. They're almost like sisters. And so.

DS: I spent an afternoon with him once on the set of *Seinfeld*, and he was just really serious. He wanted to talk a lot about Lewis Lapham and *Harper's Magazine*. He obviously has a serious side.

RFK: Yeah. He's not like Robin Williams, which is to say that he has a hard time turning it off. He's the guy that you see on TV except that he's actually a really good human being. He's very generous, and he hates to see anybody in pain. He kind of believes the best of people.

DS: So did he bring her to these ski vacations as a set-up kind of deal—

RFK: No, he did not bring her to turn her over to me. Not at all. In fact, the first time I met her, she was married, I was married, and there was a friendship, but there was no spark. And then she came back at a time when she had just gotten separated, and I was separated. And then we sat together at dinner, and there was an immediate spark. I actually then flew to New York and to ask Larry's opinion, or... to ask Larry's permission to date her.

DS: Because it's his TV wife?

RFK: It was his TV wife. But also, Larry has a lot of rules that everybody ought to know. It's just like what you see in *Seinfeld*, there's like rules where I felt it was important that I ask his permission first. And I went up to the Carlyle Hotel, around, I don't know, 10 o'clock at night and we sat down, and I felt like I was asking for his daughter's hand in marriage.

RFK: But surprisingly, he was really enthusiastic and encouraging. And he said, "She's the best person that I know. She's the only person I know in this industry who has no enemies. And she's totally beloved." And he gave me a sort of permission.

Then Cheryl talked to him about it, and

he said, "It'll never work." So, he didn't say the same thing to her.

And then when he kind of replayed it on the show, he has Ted Danson asking permission, going through the thing that I did. And he tells Ted Danson, "No fucking way. You can't date her."

DS: But that didn't actually happen in real life.

RFK: That's what he may have been thinking at the time. But luckily that's not what he said.

DS: You are the source of another *Curb Your Enthusiasm* episode, right, which is very famous among Orthodox Jews, which is the one with the girl who's stuck in the ski lift for Shabbat, the Sabbath, and then has to jump down.

RFK: Yeah. My first lawsuit when I was a summer associate at a law firm in New York, my first client was somebody who had been injured at a ski area. And the states that have ski areas normally pass shield laws, because the ski areas are huge economic drivers for the state, and they know a lot of people are going to get injured. They pass shield laws to make sure the ski areas are not just barraged in a deluge of lawsuits all the time.

So I was looking through the law books to try to find some precedent where anybody had successfully sued a ski area in New York, and I found this case, the only case I could find, which was two Hasidic Jews who got on a chair lift at the Bellayre area in the middle of the summer, and they were going to ride the ski lift up, and then they were going to hike down, which is a common thing that people do in the summer. You get a nice walk, but it's all downhill. And the guy at the bottom had told the guy at the top, there's a couple who just got on, and it was at the end of the day. So the guy at the top let a couple off, and shut off the lift. And he hiked down and he left these two people, the Hasidic couple, up on the lift. And it was at the highest point in the lift.

And in the Hasidic tradition, an unmarried male and female can't be with each other after sundown. But the stigma's on the woman. So there was an argument between them where she was trying to convince him to—

DS: Jump.

RFK: And he refused to do it. And I told

that to Larry and he thought that was the funniest thing he ever heard.

DS: It is quite funny.

RFK: And then she did jump. And then she was grievously injured, and she successfully sued the ski area. But he didn't believe it. And about a month later, somebody from his office called me and said, "Can you find that case?" Because he was checking.

DS: You don't keep any falcons here?

RFK: I don't have birds here. We had an emu, but a lion ate it.

DS: How did your wife feel about that?

RFK: My wife was very happy. She hated that emu. I would come home after work, and she'd be at the computer, looking for what the life expectancy was of emus.

DS: Did it ever bite her?

RFK: It did. It loved me. And when I came in, the emu would roll over and make me scratch its belly and it would swim in the pool with me. And it was very... it was in love with me. It had imprinted on me. But it hated her. And it would chase her. They're very big. It was about seven feet.

DS: This is going to make my wife feel better. When my youngest son was young, we went to the Bronx Zoo, and were showing him all the nice animals. And he falls for this alpaca that's there, and the alpaca puts its head down and is nuzzling him. And of course, my wife looks over, and sees what she imagines is her child being endangered by an alpaca, and she lunges towards him. Whereupon the alpaca perceives a crazy woman that's going to attack a child. It naturally acts protectively, reaching over the gate and biting her thigh, hard.

So I go get our son, who is fine. Meanwhile, my wife, who is in pain and wants the animal to be put to death, was outraged. "You're not mad at the alpaca?" And I'm like, "No. You lunged at a child, and the alpaca was acting protectively, and he was perfectly nice to me and our son." And this was a fight that went on for about three days after that. So she's going to be glad to hear that she's not the only woman who was persecuted by a large animal, and that the animal died.

RFK: Cheryl hated that emu.

DS: Thank you for telling me this story ■

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NEWS

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Excerpts from the RFK Jr. Interview

On Who Killed His Father

Sirhan never got behind him. Sirhan was in front of him. And those shots were all contact shots. So they left carbon tattoos on his body, which means the barrel of the gun could never not have been more than an inch from his body, and in some cases were clearly touching his body. And they were fired upward, at an upward angle, suggesting the person who fired them was holding the gun close to his body and concealing it while firing it upward...I think the person who did it was [Thane] Eugene Cesar, who was the security guard who had just got the job two nights before. And who was holding my father's elbow. He hated my father. He was very racist. And he thought my father was handing the country over to Blacks.

On Pharmaceutical Companies and Vaccines

If you ask any Democrat or liberal, are the pharmaceutical companies greedy, evil, and homicidal, and are they committing mass murder with a lot of products like Vioxx, which killed 120,000 people, every Democrat and every liberal will tell you, "Yeah, those companies are pure distilled evil".... Three big pharma companies have paid \$35 billion in criminal penalties and civil damages over the last decade or so. So they're chronic felons. Why do you think that just with this one product they found Jesus and they are going to behave?

On Controversies and Apologies

I'm living in a world, David, where nobody prints my replies or explanations. The only thing they'll print is that I say I'm sorry. And that's the only way to end the controversy, because I can sit there all day and make rational arguments, and nobody's ever going to hear them. It's like talking into a fucking tin can.

On When Things Changed

Eisenhower made this famous speech on my 7th birthday, in 1961 on January 17th, where he warned against the subversion of America's values and democracies because of the military-industrial complex, which includes the intelligence apparatus. Also, he specifically mentioned the federal science agencies, which he included in that definition.

I would say that my uncle came into office three days later and spent the next three years fighting a battle against his own military and intelligence apparatus to make sure that Eisenhower's predictions didn't come true and that my uncle died in that process.

Then my father [was] campaigning five years later against the Vietnam War, against the domination of American democracy by the military-industrial complex, and he died in that endeavor.

Since then, we've seen the steady subversion of our democracy and the transformation of America into an imperial state abroad and a surveillance state and security state at home. I think the biggest episodic tectonic changes happened because of the Vietnam War.

Then on 9/11, when the Cold War was over at that point, and we were all supposed to now finally get the peace dividend, instead that peace dividend was diverted to a new battle against an invisible enemy called terrorism. That was also the beginning of the bio-security state, which is a more potent enemy to justify this huge diversion of a big slice of our GDP to the same people, the intelligence agencies, the military agencies, and the associated industries, including the pharmaceutical industry, which is now the biggest industry in the world.

They're all tied together. They now control the media as well through a lot of different mechanisms, including just pharmaceutical advertising, which dominates the news reporting shows in our country. If you look at Anderson

Cooper, he is not working for CNN; he's working for Pfizer.

On What He Can Control, and What He Can't

I was in the environmental movement for many years, and I had many friends who were soul-crushed. If you're an environmentalist, every victory you have is temporary, and every loss is permanent. You lose a species, it's not coming back. You lose a piece of landscape, it's gone forever. And people would get just destroyed by the losses, and burn out. And I learned at that time that the only thing I control is this little piece of real estate inside my own shoes. That's literally the only thing I control. So I have to let go of the outcomes and not get invested in them, and I just have to keep fighting. The outcomes are in God's hands. They're not in my hands.

On Larry David As Matchmaker

Larry has a lot of rules that everybody ought to know. It's just like what you see in Seinfeld. There are rules where I felt it was important that I ask his permission first. And I went up to the Carlyle Hotel, around, I don't know, 10 o'clock at night and we sat down, and I felt like I was asking for his daughter's hand in marriage.

But surprisingly, he was really enthusiastic and encouraging. And he said, "She's the best person that I know. She's the only person I know in this industry who has no enemies. And she's totally beloved." And he gave me a sort of permission.

Then Cheryl talked to him about it and he said, "It'll never work."

READ THE ENTIRE INTERVIEW



Point your smart phone camera at the QR code to read the conversation in its entirety.

The Fight Over Religious Education

Debates between New York state and its Hasidic community about school choice offer a harbinger of what's to come nationwide

BY RAY DOMANICO

The debate in New York state surrounding a state law that requires private and religious schools to provide a curriculum that is “substantially equivalent” to that provided in the local public schools first began in 2015. A group called Young Advocates for Fair Education (YAFFED) petitioned education officials to look into what they claimed was the lack of substantial equivalence at 39 Brooklyn yeshivas for boys located in Hasidic or Haredi neighborhoods. Their complaint resonated with many in New York, including the editorial boards of the city’s three major dailies, who wrote in favor of investigating these schools to assure that their students were getting a full secular education alongside their religious studies. It quickly became an issue of national concern.

On March 23, 2023, a trial court in New York invalidated the enforcement mechanism embedded in these regulations, pointing out that the state’s compulsory education law is meant to be enforced by parents, not schools. It found that a family could be deemed in compliance with compulsory education by sending their children to a religious school while also filing a home-schooling plan with their local district indicating how their children would be meeting the requirements of the substantial equivalence law. It remains to be seen if this ruling will be appealed.

Whatever the outcome in New York, the “substantial equivalency” conflict between those advocating for the

rights of parents and those opposing public investment in private education is sure to repeat itself in states like Arizona, West Virginia, Florida, and Arkansas, where recently enacted school choice programs will allow religiously inclined parents to place their children in schools that reflect their practices and beliefs—with public money to follow. The stakes of the debate are considerable, with billions of dollars and the deeply held beliefs of millions of Americans hanging in the balance.

The most recent estimate, from 2019, indicates that over 93,000 students in New York City attended schools considered Hasidic and another 47,000 did so in five counties outside of New York City. Parents freely choose and pay tuition to these schools. It is true that some graduates of these schools have been unhappy with the choices made by their parents, as are some current students and parents. While it is hard to know the exact percentages, it seems to be a relative fraction of the Hasidic community that oppose these education systems.

YAFFED, a group of Hasidic students, graduates, and parents in New York state, argues that parents in these communities face reproach if they opt out of these yeshivas. More importantly, YAFFED believes that the schools fail to provide boys with a sufficient education to prepare them for either college or the world of work. As a result, according to YAFFED, poverty and reliance on public assistance is rampant in Hasidic communities.

There is, to be sure, some poverty and reliance on public assistance in

Hasidic communities in the state, and in some cases the poverty is extensive. New Square, New York, a town of roughly 10,000 Skverer Hasidim, is the poorest town in the state, with a poverty rate of 64%. But New York’s poverty extends far beyond these communities. In 2019, almost 14% of the state’s population lived in poverty; most of those living under the poverty line received nutrition assistance. Hasidic schools enroll less than 5% of the state’s students, so other schools must be producing significant numbers of students destined for poverty. For decades, the regents and the State Education Department have failed to break this public-school-to-poverty pipeline, yet they are now leaning on the yeshivas to follow a curriculum like that used in the public schools.

It is also true that some Hasidic schools do not offer education in secular subjects and that others attempt to provide the bare minimum with support provided through Federal Title I programs for eligible students. They all provide a classical Jewish education that features intensive instruction in Torah studies and a strong focus on Talmud, in which the boys and young men decipher and analyze competing commentaries on the scriptures in Hebrew and Aramaic. This is not the rote memorization of prayers; it is textual analysis of complex writings. Public schools often adopt “critical thinking” as a goal for their students, but many of them do not ground their students in either enough cultural literacy or advanced thinking skills to meet that goal. Among the three Brooklyn yeshivas I visited, only one does not teach any secular subjects, but its Talmudic studies classes evidenced intense discussion of complex questions related to how people should relate to each other and one’s responsibilities to others in various circumstances. That is a good anchor for raising educated, responsible adults.

These schools also maintain extraordinarily high standards of their own. Some of them expect their students to be fluent Hebrew readers by the end of grade one and test them regularly throughout grade two to gauge their

proficiency. The state of New York does not test public school students on English reading proficiency until grade three, and the statewide results are middling at best.

The yeshivas that teach students from Yiddish-speaking homes offer more complicated cases, and the shortcomings in their secular programs yield graduates who are not English proficient. Presumably this limits their ability to interact with the larger secular world, to find certain forms of employment, or to pursue higher secular education without remediation, but one does meet adults who came through these schools and who have gone on to law school or other professional training.

It should also be noted that many Jewish day schools in the modern Orthodox and centrist Orthodox traditions feel that they fulfill their religious obligations with their Talmudic studies while also providing their students with a full range of high-level academic instruction in secular studies. Why are the Hasidic schools in question so insistent in limiting secular studies? As a

father of children in such a school explained to me “the answer boils down to the idea that these fleeting early years of education, when children are impressionable and sensitive to everything they see, hear, and are taught, should be grounded in a classical, purely Jewish education.” This principle, they explained, is accentuated by the disintegrating state of society at large; Hasidic parents seek to create and foster a solid Jewish religious foundation during these crucial years of schooling before they enter the world. This traditional form of full immersion in Jewish studies has served their community well through many centuries of trials and tribulations in the diaspora. Contrary to the way these communities have been portrayed, multiple schools serve each Hasidic community, so parents are free to choose the level of secular education they desire for their children.

The question for New York’s education officials now is how to best serve these religious communities who are their constituents. A court has ruled that the state cannot shutter schools which don’t provide a substantially equivalent

education, but that they can impose fines or threaten prison to parents who are not ensuring that their children are receiving a substantially equivalent education. Are the state and city education agencies really going to impose sanctions on the many parents who are happy with the educational choices that they have freely made? Some schools might be able to document substantial equivalence with changes at the margins, but those changes will not likely satisfy those most opposed to the educational practices of these schools.

Some schools that offer no secular studies, like the one I visited, may become the locus of a case before the Supreme Court, which in 1972 gave Amish communities an exemption to Wisconsin’s compulsory education law, allowing them to opt their children out of high school, citing the uniqueness and self-sufficiency of the Amish community. The Hasidim of today might just rise to that same standard of uniqueness and self-sufficiency. ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

Disappointment

On the dream of Zionism

BY HOWARD JACOBSON

If asked to name what Jews were best at, I used always to say “argument.” Today—less glibly—I’d say that what defines Jews essentially is *disappointment*. Disappointment—the nonfulfillment of expectation—is the mournful poetry of the Jewish soul. Not only what we’re good at, but what explains—what *helps* explain, at least—how it is, to the disappointment of others, that we are still here.

The story I’m telling here is the story of ourselves we’ve been telling since we let God down at the dawn of time—some 5,000 years ago by the Jewish calendar, an approximation that might be on the short side but is still long enough for disappointment to have become a habit. However, it was more recently—while reading a reprint in the *Jewish Quarterly* of the great Israeli novelist David Grossman’s very fine 1998 essay which, at one and the same time celebrates and mourns Israel’s 50th birthday—that the

centrality of disappointment to our people—not only as an emotion but as a tool of thought—dawned on me. To Grossman, Israel’s achievements are almost miraculous. But its failures, its missed opportunities, its discordancy, fill him with despair. “An evil wind is blowing through the country,” he wrote.

“Try living here, David,” I wanted to say.

You don’t argue with David Grossman about Israel. He has lived all his life, enjoyed esteem and happiness, and suffered great tragedy there. I have only ever been a visitor and most of those visits have been in my head. I can’t forget that Israel was once the collective noun for the Jewish people.

My Israel, anyway, is a series of moments in Jewish history, still unfolding. I don’t say one moment of Jewish history is much like another, but when, even for the most ardent Zionist, *hasn’t* a wind of discord been blowing through

Israel? The joke we like to tell about ourselves is that we agree over nothing. Why should Zionists be any different?

When giving interviews about his novel *To the End of the Land* Grossman spoke movingly of the disappointment he shared with an Arab friend, the disappointment of a people who had a common dream and who saw it evaporate. But isn't that what dreams do? And since no two dreams are ever identical, what chance was there that a Zionist dream could ever have unfolded to the satisfaction of more than one Jew at a time, let alone an Arab?

With so much anticipation of failure on the part of its foes, and so much dissension among its friends—this one wanting a religious state, that one wanting a secular state—it is a miracle that Israel has succeeded to any degree at all. And my question is this: Can there ever be any satisfying a Jew's hopes? Or any assuaging a Jew's disappointment when those hopes are dashed?

The first people the Jewish imagination conceived arrived too recently in the Garden of Eden to have anything to dream about. Was this really how God wanted us to be? Innocent, unwitting, obedient? So little chance was there ever going to be that we'd stay like that, what with snakes in the garden, incipient sexual politics, and irresistible temptation, that we must wonder if disappointment in his creatures was intrinsic to God's plan. Barely two pages after God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good, he looked again and, behold, it wasn't. If you want a paradigm of disappointment, here it is. The gates to Paradise no sooner open than they close, and cherubim with flaming swords bar the way back.

Those cherubim made a great impression on me as a boy. They stand guard in my mind still whenever I let extravagant hope get the better of me. "Back, Jacobson," they order.

Jews wanted to be judged harshly and found the God to do it. How we relish his enumeration of the punishments Adam and Eve brought down on us. "Unto the woman, he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children," and "Unto Adam he said, ...

cursed is the ground for thy sake, in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee ..."

More, more—"in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground ..."

More, more—"for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return ..."

Yes, it's masochistic, but masochism is only a twisted branch of ethics. The life of hardship God visits on us, we deserve. "My punishment is greater than I can bear," cries Cain when God consigns him to a life of wandering. It's a piteous cry, yet somehow noble by virtue of not questioning the justice of it.

"Batter my heart, three-personed God," wrote the poet and divine, John Donne. Jews don't hold with any of that three-personed stuff, and we'd be loath to use Donne's erotic vocabulary of beating to describe the pleasure we take in God's wrath, but we slink from that garden with battered hearts, without essaying a word in our own defense. Henceforth, we are a fallen species in our own eyes and in God's.

But we have further to fall yet. Three or four chapters of who-begat-whom later we are on the point of extinction. "And it repenteth the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart." So suddenly and unexpectedly does this expression of profound disenchantment with humankind—us—fall from God's lips that it's easy to miss how extraordinary it is. God repenting! Aren't we the ones who should be doing that? It's as though we've confused who's who here. In eliding our self-chastisement and God's we are admitting the degree to which the God of Genesis speaks with our voice. *Would we had never been born.* Amen to that, sayeth the Lord who proclaims, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth ..."

And so it goes on, in book after book of the Torah—we murder, lie, fornicate, follow false Gods, backslide and betray. And in book after book God does what we invented him to do and visits his vengeance upon us—staying his hand only when another Noah appears to save us.

If we think of a savior as a Christian concept, we should remember how

often one turns up in the Torah to talk God down from violence. So intensely, anyway, does the Old Testament imagine God regretting having made us that we revel in what he's going to do to us even before he does it.

The Deuteronomy curse—the most terrifying curse ever pronounced by any God on any people in any place anywhere—begins, sedately, with a promise.

"And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God," that I will do the following for you. We needn't list what's on offer. Trust me, if you've forgotten—you'd want it. But then comes what happens if we break the covenant, of which let the following stand as examples—"The Lord shall smite thee with madness and blindness and astonishment of heart; and thou shalt grope at noonday ... thy sons and thy daughters shall be given unto another people, and thine eyes shall look and fail with longing for them all the day long ... and thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night ..."

It's important to note that this is not what God does, only what he *says* he *will* do. And not because of something we have done, but because of something we *might* do. The grammatical terrain of the Deuteronomy curse is the future conditional.

Grammatically, it is the mirror image of "Dayenu," that great song of gratitude we sing at the Pesach table. Composed in what we might call the Judeo-hypothetic-past-preconditional tense, "Dayenu" imagines everything that could have gone wrong had God not helped us. "*Yes, but he did,*" a sympathetic non-Jew might interject. "*Yes, but he might not have,*" we retort. In this way the "Dayenu" gives us access both to the punishment *and* the reward. Let no one stand between a Jew and his comeuppance.

"Masochism," the psychologist Theodor Reik explains, "is not characterized by the pleasure in discomfort, but by pleasure in the *expectation* of discomfort." The Deuteronomy curse is one long wail of anticipated agony. Between this and "Dayenu," between remembering and anticipating, you might ask whether Jews have ever really managed to live in the present.

The strange grammar of the Jewish imagination enables us to exist in a state of permanent apprehension. First the blessings—“And the Lord shall make thee plenteous ... blessed shall be thy basket and thy store.” Then the curse—“cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shall thou be in the field ...”

The curse comes toward the end of the Fifth Book of Moses, as the children of Israel stand on the brink of entering the land of milk and honey—*re-entering* it, we might say, since Eden was the prototype of all promised lands. Have we earned the right to return? The question is dodged by transferring it to Moses. We can enter, while he—after all those years of leading us through the desert—can’t.

And the LORD spake unto Moses that selfsame day, saying,

Get thee up into this mountain Abarim, and die in the mount whither thou goest up, and be gathered unto thy people.

Because ye trespassed against me among the children of Israel at the waters of Meribah-Kadesh, thou shalt not go thither unto the land which I give the children of Israel.

Perhaps because I first read this in an illustrated children’s Bible which showed Moses leaning on his staff on a mountain top, his robes flowing, looking out forlornly into the land he would never enter, I shed a small boy’s tear. The sadness of exclusion—out of the garden, out of Jerusalem, and never certain of return, is built into the consciousness of a Jew. We are an exiled people in our hearts still. And there are Jews who want us to stay that way. A favorite song when I was growing up was *Where Can I Go*, sung by Leo Fuld.

Tell me, where can I go?
There’s no place I can see.
Where to go, where to go?
Every door is closed for me.

I owned the record and played it over and over in my melancholy bedroom, trying not to cry in case my parents heard and wondered what the hell I was doing in there. *Where to go, where to*

go? / *Every door is closed to me.* Words I would recall, years later, every time I couldn’t get into a disco.

Moses struck a rock intemperately and for that he had to remain behind? Was that not petty? In his diary, Kafka wrote, “He is on the track of Canaan all his life; it is incredible that he should see the land only when on the verge of death. This dying vision of it can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life; incomplete because a life like this could last forever and still be nothing but a moment. Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short, but because it is a human life.”

Which, as always with Kafka, tells us everything and nothing. But might we interpret his interpretation this way? We must accept the limits set to our humanity. We must rein in our expectations of grandeur and continuance because the life of even the greatest of us is subject to rejection and failure. To be human is to be let down.

I have frequently told the story of my mother’s reaction to a letter I received when I was 17, telling me I’d won a place at Cambridge. Forgive my repeating it but it has a place here. My mother brought the letter to me in my bedroom where, when I wasn’t reading *Reveille*, I was still crying over Leo Fuld. I tore the letter open and said, “I’m in, Ma.” Instead of embracing me or throwing open the window and telling the whole street, my mother gently took the envelope from my hand, saying “*Just let me make sure that this is really addressed to you, darling.*”

Darling, notice. She wasn’t checking because she believed me to be underserving. Rather, she wanted to protect me from a mistake. Better I discovered the mistake now, than turn up at Cambridge with my suitcase only to be told, “Howard Jacobson? No. Never heard of you. There must be some mistake. Try Wolverhampton Polytechnic.” If my mother had one aim in life as a parent, it was to save her children from disappointment. The evidential experience of our people was imprinted on her imagination. Moses not making it into Canaan was just an allegory for me not making it into Cambridge.

Yet in the very fulfilment of the curse, the Jewish people found a superb consolation. After all, their God was only doing what he’d warned them he would do. It was he, the Lord their God, not some tin-pot Babylonian deity, who was the author of their suffering. “*And the Lord shall bring a nation against thee.*” Far from vanishing, he remained in control of events—their agony was the very proof they were still his chosen people. And why had he brought a nation against them? Because they had broken his commandment. Thus understood, the Babylonians were nothing, mere vassals in the enactment of God’s justice. The God of the Jews was all-powerful after all. And the Jews themselves were instrumental in their own defeat. Thus, at a stroke, they removed the terrible events from the arbitrariness of nature or even history, acknowledged the working of divine justice, however harsh, and renewed the covenant between themselves and God. They made themselves agnostic-proof.

I say “they” but not everyone was prepared to leave it at that. In the fullness of time, others wanted more tangible proof of God’s love. It seems reasonable to assume that if the shock of exile and the destruction of the Temple paradoxically strengthened faith, it also stirred those apocalyptic expectations that would lead at last to that Messianic fervor out of which Jesus Christ emerged.

I have to confess I rather like Jesus. I said as much, many years ago, to a class of fifth formers I was teaching at King David High School in Manchester. It didn’t go down well. The fifth formers told their parents who told the headmaster. I was called into his office. Was it true I was a spy for Jews for Jesus? I told him no, I hated Jews for Jesus and believed Jesus would have hated them, too. How did I know that? I just knew. The fact that I was offering to speak for Jesus made the matter worse. Was I a covert Christian? I laughed. Having spent the first half of my life as a covert Jew, I wasn’t going to give up the second to being a covert Christian.

So what was it I liked about Jesus? The Jewish part. But hadn’t he tried to destroy Judaism? No. That was made up after his death. Alive, he said, “I am not

come to destroy but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." The headmaster recoiled from my words. This would have been the first and the last time the voice of Jesus was heard in his study.

There is, I suppose, perversity in saying I like the Jewish Jesus, since every version of him we possess comes to us through Testaments it isn't easy for a Jew to admire or trust. Nietzsche called the attempt to glue the New onto the Old Testament and make one book out of it, "*perhaps the greatest audacity and 'sin against the spirit' that literary Europe has on its conscience.*" How it is that a Jewish Jesus can pierce the anti-Jewish mood music of the Apostles takes some explaining. I suppose it's akin to Tolstoy being Tolstoy even in a poor translation. A distinctive idiom, like a distinctive vision, can never be muffled. The American literary critic Harold Bloom heard and liked the Jewishness of Jesus' voice in the first Gospel in particular, with its "unanswerably rhetorical questions, and fiercely playful outbursts that edge upon a frightening fury," very much like Yahweh, the Jewish God.

I would rather, in my own pursuit of a nondivine, non-Christian Jesus, not have him likened to God. Could we not say that in his reported conversations and addresses he recalls the human voices of the Old Testament? He would have vexed God as Abraham and Moses did. He would have lamented as Jeremiah or Ezekiel did. And, I believe that he'd have rebelled against the idea that he was the Messiah. He would, I think, have found the idea un-Jewish, un-halachic even. But that's just a guess.

I have said that we have saviors in the Old Testament—Noah, Abraham, Moses himself—figures who might temporarily intercede on our behalf, but a savior from *the consequences of being human*, no, that is ethically too frivolous a concept for a Jew. The curse must be laid and only we can lift it.

A great menorah sits in the forecourt of a shul at the corner of Bury Old Road and Leicester Road in Manchester. Behind it, a billboard proclaims, "Moshiach Is Coming." Do I know a single Jew

who thinks that likely or even remotely desirable?

Some years ago—it must have been about 1994—I was filming in Crown Heights in New York. The then-Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, was dying. I filed through his synagogue to receive the *tzedakah* dollar from him and yes, the light was all but gone from his eyes. Not much longer to wait. Moshiach was coming. Out on the streets were billboards preparing the community for the end of the world. People were stocking up on bagels. Others were selling apocalyptic CDs from the boots of their cars. There was rhapsodic singing. Jews who seemed to be of another age were wailing and davening. To say it felt like the Middle East 2,000 years ago doesn't do justice to the foreignness and the fervor. How, I wondered, would these Jews who were Jewish in a way none of the skeptical, ironical, Jews I knew were Jewish, going to cope when the rebbe died and the world did not end?

As it turned out, much as the Jews did after Jesus' Crucifixion, before the Apostle Paul made a *gantse* megillah of it. People shrugged, packed away their CDs and posters of the rebbe and made new ones in preparation for the next time. Even the Messianic Lubavitchers were only half-convinced by their own prophecies.

The fact is, Jews don't do messiahs. We might have conceived them but we want them to remain a "concept." Anything else would be too literal. It would destroy the poetry of waiting. Built into the concept of a messiah that will not come, as in a God who will not answer, is a conviction of eternal and impregnable disappointment. Not a small, deferred disappointment, which consoles with the thought that we might get what we want next time, but a permanent longing which is both profoundly poetical and profoundly ethical.

There will and never can be a messiah for the Jews because the job messiahs are expected to do, Jews must do themselves. That is the condition on which God gave us our humanity. Not truly wanting the Messiah ever to come is the guarantee of our ethical seriousness.

Is there something here that will help shed light on the strange phenomenon of Jewish anti-Zionism? Is Israel, too, the realization of a Messianic longing which Jews of a certain temperament would prefer to have stayed a longing?

Some ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups insist that until the Messiah comes, Jews have no business returning to the Holy Land. They, too, attach a mystical significance to the hanging on. The return to Zionism waits upon God's revelation of his intentions for us. To have gone back before we have been redeemed, by force of political will and strength of arms, is sinful, not because of any harm done to people with whom we share the country, but because it is determined by mundane considerations rather than divine ones. "It is a terrible and awful criminal iniquity," said the Satmar Rebbe Yoel Teitelbaum, "to seize redemption and rule before the time has come."

Though these Jews often give succor to anti-Zionist protesters—and no doubt Jeremy Corbyn has had his photo taken with them—their views are not such as would be approved by the anti-Zionists who teach in our universities. If the Messiah were to turn up tomorrow, the antiwar coalition would not be on the first El Al flight to Israel with Neturei Karta.

But is secular anti-Zionism more closely related to this ultra-Orthodox version than it knows? When I say secular anti-Zionism I mean *Jewish* secular anti-Zionism, since that's the more intriguing question. Non-Jewish anti-Zionism is not in the slightest perplexing. The reasons for it long predate the modern State of Israel and are easy to mistake for basic Jew-hating. Those who say we shouldn't conflate anti-Zionism and antisemitism shouldn't use the language of medieval Jew-hatred to vilify Israel.

Jewish anti-Zionism, though, of which there are many examples that also predate the State of Israel, is more complex. To a cosmopolitan Viennese Jew like the writer Stefan Zweig, Zionism simply put Jews back into ghettos; wasn't the life he enjoyed contingent on the freedom of mind and body the diaspora provided? To his friend and

superior writer Joseph Roth, a state of Israel would bring war and bad repute upon the Jews. Religious Jews feared a secular Jewish state. Secularists feared the Jewish religion. Of those like Gershom Scholem who embraced Zionism for its promise of a regeneration of Jewish faith, many lost heart when no such regeneration transpired.

Gershom Scholem used the phrase “deferred hope” to describe Jewish Messianism—a waiting for God’s blessing and instruction before entering onto the great public stage of life. This waiting—this withdrawal, we might call it—is lethal. What if we are *never* ready to join the world? But it has a fascination. It heightens the religious life and has a comparable effect on the irreligious, creating a culture of mournful mirth in which

ineffectuality appears a virtue. I delight in that culture myself. I take an arrogant, self-punishing glory in being doomed to alienated irrelevance. But I understand why some Jews in the years before Balfour, and Israelis endeavoring to lead full lives in Tel Aviv today, don’t see the attraction. They have no truck with all our Paradises Lost and Paradises Postponed and Paradises for Someone Else. The God of eternal disappointment said stay where you are, remain forever exiled on the threshold of life, but they preferred to go in. They lifted the curse.

To Jewish anti-Zionists who wish to be taken seriously as ethical beings, I say this: Be disappointed, as we are all to a degree disappointed, that the great, adventurous ambitions of Zionism, to

avert imminent catastrophe, to rejuvenate a too long confused and slumbering faith, to chart a course between aggressive assimilation and timorous isolationism, to live in peace with neighbors, have not yet, in all instances, achieved their goals

But don’t allow the disappointments of now to transfigure the ambitions of then. Just because iniquity appears sometimes to be its fruit, does not mean Zionism was iniquitous in its planting. It is in the tragic nature of dreams to evaporate. For which we weep. The grander the dream, the more copious the tears. And whoever will not weep, wanted to see the dream blighted in the first place. ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

The Haifa Mural

The history of a remarkable artwork celebrating the creation of the State of Israel, born in Hawaii and Berlin, and recovered from the basement of a youth services center in Connecticut

BY HENRY ADAMS

Sandy Low and Walter Korder’s remarkable Haifa mural for the Jewish temple in Manchester, Connecticut, created in 1948, is one of the most noteworthy artistic statements produced to celebrate Israel at the time of its creation. Why Haifa? We have no written records outlining the reasons for this choice, but to some extent they can be deduced by considering the circumstances of the time. Jerusalem was contested and politically divided between Arabs and Jews, and was sacred to three different religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It would also have transformed the message of the painting from a celebration of the

recent creation of the State of Israel, and its promising future, to a meditation on the past. In a painting devoted to the glorious future of Israel, Haifa was the natural choice.

Why not Tel Aviv? Today Tel Aviv is a good deal larger than Haifa, but in 1948 they were about the same size. Interestingly, Tel Aviv did not yet have a port, since the port of Ashdod, which serves Tel Aviv today, was only established in 1956. In the years leading up to the creation of the State of Israel, Haifa was the major port of entry into the country, as well as the site of one of the most widely publicized incidents associated with immigration to Palestine.

In 1947 a rusty old freighter/passenger ship named the *Exodus*, constructed

nearly 30 years before, illegally set sail from France for Israel, crowded with about 4,500 Jewish men, women, and children, all displaced persons or survivors of the Holocaust. While it was en route, British destroyers surrounded the vessel, captured it with a boarding party that killed several of the passengers on board, towed it to Haifa, and then loaded the refugees on Navy transports that carried them back to France. This action quickly exploded into an international incident. The French refused to unload the boat. The refugees on it declared a hunger strike, and were joined by other refugees in camps across Europe. While the British eventually resettled the passengers in a refugee camp in the British zone in Germany, in Hamburg, the incident led to international outrage and stirred up sympathy for the Jewish cause and for unrestricted immigration to Palestine. The emphasis on the Low/Korder mural on the sea and on the curve of Haifa Bay surely celebrates Haifa’s role as the major receiving point for Jewish immigrants to Israel, as well as Haifa’s role as a gateway to the outside world.

The Haifa mural is surely the single most notable artistic statement by Sandy Low,

who today is less well known as a painter than as the person who transformed the New Britain Museum of American Art from a modest local art center into one of the country's greatest repositories of American painting. Known to all his friends as "Sandy," Sanford Low was born in North Kohala, Hawaii, in the northern sector of the Big Island, on Sept. 21, 1905, and was of mixed New England and Polynesian ancestry. His grandfather John Somes Low, came to the islands from Gloucester, Massachusetts, and married into the Hawaiian royal family. Thus, through his grandmother, Sandy was directly descended from King Kamehameha the First, who united all the tribes on the islands. Sandy was even born very near to where Kamehameha was born, not far from the volcano of Kohala, the oldest of Hawaii's seven volcanos. Sandy's mother was a full-blooded Tahitian.

Sandy's father, Eben Park Low, known to his friends as Rawhide Ben Low, was one of Hawaii's best-known ranchers and cowboys. While ranching is usually associated with the Great Plains, Hawaii has some of the largest ranches in the United States, and Ben was born on one of these, the Parker Ranch, and went on to ranching as a career. By the time Sandy was a boy, his father had sold his ranch, but Sandy grew up rowing, sailing, swimming, and surfing. In tribute to the New England side of his heritage, Sandy was named for the famous judge and pineapple grower, Sanford Dole, who served successively as president of the Republic of Hawaii and as territorial governor, and who had adopted Sandy's father after his own father died.

While he spent most of his adult life in New England, Sandy's native Hawaiian and Polynesian ancestry always formed a large part of his identity, and perhaps in part explains his extraordinary gift for always surrounding himself with a circle of friends. His son Sam Low remarks:

There are a number of Hawaiian concepts that I think are important to understand my father's life. One of them is *Ohana*, your extended family, which includes your core family but is extended way beyond. It includes

all of your friends and meaningful acquaintances. They become part of your family as well.

My father also had a sense of *Aloha*—of affection—for just about everybody he met. That innate affection for people allowed him to accept so many into his *Ohana*, his extended family.

In 1921, at the age of 16, Low was sent to the Loomis School in Windsor, Connecticut, for indoctrination into the rites, rituals, and cultural mores of New England. He stuck it out for only three months, just long enough to earn a place on the varsity football team, where he played halfback in his bare feet. When snow started falling he couldn't stand it any longer and ran away, jumping a freight train that carried him to Long Island, where he was taken in by some relatives. By this time, he had apparently already formed the ambition of becoming a cartoonist. In 1923, he enrolled at the Museum School in Boston, one of the finest art schools in the United States. In a letter to his sister, Clorinda Lucas, when he was 19, he wrote, "Now here's the point. Without a doubt of any kind, the only thing I'll ever succeed in will be the art line."

After graduating in 1927, Sandy moved to New York, where he rented a loft at 21 West 35th St., and supported himself as a commercial artist while also taking classes at the Grand Central Art School and the Art Students League. He seems also to have spent a good deal of time at parties in Long Island, and it was there that he caught the eye of a beautiful young woman, Virginia Hart, who was a graduate of Smith College and an artist in her own right. Drawing on family legend, Sam Low had left an account of what first drew her attention:

In those days, you may remember, Gar Wood speedboats were the sleekest and fastest of all—beautiful, slim, powerful boats with a sloped-back windshield. The swains of the day would aquaplane behind such boats to show their prowess. An aquaplane was a board, about six feet long and three wide, which was towed behind the boat at high speed. Just being able

to stand up on one of these careening boards was considered the height of masculine showmanship. But dad had been a surfer, a canoe paddler, and a beach boy. He had spent most of his life in the water. So he took aquaplaning one step farther. He stood on his head.

Virginia Hart had grown up in a fashionable neighborhood in New Britain, Connecticut, in a large mansion at 388 Hart St. While her parents would eventually come to adore Sandy Low, on first acquaintance they were a bit appalled that she had resolved to marry a handsome, athletic, and very friendly but penniless Hawaiian. To give her time to think things over they sent her on a trip to Europe, during which she and Sandy corresponded. The trip only strengthened Virginia's conviction that Sandy was the man for her. After their marriage in 1930, the couple moved to New Britain, then known as the hardware capital of the world, and promptly faced the question of what Sandy was going to do there to support himself. What he decided was that New Britain needed an art school. As an article in the Sunday edition of the *Hartford Courant* put it: "Grandson of late Hawaiian ruler to be first director of institution which will teach students to paint along original lines."

The institution was known as The Art League of New Britain, or, more simply, The Studio, or more simply still, as The Red Barn. The Red Barn quickly became the center of the social life of New Britain. It brought together, in a spirit of camaraderie, artists and people from all walks of life—businessmen, store owners, lawyers, doctors—all kinds of folks who would normally not have anything to do with artists.

Starting in 1937, Sandy Low and his friend Walter Korder began producing murals together for restaurants, hotels, office buildings, civic buildings and synagogues in the vicinity of New Britain, for the grand fee of \$5 a square foot. One of the most ambitious of these projects was a 36-foot-long series called "The Connecticut Murals," created for the New Britain Savings and

Loan Association in 1957, for which the Haifa mural might be seen as a kind of prelude.

Korder (1891-1962) was born in Berlin in 1891. When he was 18 months old his parents immigrated to the United States and settled in Hartford, Connecticut, where he attended school and took classes at the Hartford Art Society. After graduation from high school he received a scholarship to attend the Royal Academy in Munich, where he mastered the art of academic figure painting. On graduation, he returned to Hartford, where he worked with his father decorating period rooms in Hartford mansions. During World War I, he served in the American army, where he painted portraits of his fellow soldiers. During the 1930s he produced murals for the Works Progress Administration and for the Public Works of Art Project, and also served as an administrator for the WPA in Hartford. He and Sandy Low became friends at some point in the 1930s. Korder was an active participant in the activities of The Red Barn, and also summered on Martha's Vineyard, where he joined Low's landscape painting group.

A major shift in Sandy Low's activities occurred in 1938 when he was appointed director of the New Britain Museum of American Art and also as a member of its board of directors. A wealthy widow, Grace Judd Landers, was expected to donate a large amount of money to the museum, but unfortunately, she lost her money in the stock market crash of 1929. She did, however, leave her house to serve as a home for the museum upon her death in 1934. What Sandy Low became director of was this house and a collection of 24 paintings, acquired through a bequest made in 1903 from a local businessman, John Butler Talcott. By the time of his untimely death just 30 years later, at the premature age of 59, this very modest start had grown to a collection of about 1,500 paintings, including masterworks by many of the most illustrious names in American art, such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, Childe Hassam—the list goes on—including a complete mural cycle by Sandy's personal friend, the great regionalist painter Thomas Hart

“Low clearly recognized that his Hawaiian ancestry made him something of a misfit in the sedate, business-minded community of New Britain.”

Benton. Today many of the paintings Low acquired are worth millions, and the collection as a whole surely ranks among the top 10 collections of American art.

Low clearly recognized that his Hawaiian ancestry made him something of a misfit in the sedate, business-minded community of New Britain, and rather than seeking to hide this fact, he played it up, and as a consequence was forgiven many transgressions of normal Yankee behavior. A remarkable instance of this was his success in enlisting support for the museum from the richest individual with ties to New Britain, Alix W. Stanley, whose forebears had established Stanley Tools in New Britain, then the largest manufacturer of tools and hardware in the United States. For 15 years Alix Stanley had lived in Europe, but in 1939, returned to the safety of the family home in New Britain. As Sandy Low later wrote, in an undated memo:

In 1939 the massing of war clouds in Europe forced the return to New Britain one of her native sons, Alix W. Stanley, a retired wealthy industrialist, who had lived for 15 years on his estate in Southern France. Although previously never interested in art he took it up on his return to this country for want of something to do.

As is his custom, anything he does is done completely, sparing no effort or persons. During 1940 it was my good fortune to have a hand in stimulating him into the possibility of buying pictures as a hobby.

“Although previously never interested in art”—in fact, this conversion of Stanley to art-collecting was in good due to the charm and persuasiveness of Sandy Low; and the exact circumstances of the conversion were often fondly described afterward by Robert Vose, the director of Vose Galleries in Boston, the oldest family-owned art gallery in the United States.

The date was Christmas Eve, 1941. Vose had made a trip through Connecticut with seven paintings in the back of his station wagon, and stopped off to see Sandy Low on his way back to Boston, having failed to sell a single one of them. Low looked at them appreciatively, as Vose unloaded them from his car, and then remarked:

There is a gentleman up on the hill, Alix W. Stanley, a member of the famous Stanley family—the founders of Stanley Works. I've always wanted to get him involved somehow in the Museum. He doesn't like art but he ought to. Let's go visit.

Vose was naturally a bit startled by the proposal that they should just crash the gates without an introduction, but Sandy was undaunted. They reloaded the paintings, climbed into Vose's station wagon, drove to Stanley's house, and knocked on the door. As they were waiting for someone to open it, Sandy turned to Bob and commented: “The old gentleman is a teetotaler. The first thing we're going to do is ask for a drink.”

A butler ceremoniously opened the door, and Low slipped into the lugubrious Stanley castle for the first time. After a short wait, Mr. Stanley, who was elderly, hobbled into the room. Sandy promptly introduced Bob Vose as “an expert in American art from the world's most famous American art gallery,” and before Stanley could say a word added, “and he needs a drink.”

This was easier said than done, since

there was no hard liquor in the house. But eventually the cook emerged with glasses of cooking sherry, to serve the purpose. They exchanged some small talk. It did not take long before Sandy and Bob carried the paintings in the station wagon into Alix Stanley's large, gloomy parlor, arranged them against a wall, and launched into a talk in which they discussed each painting in turn. When they were done, Stanley remarked: "Well, I don't know anything about paintings, but I thank you very much." To which Sandy replied:

"Well, you don't have to worry because I know a lot about art and Mr. Vose knows even more than I do. These are wonderful paintings."

"What do you think I should do?" Mr. Stanley asked, "Should I buy some?"

"You should buy them all," Sandy answered.

This was surely a startling thought for Alix Stanley. An enormous mental leap. Not surprisingly, after thinking the matter over for a moment, Stanley decided not to buy them all. But he did buy three.

After making this modest venture into collecting, Alix Stanley became hooked. Despite his previous disinterest in paintings, he began to seriously focus on art collecting, took to joining up with Sandy Low on buying trips to New York, and eventually left to the museum his truly exceptional collection of American paintings, assembled with Sandy's guidance. What's more, on his death he left a very sizable financial bequest to the museum.

Along with his many connections in New Britain, Sandy Low also stood at the center of another lively circle of unconventional friends on Martha's Vineyard, where he and his wife had a 19th-century gingerbread cottage in Harthaven—a little community known for its "studious informality," which was established in the 1870s by a businessman from New Britain named William H. Hart. A snapshot that shows Sandy at the center of a typical handful of these friends includes the well-known illustrator Stephen Dohanos, who did covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*; the retired Hollywood movie star, James

Cagney; Walter Korder, Sandy's partner in mural painting; Mr. Ned Allen, amateur artist and owner of a department store in Hartford, Sage Allen; a high school art teacher; and a scattering of others. Over a 40-year period, with Sandy's encouragement, the members of this group would head out in the morning in all kinds of weather to paint scenery, harbor scenes, weathered houses, seagulls, fishermen, and the like. As Sam Low recalls:

My father and his "artist's group" gathered in Harthaven in the early morning when dark shadows splayed out from pine trees and scrub oak. They joked and grumbled. They smelled of cigars and garlicky food and, usually, of liquor and fish. By seven or so, they were gone to places all over the island that my father had scouted in his many summers on Martha's Vineyard.

Then, in the early evening, they would then reassemble at Sandy's cottage, where they would lay out the paintings on the porch for everyone to admire, while they sipped gin-and-tonics and old-fashioned and exchanged gossip.

While he loved to paint, Sandy had other enthusiasms as well. Love of cooking led to a particularly close Vineyard friendship with Denys Wortman, a well-known syndicated cartoonist, and a masterful draftsman, who was also a great cook. As Sam Low recalls: "Together they cooked turtle soup—which was a failure—and put on a traditional Hawaiian Luau—which was a great success." During his childhood in Hawaii, Sandy had developed culinary habits that were often startling to New Englanders. For example, he liked to pick up sea urchins on the beach and eat them raw. As it happened, this friendship with Wortman was to prove of momentous significance for the New Britain Museum.

Sandy Low's artists group, Harthaven. From left: Unknown, Ned Allen, Walter Korder, James Cagney, unknown, Sanford Low, Irving Katzenstein, Steve Dohanos, Louis Fusari, unknown. Courtesy Low Family

In 1947, the great regionalist painter

Thomas Hart Benton, the single most notable artist on the island, and a giant in the history of American art, persuaded Wortman to sit for a portrait. Then, seeing that it made Wortman restless to just sit still, Benton proposed that they engage in an artistic duel, and that Wortman do a portrait of him. When they had finished the project, eager to see what they were up to, and with Wortman's encouragement, Sandy arranged to visit Benton's studio in Chilmark. Astutely, Sandy arranged to purchase both paintings for the New Britain Museum, recognizing that separating the two would dilute the impact of them both. And this resulted in a nice bit of publicity for New Britain, since the editor of *Collier's* magazine also saw the two paintings in Benton's studio, and published an illustrated article about them, titled "The Battle of Beetlebung Corners," which received national circulation.

Notably this purchase also resulted in another triumph—arguably Sandy's greatest coup as a museum director—when the Whitney Museum of American Art, which was moving from a row of connected brownstones to a new building, decided to get rid of the major mural Benton had painted for their library in 1934 which is generally regarded today as one of the greatest American paintings of the 1930s. Benton's subject was "The Arts of Life in America," the recreational life of the American people, from playing music to tossing horseshoes. One of the scenes portrays Benton's student at the time, Jackson Pollock, playing the harmonica alongside a Tennessee fiddler. The price Sandy paid to the Whitney: \$500. Today each individual panel would be worth many millions.

Given his gift for pulling together people of disparate backgrounds and interests, it's not surprising that Sandy Low took on this project for a Jewish temple. Indeed, many of his friends were Jewish and the creation of the State of Israel, resonated with his deepest belief about the essential fellowship of all mankind. In the photograph of him standing with his Vineyard friends, for example, it's notable that he stands next to a Jewish

painter from Hartford, Irving Katzenstein, who worked for the WPA in the 1930s and later taught at the Ann Randall School for Creative Arts, the West Hartford Art League, and the Hartford Jewish Community Center.

Low's group of friends and artists from both Martha's Vineyard and New Britain, were in many instances early supporters of the State of Israel. Although this has been widely misrepresented, both Thomas Hart Benton and the art critic Thomas Craven had many Jewish friends and were early supporters of Israel. During his early years in New York, Benton became a close friend of both David and Leopold Mannes, who summered on Martha's Vineyard. David Mannes, was a gifted classical violinist, who established the Mannes School of Music, which still survives, as well as the Colored Music Settlement School, probably the first music school of its type in the United States, both in accepting African American students and in combining popular and classical musical forms. His son David was both a classical musician and a physicist, and in partnership with his cousin Leopold Godowsky Jr. invented Kodachrome, the first successful and marketable color film.

Both David and Leopold appear in a major painting by Benton, *Evening Concert*, of 1948. David, cradling a violin in his hand, is also the subject of a striking portrait by Benton, painted in the following year. Benton's supporters in Kansas City were mostly Jewish businessmen, and in 1949 he painted a major mural for the Harzfeld department store on the theme of *Achelous and Hercules*. Thomas Craven actively engaged in fundraising for the State of Israel.

Temple Beth Shalom, constructed in 1940, and located in Manchester, Connecticut, at 63 Linden St. (at the corner of Myrtle and Linden streets), was a red brick Georgian building with a classical pediment supported by Doric columns. The substantial size of the building, and the all-American qualities of its colonial-style architecture, surely served as a marker of the increasingly significant role of Jewish people as civic leaders in American society. In 1946 the synagogue added a school, and commissioned the

mural of Haifa for a large teaching room downstairs. The temple later moved to a larger building at 400 Middle Turnpike East, leaving the mural behind; in 2009 it merged with Temple B'nai Israel in Rockville to form Beth Shalom B'nai Israel, which is one of the largest conservative congregations east of the Connecticut River. For years the room with the mural served as a dance studio. In 1965 the town of Manchester purchased the building to serve as the Manchester Senior Center. Today it houses the Manchester Youth Services Bureau.

Low and Korder painted quite a number of murals in New Britain and the vicinity, ranging from routine commercial commissions, for bars and drugstores, to an elaborate panorama of the history of the area for a local bank. But the Haifa mural clearly rises to a different artistic level, and in fact, in interesting ways is rather different both in subject and in artistic approach. Indeed, one might propose that the special challenges of its subject led both artists to outdo themselves.

The creation of the State of Israel is surely one of the most remarkable events of the 20th century, with roots both in ancient history, and in the re-configuration of countries and political forces that took place in the aftermath of World War II. According to the Bible, as set forth in Exodus 17-28—and in a number of clarifying statements in other books of the Bible—after they fled from slavery in Egypt, God established a covenant with the Jewish people, the children of Abraham, to have everlasting ownership of the land of Canaan—the land of Israel. Since these books of the Bible are considered holy not only to Jews, but to those of the Christian and Islamic faiths, these statements are embedded in the sacred texts of these other religions as well. Some 2,000 years ago, however, the Jews largely lost possession of this territory during the Jewish revolt of 66-73 CE, when the Romans burned Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple. In the following centuries, many Jewish people emigrated to other countries, and by the fourth century CE Jews had become a minority in Palestine, although some

small Jewish communities stayed, and have lived in Palestine since ancient times to the present. Over the following centuries the Jewish people were widely dispersed in different countries, particularly in Europe, Central Europe and the Russian Empire.

The creation of the modern State of Israel dates back to 1897 when Theodor Herzl, at the first Zionist congress, proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth. Herzl was a Jewish writer and journalist, who as correspondent for the *Neue Freie Presse* had covered the Dreyfus affair in France, in which a Jewish officer was falsely accused of treason. The case created enormous controversy and led to massive antisemitic rallies; it also coincided with a series of pogroms in Russia. Events such as these convinced Herzl that only by establishing a nation of their own could Jews be free from persecution, an argument he put forward in 1896 in his book *Der Judenstaat*, and then energetically sought to put into practice.

The route to achieving this goal was arduous and winding. But after the defeat of Ottoman rule in Palestine during the First World War, England (or more properly the United Kingdom) became the ruler of Palestine. On Nov. 2, 1917, the Balfour Declaration, which was reaffirmed in 1922 in a mandate by the League of Nations, affirmed the right of the Jews to a national homeland. These abstract statements became a political reality after World War II, when thousands of Jews who had survived the Holocaust began to emigrate in large numbers to Israel. In this period, as unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust were exposed, and brought to the attention of the world, it attracted widespread support internationally, and particularly in the United States, for the Jewish cause.

On May 15, 1948, the United Kingdom formally withdrew from Palestine, and the evening before, David Ben-Gurion, president of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, declared Israel's statehood and independence. What he proposed was a state that would offer protection to Jews but would offer equal rights to people of all faiths. As the declaration stated:

The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the In-gathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

We extend our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled on its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.

Despite this statement of friendly intentions, just four hours after the announcement, the Egyptians bombed Tel Aviv, and shortly afterward they were joined by the Syrian, Egyptian, Jordanian, Iraqi, and Saudi Arabian armies who invaded Israel from all sides. Nonetheless, but despite being heavily outnumbered, the Israelis pushed back their attackers and established Israel as a state. Ultimately about 700,000 Jews immigrated to Israel and a roughly equal number of Palestinians fled or were expelled.

Haifa dates back to the 14th century BCE, when it was a port and fishing village. By Roman times it had become a major center for turning sea snails into expensive purple dye. Its growth into a major city, however, occurred following World War I, and the British victory over the Ottoman Empire. In this period, Haifa grew into a major administrative center, and the major port for shipping crude oil under the British Mandate. Its importance as a refining center is discreetly indicated in the Low/Korder mural by the puffing smoke from an oil refinery on the right.

Notably, the Low/Korder mural

focuses on things that celebrate progress and cultural exchange: the Technion (on the right) and the Baha'i Temple (on the left). The Technion was the first university in the Middle East, it was the first university to teach classes in Hebrew, and today it ranks as the foremost university in the Middle East, and one of the best in the world. With courses focused largely on science and technology, it symbolized the dream that Israel would become a leader in future scientific advances.

Distinctly unusual for a painting in a Jewish temple is the emphasis on the Baha'i Temple in Haifa, which is the world center of the Baha'i faith. But the Baha'i faith is a welcoming and ecumenical one, which teaches the essential truth of all religions, including Judaism, and the unity of all the world's people, and which today counts some 7 million adherents.

The newest of the world's four major Middle Eastern religions, Baha'i was founded 200 years ago by a charismatic Persian prelate named Siyyid Ali Humammed Shirazi. Shirazi declared himself a prophet and gained tens of thousands of followers, but was executed only six years after he began the movement. His mission was continued, however, by Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri, who chose the name Baha'u'llah. Not surprisingly, Baha'u'llah also faced persecution. After being expelled to the Ottoman Empire, the Ottomans consigned him to a prison in Acre, about 10 miles north of Haifa, at the northern tip of Haifa Bay, but eventually allowed him to purchase a house and live out his days in relative peace. His ministry was then continued by his son, Abdul-Baha.

While Acre is the site of Baha'u'llah's home, his tomb, and the gardens where he strolled, the world headquarters of the Baha'i faith, is located in Haifa, and is surrounded by beautiful gardens which are the city's major tourist attractions, with about 750,000 visitors a year. By prominently featuring the Baha'i headquarters, Sandy Low clearly intended to support the notion that Israel could become not only a refuge for Jewish people, but a country which would give equal rights and freedom of religion to all its inhabitants, as Ben-Gurion's declaration had insisted. Interestingly, three

camels are strolling in the courtyard of the temple, perhaps a reference to the Arabs who remained in Israel, and perhaps a sly reference to the three wise men of the Christian story, who rode camels to come worship the Christ Child.

The central scene in the mural, which contains a panoramic view of the city and port of Haifa, is flanked by scenes of men (on the left) and women (on the right) at work. At this time, one of the most fascinating things about Israel to Americans is that women worked and served alongside men, for example serving in the army and working alongside men in kibbutzim, the rugged socialist communities that successfully brought farming and other productive enterprises to seemingly inhospitable desert regions, through ingenious irrigation and creative enterprise. The oranges and other fruits the women are tending celebrate the fact that the settlers of Israel had created a flourishing garden in a region that previously had been barren.

There's no documentation as to which painter did what on the Haifa mural. It is very likely that Korder was chiefly responsible for the figure painting, while Low concentrated on the landscape and city scene, and the luminous, cloud-filled sky. One of the most interesting artistic features of the mural is its emphasis on the sea, the sky, and a bank of cumulus clouds—that is on empty open space.

Other murals by Low and Korder, such as the Connecticut murals they produced for a bank in New Britain, are crowded from floor to ceiling with figures in historical costumes. By contrast, a major part of the Haifa mural is a large open field—essentially an abstraction that gives the painting a cosmic and transcendental feeling. It places the activities of man within the larger context of the infinite expanse of the universe and of mysterious divine forces which will always elude complete human understanding. In doing so, the painting invites us to set aside our daily concerns for a moment, and to reflect on our place in the cosmos, with mindfulness not only of ourselves but of all humankind, and of mankind's cosmic journey. ■

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THE REST

→ **A 7-2 decision on Friday from the Supreme Court will allow Americans to continue to access the abortion pill mifepristone, but the legal battle over the drug continues just as the GOP struggles to find its footing on the abortion issue ahead of the 2024 election.** The case being waged—which features the pill maker and Biden administration attorneys on one side and an anti-abortion coalition on the other—had been taken up by the Supreme Court on its so-called shadow docket, which allows justices to dissent without writing an opinion.

- It would have been an unusual precedent for the Supreme Court to interfere in the FDA's regulatory power over drug approvals, especially of an approval first granted more than two decades ago; yet Justice Samuel Alito, who wrote the lone written dissent, made a point in his brief remarks to say the Biden administration was acting in bad faith, failing to dispel "legitimate doubts that it would even obey an unfavorable order in these cases."
- Alito's dissent was curious insofar as he'd previously championed fewer court interventions in the abortion issue, writing a majority opinion last year in *Dobbs v Jackson*, the case that overturned *Roe v Wade*, that included at least seven instances in which he said abolishing the right to an abortion was an act of judicial modesty. "The authority to regulate abortion must be returned to the people and their elected representatives," he wrote then.
- Over the weekend, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) tussled with CNN's Dana Bash on whether mifepristone regulation was a federal or state issue, with Graham conceding it should be a federal concern because "it's a human rights issue." Though Graham has long supported a 15-week nationwide ban on abortion, his reluctance to say plainly that he seeks a federal intervention underscores his party's ongoing confusion over how to treat abortion ever since GOP candidates took a beating in the midterms—seemingly because of the *Roe v Wade* decision.
- **Officials within the Republican National Committee already see abortion as 2024's "trickiest political issue and a divisive one internally for the party,"** The Washington Post reported last week. With the mifepristone case headed back to the fifth circuit, it's possible the appeal to that eventual decision would land back on the Supreme Court's actual docket, with arguments set to play out during the peak of the 2024 election cycle.

→ **A wild 48 hours in the media sphere began on Sunday when Comcast confirmed that Jeff Shell was stepping down as the top executive of its subsidiary NBC Universal as the company looks into Shell's possible inappropriate relationship with a female colleague. That C-suite bombshell quickly became old news on Monday after Tucker Carlson, the marquee Fox News talking head, abruptly left the organization after more than a decade.** It remains unclear if Carlson's departure was simply the result of his role in the historic \$787 million settlement Fox cut with Dominion Voting Systems last week. Similarly unclear is what led CNN to fire longtime star anchor Don Lemon on Monday, though that might just be the shoe finally dropping following Lemon's sexist remarks in February about Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley, 51, no longer being "in her prime" because of her age.

THE BIG STORY

A new CNN report has led some Jewish lawmakers to question the long-standing claim from Democratic House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries that he had only "a vague recollection" of the media dustup that ensnared his uncle Leonard Jeffries in 1991, when Leonard claimed that "rich Jews" had been involved in the slave trade, Jews were "dogs," and that Jewish executives in Hollywood were creating movies that denigrated Black people. In college at the time, Rep. Jeffries had previously said his parents protected him from the controversy that would eventually force his uncle to resign his post running the African American Studies Department at CUNY.

But digging into the matter, CNN found that the younger Jeffries had used his perch as a student board member of the Black Student Union at Binghamton University to invite his uncle to make his case at a campus event, and penned a college editorial defending "his uncle along with Nation of Islam Leader Louis Farrakhan" for being maligned by the "White media" for calling out the "longstanding distortion of history."

His office has sidestepped the discrepancy, saying in a statement that he's "consistently been clear that he does not share the controversial views espoused by his uncle."

— Sean Cooper

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Losing My Senses

Since I got COVID-19 three years ago and lost my ability to smell or taste anything, I've had to reevaluate my connection to Jewish cooking

BY ELIZABETH KARPEN

What is it from which the soul derives benefit and the body does not derive benefit from it? You must say: That is scent.

—Talmud, Tractate Berachot 43b

I was rushed to the emergency room with “the flu” on Jan. 28, 2020, when I was 19. The doctor jokingly asked if I had been to Wuhan recently and then we all laughed over the thought of me having COVID-19, that new disease that was starting to make the news.

I haven't been able to smell anything since then.

Until I realized that I had, in fact, contracted COVID-19—told by a doctor that summer that I presented all the symptoms of long COVID—I blamed my loss of smell on this, that, and the other thing: No one is able to smell great when they're sick, and every college student feels shitty for months between campus colds and frat flu and the people coughing in communal restrooms at any given minute between the months of December and March. I felt like there was an end in sight—because there had to be.

I continued to make little Friday night meals for my friends, experimenting with new chicken recipes or chocolate cakes with exorbitant amounts of margarine. Losing my sense of smell did not, at first, appear to be the end of the world. I would just set a timer and eye the oven a bit more watchfully (especially after I set my entire kitchen on fire).

Taste was a later loss: Being a habitual eater I did not notice for months that I was not tasting what I was eating. Then, as a test, I was blindfolded by my friends and handed vanilla and chocolate ice

cream. *Which one is which?* I was asked. I could not answer.

I could detect major taste profiles, but not much more. That left me with textures—and in terms of texture, Ashkenazi food is dreadful. What used to proudly center my dinner table now seems too slimy and congealed; without any flavor, it never feels right in my mouth. There is nothing appealing about gefilte fish when it's flavorless and I'm left chewing what can only be described as gelatinous fish cement.

Since childhood, my Judaism had been based around food—sitting at a table and eating for Shabbat and holidays. It was not thrice-a-week Hebrew school or youth group that had defined me as a Jewish woman, but rather learning how to make (and burn) a brisket and subsequently eating the charred mess. I relished the smells from my mother's kitchen, equating Friday night *brachot* with tastes that accompanied each prayer.

When the realization hit that my smell and taste are likely gone for good, my sense of Jewishness felt precarious. How was I supposed to rebuild such a stable part of my identity when I felt the most Jewish sharing a meal with my loved ones? Would I ever feel like that again when I could never enjoy that meal myself? In short: I don't think I ever will. Losing my sense of taste and smell has forced me to relearn what it means to be Jewish.

For a while after my smell and taste were gone, I resented the act of cooking. My childhood was spent at my mother's side watching her create works of art in the kitchen and playing sous chef. As an

adult who couldn't smell or taste, offers to make an additional dessert or asks whether I wanted to help were selfishly declined. There was nothing to gain in creating something I couldn't enjoy myself. I just shook my head and silently raged.

Losing my ability to enjoy food did not ravage my body—in fact, now I'll gladly eat radishes and kale and other foods that used to make me retch. However, losing my sense of smell and taste has stripped me of more than my senses because the memories have begun to slip as well. I've already forgotten how cloves smelled or whether it was the dill or parsley that hit the tongue first in my grandmother's matzo ball soup. There are days where I am frustrated and angry with my lack of memory and all I want is to enjoy that pizza shop falafel combo. Some days I just sit there and lie to those around me and nod along when a friend points out that New York City wet garbage smell because if I tell myself I can smell it, maybe eventually I'll believe it.

There is no Mourner's Kaddish for the intangible. There is no way to commemorate what once defined my Judaism. Simply, all there was left for me to do was just move on.

Three years later, my relationship with Judaism and cooking has transitioned to be more about the act of giving rather than sharing.

Now that I'm out of college and no longer constantly surrounded by friends, the act of sharing is more difficult. Despite sharing a kitchen with fewer people and controlling more fridge space, wrangling dinner companions has become far harder as the responsibilities of adulthood loom. Some days this frustrates me when I must freeze meatballs, eat the same salmon for four days straight, and pick at chicken that I can only discern as sweet.

However, when I manage to convince everyone I know to come eat with me, let me cook for them, taste the brisket, have three slices of quiche, I feel like I'm properly showing my affection toward those I adore. It's become a fun ritual to give a little spiel about who first made

this in my family or what the dish is traditionally served with.

My euphoria has become about the process of making food and educating others rather than enjoying these meals myself, since for a large part I cannot. It has been devastating, but my new tradition makes me feel like I am finally doing what my ancestors would have wanted when they sacrificed everything to flee to the United States. I am loudly and proudly creating Jewish meals in my Jewish home and sharing them with Jewish and non-Jewish friends alike, a smell-less reclamation of these foods of affliction.

As much as I cried and cursed the loss of my taste and smell, it brought me back to the ethics of Judaism rather than the superficial aspects I had thought to be the only thing that kept me Jewish. I still host meals, but the enjoyment has shifted to watching others enjoy Judaism in ways that I cannot. I

finally can view others learning about Jewish cooking without kicking myself over something gone wrong. It's made me love making others love something, and even if I ever get my sense of smell or taste back, I don't think this feeling will go away, because that is a large part of my Judaism now.

My go-to brisket is one that my mother stopped making because she said it had too many artificial products in it. (That says a lot coming from a woman who will voluntarily eat jellied fish patties from the jar and encouraged me to try *ptcha* because it was—understandably—the only thing left uneaten at a shiva.) However, people like my brisket with the processed apricot jelly and onion soup mix and I love making it even if I can't really taste or smell it. I still have the sweet sensation on my tongue of the meat coated with sauce, the tender chew of the beef. That feeling hasn't changed, and I am so thankful for that.

That orange saucy brisket was the star of the first Shabbat dinner I ever made back when I was 15. Three years after my bat mitzvah, I felt like a Jewish *woman*, not a Jewish girl, for the first time as I pulled out my brisket (overcooked) mashed potatoes (under-mashed), and Brussels sprouts (burned to a crisp). I feel an innate sense of Jewish femininity being in the kitchen and making something that people enjoy.

Almost 10 years after my bat mitzvah, I've now figured out how to use a potato masher. Am I good at mashing potatoes? I would probably say no. However, every time I cook for loved ones, I still feel a little closer to my Judaism. So I continue to buy a slab of meat, dress it in all the fixings, pop it in the oven, and wait for someone *else* to say, "That smells really good." ■

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SPORTS

Judgement Day

Aaron Judge has assumed Derek Jeter's mantle as the clean-cut, biracial face of baseball's most famous franchise

BY JAYSON BUFORD

When I was 7 years old I saw it on a television screen, sitting next to my father in his bedroom in Harlem.

The "biracial angel" of my childhood, Derek Jeter, was trying to will the Yankees to victory in Game 7 of the 2003 American League Championship Series. With runners on first and third and the Boston Red Sox threatening to add to their 4-0 lead in the fourth inning, the Yankee captain fielded a tough hop on a scorched infield grounder from Boston's Johnny Damon. The next moment is an unheralded career highlight,

but one that encapsulated why Jeter was so beloved. Jeter scooped the ball, charged to second, and threw his own fastball to first. It was the hardest I had ever seen a shortstop throw a baseball. Even on TV, you could almost hear it whistle. The Yankees were still down four, but Jeter pumped his fist as violently as if he'd just won the game. And the Yankees did win. They mounted a comeback, beat the Red Sox off an Aaron Boone home run in extras, and went on to win the World Series.

Jeter was his era's biggest—and most atypical—superstar. His teammate Alex Rodriguez was a more perfect talent: a true freak athlete and baseball prodigy,

yet also insecure and inauthentic, and therefore unloved by the Yankee masses. "A-Rod" had an ego the size of Manhattan, memorably encapsulated in a photoshoot in which he posed kissing himself in a mirror. Jeter, by contrast, was unassuming. If Rodriguez could hit 40 and even 50 home runs a year, Jeter's calling cards were the double in the gap, the timely home run, or the inside-out flare to right field. He was "clutch," on offense and defense. If it is fashionable today to argue that Jeter was overrated, it's because he was the beating heart of a Yankees team that was its era's juggernaut. Just a cog in a world-beating machine, say the cynics, even if that cog once dated Mariah Carey.

It was a different time for Jeter, and for New York City, and for me. The city was allegedly being treated like hell by Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, but I didn't notice. The Yankees embodied traditional Republican ideals—no beards, one chain per player, and a dress code—and I, embarrassing to admit, loved it. We were *good*. We won. Other teams lost, and their fan bases could cry about it while walking to their

minivans. Politically, I'm a progressive, and yet these Yankees were conservative—a clean-shaven, best-foot-forward, hard-working team of rich ball players. Wade Boggs rode police horses after the infamous 1996 World Series victory; Joe Torre allegedly gambled at the track during the day; Mariano Rivera was, in addition to being one of the most unique talents in the history of sports, something approaching a fascist. I couldn't—and still can't—get enough of it.

But the times have changed. New York has accelerated its transformation into a soulless, unlivable playground for the international rich, and the Yankees, with no championship for 13 years despite their \$279 million payroll, are no longer the unifying behemoth they once were. Symbolically, they're a product of that mayoral machine that has changed the city for the worse. After 9/11, the franchise became an element of Giuliani's PR campaign to brand himself as "America's mayor," while during the Bloomberg era, the hollowing out of the city's working and middle classes corresponded with the start of the Yankee World Series drought. Old Navy and Target opened stores in Harlem; the Yankees got bounced from the playoffs by the Anaheim Angels, twice.

And still, until his retirement in 2014, there was always Jeter. If something was going on in the late innings, Jeter was a part of it. If there was a big play to be made, Jeter almost always made it. The statistical revolution has shown that Jeter was a poor defender. Who cares? Newfangled defensive statistics don't take into account how *athletic* and situationally *crucial* some of Jeter's best plays were. Jeter is from the era where a jump throw was still a jaw-dropping highlight, instead of being sneeringly treated as proof of a player's alleged

“Like Jeter, Judge is almost painfully normal. No bat flips, no scandals, no braggadocio—nothing interesting except the transcendent talent at crushing a baseball.”

slowness in getting to the ball. He did things that won big games that were far off of the stat sheet. When CC Sabathia opened Game 1 of the 2009 playoffs and spotted the Twins a 2-0 lead, it was Jeter who told CC “I got you,” and then proved it by tying the game for the Yankees with a home run.

Jeter was a master of the art of maintaining privacy in the midst of the media spotlight. We fans knew nothing about the real Jeter. We didn't know who he hung out with. Unlike his teammate and frenemy A-Rod, he avoided bizarre controversies. People didn't know Derek, but they *admired* him. He was in control of his own narrative, and that narrative was reassuringly impenetrable and bland, even corporate.

Today, Yankee fans have a new Jeter, or at least a would-be Jeter: right-fielder Aaron Judge, another biracial superstar. The reigning American League MVP—generally recognized, along with Japanese phenom Shohei Ohtani, as one of the two best players in baseball—is the new captain of the Yankees. If Jeter was physically unassuming, then Judge is a Hercules: 6-foot-7 and nearly 300 pounds of muscle, a towering, imposing figure who leads by sheer strength and force of example. Like Jeter, Judge is almost painfully normal. No bat flips, no scandals, no braggadocio—nothing

interesting except the transcendent talent at crushing a baseball. You wonder if the man can even dance.

Judge, who was adopted by white parents, sees himself as biracial, like Jeter. But Jeter played at a time when race was a considerably less fraught subject than it is today, at least publicly. Now, identity permeates everything, even for athletes. In the ESPN documentary *The Captain*, which aired last July, Jeter made the case for knowing himself as a Black man and a Black athlete, something he had never spoken about before. Episode 1 features Jeter discussing what his parents, Dr. Charles Jeter and Dorothy Jeter, told him about his identity. “My parents raised me and said, you're a Black man. You're going to deal with racism.” Judging from the grotesque story about a white man calling Jeter a “nigger” in his hometown of Kalamazoo, Michigan, his parents were right. Mrs. Jeter talks about the city with palpable disgust.

Jeter is the son of interracial marriage. His relationship with Black culture is evidenced by the many hip-hop songs—Young Jeezy's “Go Getta,” for example—he would use as walk-up songs. On a recent appearance on the hip-hop podcast *Drink Champs*, he demonstrated his comfort around other Black men, and their appreciation of him. The Yankees' late-'90s dynasty, after all, came at the end of one of hip-hop's recurring New York golden ages. While Ghostface Killah rapped “ringleader, set it off, rap's Derek Jeter,” Jeter was leading the Yanks to another World Series title, their third in four seasons. He played in the Bronx, the city's roughest and poorest borough. His close friendship with Gerald Williams, the Black Mets and Yankees mainstay who died last year, is well-documented, as is Jeter's fortunate noninvolvement in the events surrounding Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs' alleged nightclub shooting.

Jeter, in other words, is Black, but the perception of him is that he's mixed. Sportswriter Wallace Matthews described him as “racially neutral” and “almost colorless,” which was pernicious, but at the same time, you sort of knew what he meant. Until recently, Jeter didn't seem interested in being understood by, or in ingratiating himself

COMMUNITY

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publicly with, Black people. Maybe he was responding to the “apolitical” stance of the ever straight-laced Yankees organization. Maybe he was reflecting the supposedly less political era that he made his bones in. Maybe his tenure as the Marlins owner made him realize that it was time to shift his public image and lean into his cultural cachet. As a Black man, Jeter never felt quite *with* us, even if he is one of us.

Besides, at the time, Jeter had better things to do than be Black: He was a true Yankee. The Yankees carry a ridiculous amount of psychic baggage. They command reverence, or at least attempt to, not just for the team but for the city, the country, and the entire sport of baseball. If Jeter had played for the Cincinnati Reds, there’d be no mystique. But he played for New York, and so he became part of a centurylong lineage of charming pinstripe stars. He’s painted on walls on Jerome Avenue next to Joe DiMaggio and the rest of the Yankee legends. In *The Captain*, ESPN writer Howard Bryant says, “I talk to the players all the time and they say, oh yeah, Jeter’s down.” I don’t doubt the other players feel that way, but for me, as a fan, nothing Jeter ever did was about his Blackness. Blackness was a suggestion, or something unspoken. It was never presented in the story.

The same goes for Judge, who signed a nine-year, \$365 million contract extension with the Yankees on Dec. 7. Like Jeter, he has a guarded charisma, an inoffensive flair with just enough strut, though not too much. You’re supposed to see the intimidating, quiet confidence of someone who makes the right play with a remarkable frequency. Both Judge and Jeter handle the public eye with ease. They reveal nothing, but are the first ones journalists mob outside the locker room.

I, of course, *love* Aaron Judge, as I loved Jeter. He’s excellent, and getting better. It used to be possible to sneak a fastball by him if you jammed him. Now, he can turn on an inside pitch and crush it into the upper deck. His fielding is pristine, too. Against the Angels, on April 19, he chased down a screamer in the eighth inning, keeping the game at 2-2. You knew he was going to make the play. He’s notorious for that.

“The Yankee Way is all-encompassing, and it refers to a special mix of loyalty, classiness, and stoicism, a kind of brutally systematic success.”

For years, fans wondered whether Hal Steinbrenner, the enigmatic son of the impulsive and mercurial George Steinbrenner, the deep-pocketed owner who paid for the Yankees’ incredible World Series run in the late ‘90s and early 2000s, would ever take a massive financial risk on a potential franchise player. Now we know the answer is yes. Judge is inheriting the stratospheric expectations that Jeter created for any future Yankee savior. Probably, this is exactly the kind of challenge that Judge wants, even if there were offseason murmurings about him returning to his home in Northern California. The Yankee Way is all-encompassing, and it refers to a special mix of loyalty, classiness, and stoicism, a kind of brutally systematic success. Hardly any star player ventures off the grid in the Bronx. Distractions aren’t just a nuisance up there—they’re fatal. An excess of personal ego is simply unbecoming for members of a regal baseball franchise.

And yet, as a fan, I can’t help but ask: Does the Yankees’ gravitas, their conservatism, still make sense for what the franchise—and the city of New York—is today? Across American professional sports, superstardom is increasingly rooted in the identity of the stars themselves. Witness the marketing of Ohtani, Judge’s main MVP rival, as a

sort of happy-go-lucky samurai basking in the Southern California sun, or even the recent embrace of political activism by Black NBA superstars like LeBron James. Fans need something to care about, to relate to, to argue and get angry about. It is one thing to be the clean-cut, stoic, team-first Yankees when the Yankees are on top of the universe, but this team is no longer riding police horses in front of euphoric fans; they’re coming up limp in the face of angry New Jersey men. I wonder if they know how empty—how unenthusiastic—the fans feel about the identity of the current team, and not just the fact that they haven’t won.

Judge seems to want to toe the organization’s partying line of tranquility, stating that his goal as a Yankee is to add to the running count of Yankee championships. That’s fair. Athletes, Black or not, do not have to be role models. Still, there’s a trope about mixed kids being more white than Black—one that I am hesitant to perpetuate, but which does occur to me when I watch Aaron Judge. In America, if you have a parent who is Black, you are Black. Maybe Judge doesn’t feel that way, or doesn’t care, or has other things on his mind. As a Black Yankees fan, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want him to embrace his Blackness. Maybe I have to contend with the fact that just because the team isn’t what it used to be, that doesn’t mean the players have to change. The Yankees look like they will be good this year, but the powerful, almost totalitarian image of the old Yankees—the one that changed the city’s fanatic energy from a Mets-centric one to a Yankees-centric one—is gone. In its absence, it may be time for Judge to be someone. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The Jewish State and its neighbors at tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east

Stuffed Vegetables

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 4 large onions
- 4 small zucchini (or 2 medium zucchini, cut in half crosswise)
- 2 medium tomatoes
- 2 bell peppers
- 1 cup short- or medium-grain rice
- 1 stalk celery with leaves, diced
- 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste
- 1½ teaspoons salt, or to taste
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground allspice
- Juice of 2 lemons, or to taste
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- ¼ cup chopped parsley, for garnish

PREPARATION

Step 1

Cut ½ inch off the tops and bottoms of the onions, peel, and microwave for 3 to 4 minutes (to help separate the layers). Cool to room temperature. Using a paring knife and your fingers, gently pull the inner layers out of the onions, keeping the shell about ⅛ inch thick. Reserve the inner onion layers for the filling.

Step 2

Cut the stems off the zucchini and, using a paring knife or apple or vegetable corer, hollow out the insides, leaving a shell about ⅛ inch thick. Then, also using a paring knife, hollow out the tomatoes, leaving a shell about ¼ inch thick, and squeezing the juice into a bowl. Cut about ½ inch off the top of the peppers, then remove and discard the seeds. You should have 12 vegetable shells in total. Reserve the inner pulp from the vegetables.

Step 3

Dice all the reserved onion and vegetable pulp with a knife or in a food processor. Put the pulp in a large mixing bowl with the rice, celery, 1 tablespoon of the tomato paste, salt, pepper, ¼ teaspoon of cumin, ¼ teaspoon of cinnamon, ¼ teaspoon of allspice, and the juice of 1 lemon. Mix well, then stuff the vegetables with the filling, leaving almost ¾ inch at the top for the rice to expand.

Step 4

Grease the bottom of a large, heavy-bottomed pot with a tight-fitting lid with the olive oil, then arrange the stuffed vegetables, in a single layer, standing the zucchini up. Stir the remaining tomato paste and juice from 1 lemon into 2 cups of water and pour the liquid over the vegetables. Add remaining cumin, cinnamon, and allspice. Set a heatproof plate on top to weigh down the vegetables, then cover and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Lower the heat and simmer gently for 1 hour, checking about halfway through cooking and spooning some of the liquid into the vegetables to help the rice cook. Add a little more water if necessary.

Step 5

Using a slotted spoon, carefully remove the vegetables to a serving platter. Spoon some of the extra cooking liquid over the vegetables, then sprinkle with the remaining juice from half a lemon and garnish with the chopped parsley.

Yield: Serves 6 to 8

