

# THE TAB

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## COMMUNITY

# The Rules of Conversion

Understanding how to join the nation of Israel, then and now

BY RICHARD HIDARY

What does it mean to join the people of Israel? This question takes on pressing urgency now as the State of Israel takes in tens of thousands of refugees from Ukraine, some with Jewish mothers, some with only Jewish fathers, some who converted or want to convert, others non-Jews seeking safety until the fighting ends. The complexity of Israel's national immigration law, including the relevant-as-ever Law of Return, overlaps uneasily with traditional Halacha, resulting in confusion and bureaucratic hurdles for hundreds of thousands of people. Our current countdown toward the Shavuot reading of the Book of xRuth coinciding with the *Daf Yomi* study of the locus classicus of conversion laws in the Talmud offers a perfect opportunity to untangle the historical strands of the laws of conversion and gain a better perspective of both the current predicament and possible solutions.

How did one join the nation of Israel during biblical times? As a sovereign kingdom in a land defined by borders, conversion in early Israel meant immigrating and naturalizing as a citizen. The first requirement would be to live in the land of Israel, just as modern countries require residence for citizenship. A foreigner who has come only for

a visit or a temporary stay received the title of *nokhri* (foreigner) and was treated like any member of a foreign nation (Deuteronomy 14:21, 15:3, and 17:15). However, immigrants who have come to live permanently in Israel gained the status of *toshav* or *ger*, literally “a dweller or resident.” These individuals had a right to receive gifts to the poor (Leviticus 19:10, 23:22, 25:35-36), could not be forced to work on Shabbat (Exodus 20:10, 23:12), and were provided special protection against usury, abuse, and injustice (Exodus 22:20, 23:9, Leviticus 19:33-34, Deuteronomy 24:17) on account of their vulnerability as poor newcomers lacking alliances and family networks. They were invited to celebrate national holidays (Leviticus 16:29, Deuteronomy 16:14) and, if they agreed to circumcise, could even partake of the Passover sacrifice (Exodus 12:48), a defining ritual that indicated affiliation with the Israelite people.

The requirement of circumcision for men in order to marry into Israelite families can be derived from the offer by Jacob's sons to the Shechemites. But other than that, the Bible legislates no formal procedure. *Gerim*—Jews by choice, or proselytes—would simply become indistinguishable after they lost their accents and married into local communities. The finest model for this process was Ruth, who was still considered a Moabite while living outside

of Israel, even though married to a Judahide there. Her move to Judea, however, made her marriageable even to a respected landowner like Boaz, which eventually made her the foremother of King David. Ruth's inspiring declaration to her mother-in-law encapsulates the transformative significance of her journey: "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:16-17).

Jumping forward several centuries and two Temple destructions later, the Talmudic sages find themselves scattered throughout the Roman and Persian empires struggling to maintain a sense of nationhood without a homeland. Even without a capital city or a centralized leadership, the rabbis envision a nation bound by laws rather than land, upheld by academies and courts rather than cavalry. A revised set of criteria for joining this nation could no longer require residency, as the Talmud explicitly derives: "I know only that a convert is accepted in the Land of Israel; from where do I derive that also outside of the Land of Israel? The verse states 'with you,' which indicates that in any place that he is with you, you should accept him."

Instead, the sages brilliantly draw from their history to formulate a set of rituals and legal processes to becoming Jewish. Talmud Bavli Yevamot 46a offers a three-way controversy about the minimum ritual requirement:

Our Rabbis taught: If a convert was circumcised but did not immerse in a mikveh, Rabbi Eliezer says he is a valid convert for so we find that our forefathers were circumcised but did not immerse.

If he immersed but was not circumcised, Rabbi Joshua says he is a valid convert for we find that our foremothers immersed but were not circumcised.

But the sages say, whether he immersed but was not circumcised, or was circumcised but did not immerse, he is not a valid convert unless he is circumcised and immerses.

Rabbi Eliezer looks for a ritual precedent in the Torah and finds not only that circumcision is the symbol of the covenant commanded to Abraham but also that the forefathers in Egypt underwent a mass circumcision at the time of the Passover sacrifice (see Joshua 5:5) to mark their bodies as Israelite, just as they did with their doorposts. Rabbi Joshua argues that since the foremothers did not have circumcision to define them, they must have had a different conversion ritual. The continuation of the Talmud finds a lead in the instructions of Moses that the people sanctify themselves and wash their garments three days before the Lawgiving (Exodus 19:10). If they washed their garments, then they surely also immersed their bodies. The sages agree with both precedents of the forefathers and foremothers such that every new convert in future generations will need to experience for themselves all elements of the mass ceremony when the Children of Israel first became a nation. The Talmud continues to provide a script for the interview before the court:

Our Rabbis: Regarding a potential convert who comes to a court at the present time when the Jews are in exile, the judges of the court say to him: "What did you see that motivated you to come to convert? Don't you know that the Jewish people at the present time are anguished, suppressed, despised, and harassed, and hardships are frequently visited upon them?" If he says: "I know, and I am unworthy of joining the Jewish people," then the court accepts him immediately.

The judges of the court inform him of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot, and they inform him of the sin of neglecting the mitzvah to allow the poor to take gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and produce in the corner of one's field, and about the poor man's tithe. And they inform him of the punishment for transgressing the mitzvot. They tell him, "...If you now profane Shabbat, you will be punished by stoning." And just as they inform him about the punishment for transgressing the mitzvot, so too, they inform him

about the reward granted for fulfilling them....They do not overwhelm him with threats, and they are not exacting with him about the details.

If he accepts upon himself all of these ramifications, then they circumcise him immediately.... When he is healed from the circumcision, they immerse him immediately, and two Torah scholars stand over him at the time of his immersion and inform him of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot. Once he has immersed and emerged, he is like a born Jew in every sense.

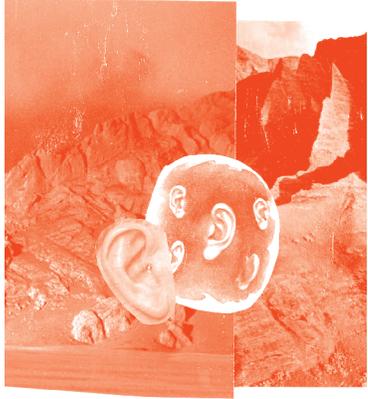
For the immersion of a woman: Women appointed by the court seat her in the water of the ritual bath up to her neck, and two Torah scholars stand outside the bathhouse so as not to compromise her modesty, and from there they inform her of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot.

The Talmud continues to elaborate on these details, changing the two Torah scholars into three judges such that they are not simply witnessing the ritual but issuing a legal decision to accept the new convert. The opening question establishes that joining a people also means joining in their persecution, feeling the weight of their history and

 **UPCOMING HOLIDAY**

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**Shavuot**



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their minority status among great empires. The goal of the educational section that follows is not to drill in a full curriculum of Jewish law that would take years to accomplish. Rather, just as at the Sinai Lawgiving the people accept 10 foundational laws and hear the rest later, so, too, the convert learns a representative sampling (with special emphasis on charity) and an expectation to continue studying afterward. Instead of geographical boundaries, it is now primarily the bounds of the commandments, with all of their legal consequences and rewards, that comes to define Jewish identity. The Gemara poetically reenacts this shift through a rereading of the conversation between Naomi and her daughter-in-law:

Naomi said to her: “On Shabbat, it is prohibited for us to go beyond the Shabbat limit.” Ruth responded: “*Wherever you go, I will go* (Ruth 1:16), and no further.” Naomi said to her: “It is forbidden for us to be alone together with a man with whom it is forbidden to engage in relations.” Ruth responded: “*Where you lodge, I will lodge* (Ruth 1:16), and in the same manner.”

Naomi said to her: “We are commanded to observe six hundred and thirteen commandments.” Ruth responded: “Your people shall be my people” (Ruth 1:16). Naomi said to her: “Idolatrous worship is forbidden to us.” Ruth responded: “Your God is my God” (Ruth 1:16). Naomi said to her: “Four types of capital punishment were handed over to a court with which to punish those who transgress the mitzvot.” Ruth responded: “*Where you die, I shall die*” (Ruth 1:17). Naomi said to her: “Two burial grounds were handed over to the court, one for those executed for more severe crimes and another for those executed for less severe crimes.” Ruth responded: “*And there I will be buried*” (Ruth 1:17).

Each phrase in Ruth’s nationalistic pledge of allegiance is now read as a cipher for particular commandments and for the consequences of violating them. Adjudicated by a loose network

“Ironically, those coming to convert in Israel today are held up to the strictest standards while those in the Diaspora can choose from the widest range of conversion programs.”

of rabbinic courts around the world, the Talmudic system of defining who is a Jew succeeded for 2,000 years of exile.

The rise of the State of Israel, however, now rekindles fundamental questions about what it means to join the nation. The Jewish people finds itself at a crossroads that the ancient rabbis could only have hoped for but could barely have imagined. Israel as a democracy legislates civil immigration laws based on economic, political, and humanitarian considerations, as does every other sovereign nation. Add to that the Law of Return guaranteeing that anyone with even partial Jewish lineage persecuted under the Nuremberg Laws can find safety in the Jewish homeland. These national laws overlap the Talmudic definitions that continue to define Jewish conversion in the Diaspora as well as the status of returnees to Israel who must answer to Halacha for full marriage and burial rights as Jews.

Can Halacha find precedent for taking into account residence in the sovereign State of Israel as a key element for conversion as it was in biblical times? Many halachic decisors, both Ashkenazic and Sephardic, agree that specifically for conversion in Israel, we should follow the lenient views based on Maimonides, Rabbi Meir Hai Uziel,

and others to accept converts even without complete halachic observance at the outset. In Israel, these immigrant converts will become integrated with Israeli society, will fight in the Israel Defense Forces, will contribute to the rebuilding of the country, and will be far from foreign influence or threat of future intermarriage.

Ironically, those coming to convert in Israel today are held up to the strictest standards while those in the Diaspora can choose from the widest range of conversion programs from the most to the least demanding. Common sense, however, would recommend for stricter standards outside of Israel, where keeping up Jewish identity, practice, and intramarriage is more challenging. On the other hand, ensuring that all Israeli citizens who identify as Jewish can halachically marry other Jews is of utmost importance for the integrity of the Jewish State. Precedent for reintroducing elements of the biblical model by fast-tracking converts in the Land of Israel is already found in Tractate Gerim 4:5:

The Land of Israel is beloved for it readily converts. One who comes as a convert in the Land of Israel, we accept them immediately. One who comes as a convert outside the Land, we do not accept them unless they bring their testimony with them.

As the Jewish people counts up toward the reacceptance of the Sinai Lawgiving on Shavuot and the reading of the Book of Ruth, we can take this opportunity to revisit and strengthen our own Israelite identities, whether based on lineage, law, or longing. Whether that means learning Hebrew, observing Shabbat and celebrating holidays, creating a Jewish music playlist, considering *aliyah*, joining *Daf Yomi*, or getting involved in a synagogue or a Jewish humanitarian organization, there are plenty of paths toward greater Jewish commitment and a deepened feeling that “your people shall be my people.” ■

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# ‘There Is Always Room in Life for a Valorous Deed’

As war rages in Ukraine, Boris Zakharov and a network of human-rights activists stretching from Kyiv to Brooklyn are organizing rescue missions

BY BORIS FISHMAN

**O**n March 2, a 52-year-old Ukrainian woman named Galina Stepanishcheva decided to try to drive out of Hostomel, a suburb of Kyiv, with her 9-year-old son, Vanya. Hostomel had been occupied since shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, but Stepanishcheva declined to follow her stepdaughter Anya Koizmenko out of town the night of the invasion. “I don’t think Galina could imagine what was going to happen,” Koizmenko said. Along with Koizmenko’s father, Grigoriy Zabiya, also 52, Galina and Vanya spent the next week shivering at home without water, heat, or electricity. On March 2, Stepanishcheva decided she had to try to leave.

At first, “my father disagreed,” Koizmenko told me, but eventually Zabiya relented. He decided to remain behind on the assumption that women and children stood a better chance of escaping Russian occupation than combat-age males. Stepanishcheva’s red Citroën C2 had barely turned onto a neighboring street when a Russian infantry vehicle opened fire from behind. Galina was killed instantly.

Zabiya heard the shots through his windows. It was too dangerous for him to go outside, so he called his daughter, frantic. Koizmenko had no news until she received a phone call from a woman who lived near the attack. Her husband and brother had crawled out to the car. Vanya’s body was shredded by glass

fragments—one of his fingers had been sliced open to the bone—but he was alive. The men carried Vanya to their apartment. The next day, when Russian forces began breaking into local apartments in search of combat-age males, they moved him to a bunker nearby.

It was then that Koizmenko called Boris Zakharov, a former colleague at the Ukrainian-Helsinki Human Rights Union, where Zakharov headed the advocacy center from 2014 to 2018 and Koizmenko still worked as a lawyer. Zakharov called the person in charge of evacuation for the region. “I put them all on their ears,” Zakharov said, an expression in Russian that means roughly to turn a place upside down. “They started planning a rescue operation for Vanya.”

Not many human-rights advocates in corrupt countries with a history of abuse by law enforcement have the kinds of relationships with local military commanders that allow the former to put the latter “on their ears” in requesting a highly dangerous rescue mission. But Boris Zakharov, whose wispy beard, clipped bangs, and curly-haired mullet invoke a cross between Matisyahu and Travis Tritt, is not a typical human-rights advocate.

Zakharov was born in Kharkiv, in eastern Ukraine, the son of Yevgeny Zakharov, a Soviet dissident who formed the first human-rights organization in independent Ukraine. In his early twenties, Zakharov turned to the same work as his father. “I almost didn’t

have a choice,” he said. As the host of a hard-charging program on national television, Zakharov brought attention to abuses by the security services and the mistreatment of inmates in Ukrainian prisons. In one case, having to do with a serial domestic abuser who had managed to pay off the local police and judiciary, Zakharov’s investigation prompted the intervention of the national deputy minister of Internal Affairs.

“I developed a good relationship with Internal Affairs,” Zakharov told me, but the security services were unhappy with him. According to Zakharov, before the war, the Ukrainian security services, often working with their Russian counterparts—“their fathers and grandfathers all learned their methods in the same places,” he said—collected substantial bounties for returning dissidents who had found safety in Ukraine, which was relatively open compared to their authoritarian homelands. After Zakharov helped one legitimate Azeri dissident find such refuge, “they tried to set me up,” he said. According to him, an assistant to a parliament deputy invited him to a meeting, ostensibly to get his help with another Azeri dissident, in exchange for payment. “I said I don’t do things for pay,” Zakharov said. “And it didn’t take long to figure out that the assistant was in Ukrainian security, and this ‘dissident’ was actually a Russian agent.”

The risks Zakharov has taken and the far-reaching network of partners and resources that he has developed in two decades as an activist have earned him the begrudging respect of Ukrainian law enforcement. “This was why I was able to call the commander in Hostomel,” Zakharov told me. “Everyone knows me, and I know everyone. I have never used these contacts for personal gain.”

This was possible thanks also to the evolution of the rule of law in Ukraine, certainly as compared to its neighbor to the east. But Zakharov, a Jewish citizen of a nation that has not been kind to its Jews, and someone whose first language was Russian, has evolved too. “I have come to feel a great deal of love and respect for the Ukrainian people,” he said. “Ukraine is like a young person. We are sufficiently emancipated to reject autocracy, but we’re not mature enough

to be self-sufficient. Our government is corrupt and our institutions are weak, but when it comes to people organizing themselves, we have plenty of will to say no to attacks on our freedom—that’s why we’re resisting so capably now.”

After Russia invaded, Zakharov was eligible to leave the country despite being of combat age because he was the father of three or more children. (He and his wife Marina, a jazz musician, have five, three girls and two boys ranging from ages 2 to 19.) After evacuating his family to safety, however, he returned to Kyiv to join Ukraine’s territorial defense. But then, he said, “I got a call from Inna.”

He was referring to Inna Fershteyn, a childhood friend from Kharkiv, whose parents, also dissidents, had been close with Zakharov’s. Three decades ago, their paths diverged. “Inna’s family immigrated to the States, and we remained behind,” Zakharov said.

It was Fershteyn who introduced me to Zakharov, as she knew I was trying to understand what was happening in Ukraine. I was born in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, when it was still part of the USSR, but the real reason for my interest was my connection to an older Ukrainian woman who, in the process of looking after my grandfather for more than a decade, had become a dear person to me and my family. In 2014, I followed Oksana to Ivano-Frankivsk, her hometown in western Ukraine, and there acquired the kind of adopted ex-Soviet home that Belarus, on account of its repression and stasis, never managed to be for me. In Ukraine, I found a country as flawed, corrupt, and struggling as its people were generally welcoming, down-to-earth, and mostly concerned with making a better life for the next generation. After much travel to Russia, it was a relief to encounter none of its insecurity complexes and self-aggrandizement. As the war dragged on, Zakharov and I began to speak almost daily. His willingness to open up, without airs or cynicism, to a disembodied voice across the Atlantic felt emblematic of my travels in his country.

Inna Fershteyn is an estate attorney in Brooklyn who believes she is called by

her Jewish faith to help those in need. As she says, “There is always room in life for a valorous deed.” She had called Zakharov to ask how she could help those affected by the war. Zakharov told her that hospitals were falling dangerously short on key medicines. Fershteyn began to spread word throughout south Brooklyn, where hundreds of thousands of ex-Soviets live, and reached out to a local pharmacy to ask its owner to serve as a collection point for donations. Within a week, \$15,000 had come in, and a dozen boxes of antibiotics, wound dressings, and pain medication went off to Ukraine.

Over the following weeks, the childhood friends became partners in a cross-continental enterprise to help Ukraine. It was bureaucratically cumbersome to ship medicine from the States, so Fershteyn shifted to fundraising, and Zakharov became a humanitarian commuter, driving to Poland to purchase medications and military equipment and delivering them where they were needed in Ukraine. After just a month, with the help of several colleagues, they were feeding and providing financial assistance to nearly a hundred people in Kyiv and its suburbs; supplying medical equipment to hospitals in several cities; and evacuating people in need using vehicles they had purchased. Between these missions, Zakharov tried to help people like Anya Koizmenko.

Working in haste, Fershteyn, Zakharov, and their colleagues formed a group that took on a name as elemental as the work it was doing: World Help Ukraine. Soon, its Facebook page was brimming with posts like “Does anyone knows if volunteer can pick up 1 bulletproof vest from someone in a Kiev?” [sic] It was a round-the-clock effort. “For a month, I woke up at 6 a.m. and never got out of my pajamas,” Sasha Krasny, a nonprofit consultant who has worked with World Help Ukraine, told me. “My kids have been raising themselves.” In their effort to defend Ukrainian sovereignty against Russian aggression, its members, most of them from Ukraine, communicated with each other in the language of their Soviet childhoods, the same language that so many Ukrainians continued to use: Russian.

World Help Ukraine was only one of several such groups in south Brooklyn. The members of these groups share a powerful, idiosyncratic bond: Many are Jews who fled the Soviet Union because they were mistreated by Ukrainians. As such, they constitute perhaps history’s first example of a persecuted minority undergoing substantial sacrifice to aid the people by whom they were once persecuted. In an equally powerful irony, their Ukrainian Jewish colleagues often have very different feelings about being Jewish in Ukraine.

“I can’t not help,” Fershteyn said. “But I feel uneasy as I do it. Ukraine did not love us.” When Fershteyn’s parents had tried to enroll her in a specialized music school in Kharkiv, they were told that a child with this last name would not be accepted. (Fershteyn is now helping to support a teacher from this school.) “Would the Ukrainians do the same for us Jews if the tables were turned?” she said. “I’m not sure.” She mentioned that Ukraine had voted against Israel on nearly 40 occasions in recent years at the United Nations, and she referred me to an impassioned open letter that a fellow ex-Soviet Jew who has been helping Ukrainians wrote to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is Jewish. Zelensky had just excoriated the Israeli Knesset for insufficient assistance and its neutral stance on the conflict, comparing the current plight of Ukraine to the Holocaust. The letter read, in part:

You feel that we owe you because you are Jewish ...

I guess we won’t mention that your children are not only not-Jewish, but have, with your permission, been baptized ...

We’ll help ... not because you are a Jew, but because WE are Jews.

The relationship of Ukraine and its Jewry is long and grim. Some of the most significant movements in Jewish life, including Hasidism and Zionism, trace their origins to the country. It was also a place of routine slaughter of Jews. I grew up in Soviet Minsk on a street named for Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who led a 1648 uprising against Polish

domination, murdering between 15,000 and 30,000 Jews in the process. When I visited Ivano-Frankivsk in western Ukraine in 2014, I did not see a single commemoration of the fact that before the Holocaust, the town had a Jewish population of between 25,000 and 40,000 (65% of the city's population, by some estimates), of whom 100 survived. (Oksana's daughter lives in a town 150 miles away, named Khmelnytsky.)

Was this antisemitism or the oversight of people who still thought of what happened in the Soviet way, that is, as a collective loss without particularized suffering? (The Soviet Union punished commemorative singling out of victim groups during WWII.) Vladimir Putin's reason for invasion—the de-Nazification of Ukraine—was patently absurd, but so was the claim that it was invalid just because Ukraine's president was Jewish. “There were Ukrainians shooting at Jews at Babiy Yar,” where more than 33,000 Jews were murdered in 1941, Fershteyn said, referring to the welcome German invaders received from some western Ukrainians, who were less concerned with slaughter of Jews than with assistance in undermining the Soviet occupation.

Zakharov is stranded between people like Fershteyn and those her group is helping. Despite his roots in one Russian-speaking city (Kharkiv) and residence near another (Kyiv), he has learned Ukrainian, in his country an act with more than the usual national overtones. I asked him whether his confederates in New York had failed to see a change in his country—whether in emigrating from a “backward” country to a more modern one, history had actually stopped for them, at least on the question of Ukraine's relationship to its Jews. Was what I had seen, or not seen, in Ivano-Frankivsk merely a holdover of the same Soviet mentality that led Zelensky to refer to the suffering of his ancestors at the hands of the Nazis as “the war” rather than “the Holocaust”? If Ukraine had changed, shouldn't I have seen more plaques in Ivano-Frankivsk?

“I grew up in a working-class part of Kharkiv,” he said. “This Georgian kid and I, we used to get beaten up all the time. But Ukraine has changed a great

“There are Jews serving in the Azov Battalion today, shoulder to shoulder. Part of it is that we have a common enemy. But it's also that Ukrainians have changed themselves from the inside.”

deal. Antisemitism stopped being popular. It's just my impression, but after Jews emigrated en masse, there was less color in life. And Jews gained a positive association because their identities became vehicles for emigration.” In other words, the reason may have been mercenary, but people wanted to be related to Jews.

“Today, we have some of the lowest levels of antisemitism in Europe,” he said, citing research by the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine. “It's not a daily reality for me, remotely. Ukrainians are a passionate people, but these days, in my experience, they avoid the extremities. We're all stomping our feet around the center.” He insisted that the Azov Battalion—once the offspring of two fascist political parties and now a paramilitary unit of the Ukrainian Armed Forces that held back, Thermopylae-like, vastly superior Russian forces in Mariupol for nearly three months—has changed. “There are Jews serving in the Azov Battalion today, shoulder to shoulder. Part of it is that we have a common enemy. But it's also that Ukrainians have changed themselves from the inside.”

Moments of crisis have been pivotal in that evolution, he argued. “It's development in peacetime that's difficult. The habit for paternalism takes over, the denial of personal responsibility, the idea that government should solve our problems. But progress comes in waves. It happened after 2004,” when the Orange Revolution denied Viktor Yanukovich the presidency after a rigged election, “and again in 2014. I hope it will happen again after this war.”

When speaking about his childhood friendship with Inna Fershteyn, Zakharov had used the word “unfortunately” to refer to the fact that his family remained in Ukraine while Fershteyn's parents managed to leave. But it was hard to imagine him wanting to be elsewhere.

On March 4, Zakharov received disappointing news: The commander in Hostomel “had called his people in the field, the people with Vanya in the cellar, even the Russians,” Zakharov said. “They decided they couldn't do it. The place was encircled.” On March 7, the Russians murdered Hostomel's mayor, Yuri Prylypko, mined his body, and left it in the street. Only the intervention of a Russian soldier prevented the death of a Ukrainian priest who was intending to retrieve the body for burial.

There were about 150 people sheltering in the bunker with Vanya. “They took care of him as best as they could,” Koizmenko said. “Bandages, iodine. I spoke to him once a day. There was no power, so you turned on your phone once a day, for two minutes. ‘Vanya? Da. Alive? Alive. I love you. I love you.’ And then you had to hang up.” In the bunker, Vanya was surrounded by unfamiliar people trying and failing to keep private the business of humanity in confined quarters without the relief of utilities: “Grown men defecating right next to him, smoking right next to him,” Koizmenko said, her voice trailing off.

Nearly a week passed this way. On March 9, Grigoriy Zabiya managed to reach the bunker and reunite with his son. The next day, Russian forces arrived at the bunker and forced all combat-age men to ground level. “They destroyed everyone's phones,” Koizmenko said.

“And they shot all around the men, like a mock execution. Vanya stayed in the bunker, but he was hysterical, because he thought that now they were killing his father.” One of the soldiers nearly broke Grigoriy Zabiayaka’s hand with the butt of his weapon. In the end, Zabiayaka and Vanya managed to leave the bunker, and Hostomel, thanks only to a humanitarian corridor authorized by the Russians.

The same corridor made possible the escape from Hostomel of another family known to Zakharov: Viacheslav Bodnar, a 56-year-old graphic designer who had done work for the Ukrainian-Helsinki Human Rights Union; Bodnar’s wife, Inna; and his 84-year-old mother, Alisa Ivanovna. As Alisa Ivanovna couldn’t walk—at various points, Bodnar used a pallet, a steel window grate, and a decommissioned chest freezer to haul her to the evacuation point—Bodnar sent out a distress call on social media. It reached Zakharov the morning after the Bodnars had managed to reach Kyiv.

Zakharov dialed S., a driver. About a month before the war, Zakharov, who did not own a car and took taxis into Kyiv for meetings, had ended up in S.’s taxi. S. shared that he was from Popasna, a small city of 20,000 in eastern Ukraine that had exchanged control several times in 2014, when Ukrainian forces battled pro-Russian separatists for the Donbas region, which the separatists, with Russia’s covert backing, attempted to take over after Russia annexed Crimea the same year. (It is now an epicenter of the fight for the Donbas.) One day during the 2014 fighting, S.’s father had gone out for bread. While he waited in line—Popasna experienced severe food shortages as a result of the conflict—a shell launched by the separatists slammed into the queue, killing him. Before Zakharov got out of S.’s taxi after that first ride, he asked S. to contact the Ukrainian-Helsinki Human Rights Union for help investigating the killing, which the separatists blamed on Ukrainian forces.

S. did not call Zakharov until several days after Russia’s invasion. “He felt unwell morally,” Zakharov said. “He was looking for a mission. The territorial

defense didn’t need him because in Kyiv, they were over-subscribed with people with combat experience. He needed to be useful.”

Zakharov asked me not to share S.’s full name because now, in early April, S. was back in Popasna, which was under what Zakharov called “operational encirclement”—one road out remained under Ukrainian control, but it was under constant attack. S. had gone there because his elderly mother continued to live in Popasna, but he had failed to persuade her to leave. So he spirited out those who dared to try, driving back in as soon as he deposited them closer to safety. As a previous resident, S. was on the local conscription rolls, and the Russian military had already called on his mother to demand his whereabouts for mobilization. If he was discovered, he would be killed.

“You have to understand, this man was not some kind of Ukrainian patriot,” Zakharov said. “He’s a Russian-speaking person from eastern Ukraine. He used to work in Russia itself. Before the war, it didn’t matter to him, freedom or no freedom, Maidan or no Maidan, Russia in charge or Ukraine. He’s a simple person, a driver. Life pulled him into this story. Here, even if you’re not interested in politics, politics will become interested in you.”

On the way to the Kyiv apartment where the Bodnars had managed to find temporary lodging—and their first showers in two weeks—S. and Zakharov stalled at a checkpoint with a lengthy line. To put it modestly, Kyiv is not a grid; on a visit once, I retraced the same kilometer four times on my way from the metro before I found the address on the scrap of paper in my hand. But as a taxi driver, S. had come to know the city closely. He wheeled out of line and drove down side alleys and the wide walkways that border the massive apartment buildings common in this part of the world until they emerged on the other side of the checkpoint.

Zakharov himself carried Bodnar’s elderly mother into S.’s vehicle. At a gas station where a column of evacuation vehicles organized by Zakharov awaited the Bodnars, Zakharov and S. helped them transfer their possessions and

wished them an uneventful journey to the relative safety of Lviv, in western Ukraine. Zakharov and S. were returning to Kyiv.

“It was easy to help someone like Bodnar,” Zakharov told me with characteristic serenity. “Getting people out of the occupied areas is the hard part.”

On April 16, Zakharov drove to Poland to pick up a shipment of protective military equipment and medicines funded by World Help Ukraine. He was accompanied by a man named Gerd, a German volunteer from Düsseldorf who works at an oil refinery. “To him, all this is a monstrous injustice,” Zakharov told me. “He was putting up refugees in hotels and feeding them out of his own pocket.” After Gerd, who is not Jewish, reached out to the Central Council of Jews in Germany, the umbrella organization of German Jewry, he was connected to Zakharov. Gerd convinced his employers to send gas masks and chemical protective suits, then decided to help Zakharov by driving. Gerd was attempting to rectify a more recent sin than the Holocaust. In his view, Germany’s former Chancellor Angela Merkel had encouraged Putin by sacrificing morals to business interests even after the annexation of Crimea; in his opinion, Olaf Scholz, the current chancellor, was no different.

Zakharov’s ultimate destination was his hometown of Kharkiv, on the opposite end of Ukraine, only 25 miles from the Russian border. “It is rainy and bomb-y in Kharkiv today,” he wrote me in English on WhatsApp as he and Gerd approached the city on Easter Sunday. Up ahead of them was a vast, bone-colored mushroom cloud caused by explosions in the city center. Zakharov hadn’t told his family where he was going.

In recent days, Russian forces had focused on shelling the residential neighborhood of Saltivka, in north-eastern Kharkiv. Citing the neologism of a colleague, Zakharov refers to this as “urbicide”—a variation on genocide through the destruction of urban infrastructure and mass random terror against civilians. “It’s a bedroom community,” he said. “Nothing but schools,

hospitals, and those old Brezhnev-era concrete-panel apartment buildings.”

“I’ve never seen such resistance in my life,” Zakharov told me on the phone, after returning home. “If the water main is disrupted, the firefighters, the service workers, the volunteers to clean debris are there in minutes. They just show up out of nowhere. People are even planting flowers under bombardment. People have become very close. We never had this before. The various groups in town never agreed on anything.”

In security-camera footage from Kharkiv he shared with me, a stylishly dressed woman walks down what looks like the courtyard of one such complex, a grocery bag in each hand. As a shell explodes, and several other pedestrians

in the frame scatter for cover, she continues walking with straight-backed defiance. In a moment, two shells explode on either side of her, and she crumples to the ground. Then she rises, grocery bags still in hand, and continues walking.

“It was a very spiritual visit,” Zakharov said. “It has never been such a dear city to me.”

Zakharov returned to Kharkiv to deliver humanitarian supplies in late May. His visit coincided with Russian shelling that killed nine people, including a five-month-old boy. From there, he went to the front line in Donbas to deliver a drone. I asked him how Ukrainian troops were faring.

“They are well provided for,” he said. “Half the country is fighting and

the other half is working to get them what they need. There’s an enormous horizontal web of support. Our government is weak, so from a distance, all this grassroots initiative looks like chaos to someone like Putin. He thought he could come in and take it in three days. Well, we loaded our guns and went off to fight. Businessmen, intellectuals, IT people, musicians. My friend was a bassoonist. Now he operates a rocket launcher.”

Will was high, and so was morale, Zakharov said. There was only one thing Ukrainian troops lacked: the weapons to win. ■

*This article was originally published on June 2, 2022.*

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ARTS & LETTERS

# ‘The Northman’ Is ‘Hamlet’ for Silicon Valley

Robert Eggers’ new film is a techno-shamanistic reversion of Shakespeare’s wordy ambivalence by way of ‘Game of Thrones’

BY MARCO ROTH

**T**he *Northman* is one of those high concept, medieval sword and sorcery movies that unintentionally offers an insight into our present-day civilization—in which the unceasing advance of technology, the triumph of the algorithm, and the continued quantification of anything and everything through advanced statistics has been accompanied by a widespread and heterogenous cultural reengagement with the primitive, the pre-rational, the mystical, and the proto-civilizational. Something like this

mix courses through pop-cultural phenomena like *Game of Thrones*, the burgeoning genre of intensively researched witch novels, the popularity of Yuval Noah Harari, the revival of psychedelics, the myriad varieties of mysticisms and apocalyptic visions, new and old, including Eastern religions, Hasidism, goddess cults, crystals, energetic healing, QAnon, and Scientology—American society now, as in Puritan and Anabaptist times, consisting of one big grab bag of cults. *The Northman* eagerly participates in some of the sillier versions of contemporary neo-primitivism (“My earth magic will aid your

sword of fire” is an actual line in the movie and of course foreshadows sex), but also manages to be one of its more serious aesthetic achievements to date.

Conceived and directed by the American filmmaker Robert Eggers (whose directorial debut *The Witch* peered into the mind of colonial New Englanders) the movie stages an ur-*Hamlet*, a version of the Amleth legend that circulated in various northern European oral and written forms for several centuries before finding its way to the artist conveniently known as Shakespeare. Up until quite recently—and since the late 18th century—*Hamlet* (the Shakespeare play) had been interpreted by Goethe, by Hegel, by Hazlitt, by Coleridge, and by Freud, among others, as a paradigmatic modern tragedy of ambivalence, a drama that stages the impossibility of right action. The play was not just another *Revenge Tragedy* in Thomas Kyd’s earlier Renaissance version, but, according to Laurence Olivier’s pithy, middlebrow, midcentury-modern gloss, “the tragedy of a man who can’t make up his mind.” Shakespeare introduces “conscience”—then nearly synonymous with “consciousness”—as a player in its own right, who responds to works of art (“the play’s the thing in which to catch the conscience of the king”), and famously “makes cowards of us all.”

The causes of all this hesitation could be found in *Hamlet's* world: still Christian but also secular, skeptical and self-questioning, the characters caught between impulse and thought, belief and evidence, desire and everything that comes between desire and its realization, which are mostly words (*Hamlet* is Shakespeare's wordiest play). When Hamlet surprises Claudius at prayer, Claudius is talking (to himself and the audience) about how he cannot pray but only pretend to do so. This kind of prayer isn't really an action, "words without thoughts never to heaven go," but since Hamlet's senses alone can't distinguish between simulation and sincerity, he hesitates over this prime opportunity for vengeance, lest he send Claudius to heaven and so eternally reward him for killing his father.

At the equivalent moment in Eggers' film, Amleth comes upon his uncle Fionir as he's trying to ravish a slave girl, who escapes by smacking him in the face with her bloody menstrual rag. The woman's blood reminds the hero of a witch's prophecy foretelling he will face his uncle at "a lake of fire" and the time is not yet ripe for revenge. So much for ambivalence.

What interests Eggers, instead, in his revision, is something more literally "profound." Claudius is saved by theological anxiety; Fionir by the more raw emotion of disgust. Throughout, the movie aims to recreate and also speak to these animal-brained emotions that power the occult—not just disgust but fear, hunger, lust, and bloodlust. Its focus is on how deep beliefs get instilled in us pre-consciously and thus generate an enchanted world of "true magic."

The question for the cultural critic is why all this neo-primitivism, and why now? Once upon a time, the rewriting of a gory Norse tale and its transformation into a paradigmatic drama of modernity was seen as a crowning human achievement. Now, the un-Shakespeare-ing of *Hamlet*—returning the drama to its primitive origins—is taken to be a kind of progress.

Eggers attempts an anthropology of vanished Viking culture that also acts as an investigation into what New Age

types would call "the warrior archetype." The first hints of his method are subtle. After a false-start, kitsch opening—a volcano and a voice over "prologue" uttered in growled, Nordic-accented consonants—the filmmaker cuts to a black screen and hits the audience with the disorienting, dissonant blasts of a Viking horn that we soon learn announces the return of the king from his raids. This use of period sound—the movie has no other soundtrack—is almost a straight steal from one of cinema's great folklorists, the dissident Soviet director Sergei Paradjanov and his *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, which begins a dreamlike retelling of an old Ukrainian Hutsul legend with the equally mind-bending notes of a Carpathian Alpenhorn.

Paradjanov's oeuvre was devoted to the preservation of various minority traditions threatened by the Soviet drive to mass produce a modern communist collective subject. The sociopolitical stakes of Eggers' anthropological interests are less clear, even as he adapts elements of Paradjanov's pioneering folkloric filming style. *The Northman's* main actions are a series of rituals—intercut with moments of intense violence. We see young Amleth, crucially a pre-pubescent boy instead of Shakespeare's sulky university student, go through a manhood initiation at a forest shrine with his father. This involves acting like dogs, ingesting a psychedelic potion, farting and belching to prove one is a man and not a beast, all under the supervision of an Odin priest. The warrior code of familial loyalty and vengeance newly inscribed in him, he then witnesses his father's brutal murder at the hands of the uncle, the massacre of the old king's loyal household, and watches his mother carried off as war booty. He barely escapes himself, rowing out into the mists of a fjord with a single mantra to keep him going, "I will avenge you father, I will save you mother, I will kill you Fionir."

The beat of the oars gives way to the beat of drums and chants, as Amleth, now a young man, has been adopted by a group of Berserkers, Viking warriors who transform themselves into Wolf Men, on the eve of battle. What

the soliloquy was to Shakespeare, the ceremony is for Eggers, and he devotes as much screen time to it as the sacking of the ninth-century Russian village that follows.

Here, something that we might call "conscience," in the modern sense, appears to intervene. While his Wolf Men colleagues are busy raping women and rounding up the young boys of the town to lock them in a barn and burn them all to death, Amleth can only watch. The camera tracks the fate of one young boy, in particular, who's meant to remind us of young Amleth and might even be played by the same actor. After the atrocity, Amleth leaves the Viking feast and wanders in the ruined village until he comes to the burnt husk of the barn. There he apparently has a visionary encounter, shot in black and white, with a native Rus witch who restores his "last teardrop," taken from him during the initiation ceremony with his father. She also reminds him of his destiny to avenge his father and kill his uncle.

The fate of the anonymous village boy and his fellows becomes the reawakening trigger of what we have almost too casually learned to call "trauma." It's also the moment that Aristotle believed to be a constitutive part of tragedy, known as "recognition" (*anagnorisis*). The scene offers a chilling reminder of how uncanny and haunting trauma really can be, at a visceral level. Felt as "too real," it can only be experienced through estrangement and disassociation. By trying to show us how trauma feels from the inside, however, the witch scene also activates a particular kind of cognitive dissonance for the audience, situating us both inside and outside the events on screen. The dissonance occurs because most of us retain just enough of the late 18th-century concept known as sympathy. We

## ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The Jewish State and  
its neighbors at  
[tabletmag.com/sections/  
israel-middle-east](https://tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east)

understand that Amleth has just been complicit also in murdering the child he was and the rape of women who might have been his own mother. Whatever our emotions are for the victims in this scene, we can also extend that sorrow to the perpetrator.

But there's a gulf between how the audience sees and understands this moment and how *The Northman* shows it to us. The sympathy we feel is secondary and also beside the point. Eggers tries to go beyond mere dramatic irony (where the viewer knows more than the actor) and leads us into a dissonant "historical" irony that puts the audience's assumptions at risk. Instead of mourning the child he was, of being able to feel for the victims of his own Berserker blood lust, the return of the tear only offers Amleth a partial rehumanization; it restores memory and a knowledge of his purpose but not anything like what a contemporary audience would understand to be "self recognition." His "human self" is restored but only to the extent that it remains tied to the old code imprinted in each oar stroke, each beat of the drum.

The original *Hamlet* was hung up on a modern question about truth: If your father's ghost appears to you and tells you to avenge him, what other proofs are required before carrying out that wish. *The Northman*, however, dwells comfortably within our postmodern cynicism about truths and rights. In her only real speaking moment in the film, Nicole Kidman as Amleth's mother, Gudrun, delivers a powerful rebuke to Amleth as he tries to "save her"; she reveals that she was already a captured war bride and Amleth the product of a rape. So she too has a vengeance story of her own. Society is only a sham of organized bloodthirsty interests in competition with each other for pre-eminence. The only division that matters is between who wields power and who is dominated. Almost everyone in this world is a kind of revanchist who nurtures a deeply held grievance, and deep down we are all just following one or another kind of predatory animal script. Man is wolf to man and sometimes woman is too.

This is *Hamlet* by way of Jung and

Mircea Eliade, champions of the archetypal over the individual. Prince Amleth's tragedy here is not that of a modern, ambivalent self but of someone upon whom the actions and rituals of his time have been all-too-deeply imprinted. Amleth is either "not fully human"—a wolf-warrior, monster automaton—or the warrior prince who must make himself a literal slave in his uncle's house to achieve a foretold end. The program either runs in an endless error loop of savagery or terminates according to a pre-written script with violence harnessed and rightly aimed.

The result is something like ancient Greek classical tragedy more than the Renaissance version: Amleth can no more avoid revenge than Oedipus can avoid solving the riddle of who's responsible for the pollution at Thebes. The tragedy arises from people acting in accordance with their inscribed purpose within a defective social order. What looks like tragedy to us from the outside might feel like something different from the inside—consider, for example, the sacrifice of Isaac from the standpoint of the true believer, as both a supreme test of faith and an ordeal.

Eggers is trying to switch one kind of interiority—Hamlet's debates with himself—for another. What is it like to fully inhabit the spirit of a Viking fated to avenge? The madness of this Amleth, as opposed to his modern Shakespearean counterpart, comes from accepting his role too well, not because things are sicklied over with the pale cast of thought.

As the movie switches to Iceland, where the uncle has moved his household, Eggers gives us more rituals—another psychedelic shaman, a primitive "hurling" match, a springtime orgy, a Viking funeral, alongside generous helpings of Icelandic natural scenery. Once the movie drags towards its bloody conclusion, Eggers risks an anachronism for the sake of dramatic tension legible to contemporary audiences—a love interest. The Ophelia story is an artifact of the modern (i.e., Shakespearean) version. In this case, Amleth falls in love with one of the Russian slave girls he stows away with to Fionir's homestead

in Iceland, she of the "earth magic," and also of the menstrual rag. The feminine archetype comes in to offer a different code, that of survival and human flourishing. She holds the antidote to the poison between Amleth's ears; but can he accept it?

Unlike the case with Paradjanov's anthropological films, which tried to translate how traditional cultures told their own stories into the modern medium of cinema, there's no intention here to preserve or revive pagan Nordic folkways. Neither is Eggers suggesting we should or can become authentic Northmen in order to resist the suffocating conformity of a majority culture, after the manner of the neo-Nazi right or versions of the pro-indigenous left. Indeed, the psychology offered in *The Northman* conforms in all sorts of ways with the closest thing we have to a majority norm—the Silicon Valley view of how minds work. We are just infinitely suggestible bots, running software written for us at a level below spoken language—codes made up of genes and primal experiences.

The movie additionally crystallizes something about our contemporary techno-barbarism. As recent events have shown—from the school shootings in Texas, the atrocities at Bucha, the Bataclan atrocity in Paris, the mass shootings in Buffalo and the Pittsburgh and Texas synagogues (also the crimes of that present-day Northman, Anders Breivik)—just about anyone can be conditioned to believe they are under existential threat from a host of outside forces and come to style themselves an avenger, a lonely warrior on a predestined mission. This is not a matter of people believing what they want to believe, but about how ready we are to believe what we are told, provided the telling has sufficient force or algorithmic stickiness. What we want then changes on account of these beliefs we receive at a level beneath conscious thought. Technology can create this hypnotic state as much, if not more easily, than any shamanism. And they may even work together. ■

*This article was originally published on May 31, 2022.*

## THE REST

→ Jurors in Virginia have concluded that **Johnny Depp had been defamed by his ex-wife Amber Heard**, and have awarded the actor \$15 million in damages. The lawsuit began with Depp suing Heard for \$50 million after she called herself a “public figure representing domestic abuse” in a 2018 article for *The Washington Post*, which led Heard to countersue Depp for \$100 million. **The verdict was delivered Wednesday after a six-week trial** during which the former couple, who met while filming a movie, traded claims of physical and emotional abuse and fed the most private and scurrilous details of their marriage—Depp accused his ex-wife of both defecating in their bed as a form of revenge and cheating on him with billionaire Elon Musk, and Heard alleged Depp was an abusive drug addict—directly into the media machine.

→ **San Francisco will spend \$6.5 million to end trans homelessness in the next five years.** “Transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming San Franciscans are eighteen times more likely to experience homelessness compared to the general population, and we know that the rates are even higher for our minority trans communities,” said Mayor Breed in a statement. This program comes after intense scrutiny of another \$160 million San Francisco program previously mentioned in *The Scroll*, which subjected the 6,000 residents of the program’s single-room-occupancy housing to a “a pattern of chaos, crime, and death,” according to an investigation by the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

→ Gathering on Wednesday for its annual shareholder meeting, **Amazon’s investors approved a \$212 million compensation package for CEO Andy Jassy while voting against 15 proposals that would improve worker safety, worker pay, and worker rights to organize, as well as environmental and customer privacy policy.** Investors were unmoved by the four warehouse workers who attended the meeting and pitched some of these proposals directly, including one who suggested doing away with the warehouse quota system, which tracks workers’ productivity and activity rates—a practice the worker called “exploitative and dangerous” and that, according to Washington state regulators, is the direct cause of many injuries in the factories.

→ College enrollment dropped precipitously this past spring, with **662,000 fewer students enrolling in bachelor’s degree programs than in Spring 2021**—a 4.7% decline that suggests students are rethinking the benefits of getting a diploma. The numbers come from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center and suggest “it’s more than just the pandemic” and “more than just low-income communities that are primarily served by community colleges,” the center’s executive director, Doug Shapiro, told reporters.

→ Buried beneath the dense foliage of the **Amazon jungle are the ruins of vast and complex earthen cities constructed by the indigenous Casarabe people between 500 and 1,500 years ago.** These findings, made by helicopters equipped with lidar equipment that maps densely covered terrain using lasers, were published in *Nature* and indicate that, contrary to the narratives that frame Amazonia prior to Hispanic colonization as sparsely populated with simple settlements, **there were flourishing cities lined with sewage and irrigation systems that were linked to other such cities by an interurban highway.** Researchers discovered that these 11 settlements, some of which are almost a thousand acres in size, once bustled with almost 1 million inhabitants.

## FROM THE BACK PAGES

“The purpose of this is not to make money for Alibaba. It’s about how we can contribute to our commitments” to the environment, Evans assured the audience of fellow corporate humanitarians at Davos.

A campaign to turn the surveillance of a billion consumers into a commodity is about making money, no matter how much Evans might say otherwise. Indeed, the carbon tracking of consumers and vendors alike is an existential need for many companies, as the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission announced in March that it would begin requiring publicly traded corporations to disclose their greenhouse gas emissions and “carbon price” for doing business. For now, at least, the measurement of those emissions and environmental impacts is largely left up to the companies and to the popular firms who help them satisfy these vaguely defined requirements, providing giants like Alibaba a terrific opportunity for new lines of business, just as unstable supply chains and vulnerable trade alliances threaten their established revenue streams.

Indeed, carbon credits for vaguely defined “green products” are essentially unregulated—just like the many surveillance technologies baked into the platforms we now all use every day for daily tasks—and allow those who get into them first the chance to define the standards of engagement that are most favorable for their own monopoly position.

—Sean Cooper

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# The Founding Mother of Sapphic Hollywood

Crimea-born actress Alla Nazimova was once the highest-paid film actress in the world. After a series of scandals and box-office flops, her name is mostly lost to history.

BY SAMANTHA SHOKIN

**I**n the late 1910s, Crimea-born theater star Alla Nazimova became the highest-paid movie actress in the world, earning a staggering \$13,000 a week with Metro Pictures, the forerunner of today's MGM. Billed as "The World's Greatest Actress" and associated with some of the most noteworthy (and notorious) celebrities of her time, Alla was poised to go down in history among the most revered movie icons of the 20th century. And yet, despite her tantalizing life story, vampy looks, and unparalleled talent—and even despite achieving posthumous cult status as the "founding mother of Sapphic Hollywood," coining the phrase "sewing circles" to describe her secret society of lesbian and bisexual actresses—today she is all but forgotten.

How is it that a world-class actress who befriended the likes of Emma Goldman, studied under Stanislavski, cast a pre-famous Valentino in her movies, and built an estate that became home to Hollywood's nascent LGBTQ community is a mere historical footnote today?

According to her unpublished memoirs, painstakingly detailed in the definitive biography *Nazimova* by the Hollywood screenwriter Gavin Lambert, the early years of Alla's life were marked by extreme physical and sexual violence. Alla was born Adelaida Leventon to parents Yakov and Sonya in Yalta, Crimea, in 1879. Her father Yakov, a poor Jewish pharmacist from Ukraine, regularly subjected both her and her mother to

lashings and verbal abuse. After her parents divorced, Yakov forbade Alla from ever speaking about her beloved mother, traumatizing her for life.

In 1882, Yakov relocated his family to Switzerland, fearing pogroms that had been sweeping from Kyiv to Odesa. Because he never revealed to his children that they were Jewish, it would be years until Alla would understand the true impetus for this move. In 1888, at age 10, Alla rejoined her remarried father in Yalta. Newly well-to-do after earning the endorsement of the tsar, he enrolled Alla in violin lessons but forbade her from performing as Adelaida Leventon lest she disgrace the family name. Determined to perform, Alla assumed the stage name Nazimova, inspired by a heroine from a Russian novel. Her scheme worked and the name stuck.

Alla used performance as a means of escape and showed a natural talent for acting from an early age. At age 17, she moved to Moscow to study acting under director and dramaturg Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, who founded the Moscow Art Theatre with his colleague, the famed Konstantin Stanislavski, in 1898. As a student, Alla was introduced to Stanislavski's famous acting method when it was still in its early stages of development, and she would draw from it throughout her career.

Alla soon fell upon hard times and resorted to prostitution to make ends meet, becoming the mistress of a wealthy admirer whose generosity enabled her to focus on her acting. After leaving the Moscow Art Theatre in 1899, she began acting in the provinces and rushed

into a marriage with a penniless actor named Sergius de Golovin, only to begin an affair with Pavel Orlenev, a legendary theater actor and director, a year later. Alla steered Orlenev to great personal success by bringing the play *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen to his attention. To return the favor, Orlenev cast her in Evgeny Chirikov's *The Chosen People* (also translated as *The Jews*), a daring production that served as a counterattack to the government-backed, virulently antisemitic play *The Swindlers*, then in the second year of its Moscow run.

Though starring in Chirikov's play ultimately set Alla on a path toward stardom, by doing so she risked not only outing herself ethnically but also being accused of promoting "audacious conduct"—then a criminal offense for Jews. Just a few hours before opening night, Cossacks arrived at the theater with an order from the tsar forbidding the performance. After the incident, Orlenev took his friend Maxim Gorky's advice to stage only government-approved productions from then on, putting him in good enough standing to take the company on a European tour. This was a wise move: The tour's success eventually brought the company to New York, where Orlenev debuted *The Chosen People* with the newly self-proclaimed "Madame Nazimova" as his leading lady.

With thousands of immigrants arriving in New York, Broadway was fertile ground for ethnic theater, and *The Chosen People* became a hit with multinational Jewish audiences—among them, the radical anarchist Emma Goldman. Goldman was so taken by Orlenev that she became the troupe's PR manager and fundraiser. Meanwhile, Alla returned to Russia, ostensibly to recruit more actors, though she soon dashed off to Paris to begin another affair, this time with artist Maurice Stern. Still technically married and knowing accusations of infidelity could ruin her career, Alla returned to the United States with her marital status tightly under wraps.

After returning from Europe, an impatient Orlenev pushed Alla to her limits sewing costumes, translating, and stage managing on top of acting. Hollywood historian Jon Ponder writes that

## The Jacob's Ladder

Denise Levertov, 1961

The stairway is not  
a thing of gleaming strands  
a radiant evanescence  
for angels' feet that only glance  
in their tread, and  
need not touch the stone.

It is of stone.  
A rosy stone that takes  
a glowing tone of softness  
only because behind it the sky  
is a doubtful,  
a doubting night gray.

A stairway of sharp  
angles, solidly built.  
One sees that the angels  
must spring  
down from one step to  
the next, giving a little  
lift of the wings:

and a man climbing  
must scrape his knees, and bring  
the grip of his hands into play.

The cut stone  
consoles his groping feet.

Wings brush past him.  
The poem ascends.

*Read Jake Marmer's commentary  
on this poem in his new poetry  
column in Tablet.*

by that point, Alla's relationship with Orlenev was strained and that he was a "serial philanderer," "alcoholic binger," and possibly bipolar. His newly founded theater company Lyceum was on the brink of bankruptcy but opened with enough critical praise to convince his backers to organize a relief fund that enabled the company to go on tour. But just as Alla was gaining critical acclaim, Orlenev was arrested for grand larceny, charged with diverting relief funds to his own pocket. Released on bail and publicly humiliated, he returned with his company to Russia without Alla, marking a major turning point in her career.

On May 14, 1906, just days after

Orlenev sailed back to Russia, Alla signed a five-year acting contract with the Shubert family, founders of the Broadway district, ensuring her financial security and a promising career. Staking her future on her English-language debut, she began intensive language lessons and demanded to play the title role in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, about a woman trapped in a loveless marriage. Despite Lee Shubert's protests that "Ibsen is not a money-maker," Alla had the final say and even convinced him to allow her to direct her own debut—unheard of for an actress at the time.

Again, Alla's intuition was spot-on. Critics hailed her startlingly imaginative performance. An 18-year-old Eugene O'Neill saw the production 10 times, recalling later how the experience opened "an entire new world of drama for me ... of a modern theater where truth may live." Two months later Alla debuted in *A Doll's House* and, in 1907, *The Master Builder*, both by Henrik Ibsen, whose work was becoming popular in the States, thanks to her. By 1910 Alla's name was officially appended to the Thirty-Ninth Street Theater.

Audiences were obsessed with the dangerous, seductive siren image that Alla's producers had cultivated—but according to theater scholar Robert A. Schanke, the image was merely a front intended to dispel rumors of Alla's bisexuality. Tired of the Shuberts' patronizing, Alla turned down their offer to renew her contract and signed on instead with star-maker Charles Frohman. From there, she went on tour as the exotic vixen in *Bella Donna*. Writes Schanke in *Passing Performances*, "Though her reputation had soared, her fame had turned to infamy ... She wanted to be considered a great classic actress, but instead had become ... a novelty who had lost the respect of the critics."

Frustrated with the direction of her career and left with no other options, Alla broke the Frohman contract and decided to break out on her own, taking to the vaudeville circuit with Marion Craig Wentworth's bold pacifist drama *War Brides*. The play was a smash success and won Alla her first movie deal in its silent

film adaptation, which paid \$30,000 for a month of work, plus another thousand for every day the production went over schedule. The film raked in more than \$300,000 in profits, cementing Alla's place as a screen starlet.

After *War Brides*, Alla entered a relationship with her co-star Charles Bryant, an English actor who served as her partner and business manager for the next 10 years. Though still legally wed to her former classmate Golovin in Russia, Alla fabricated her marriage to Bryant, intending once again to conceal her private life from her adoring public. It is often suggested that they had a 'lavender marriage'—whether Bryant was gay or bisexual remains unclear. Despite Alla's professed love for Bryant, Lambert asserts that by the zenith of her career, Bryant remained useful to her merely as a "convenient but expensive beard."

After two years with Bryant, Alla met writer Mercedes de Acosta and, according to Lambert, had her first known lesbian affair—"which is not to say that it was her first." De Acosta was known for her romances with celebrated stage and screen personalities, counting Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo among her most famous reputed lovers. Unabashedly uncloseted, De Acosta famously walked the streets of New York in trousers, cape, and a tricorne hat, once boasting that she "can get any woman from a man." After De Acosta, Alla became predominantly interested in women.

Alla's commercial success afforded her a lavish new lifestyle that also nourished her burgeoning community of queer Hollywood actors. In 1918, she purchased a 3.5-acre estate on Sunset Boulevard that she jokingly called "The Garden of Alla"—a reference to her own name and the best-selling 1905 novel *The Garden Of Allah* by Robert S. Hichens. After spending today's equivalent of half a million dollars on renovations, including on a swimming pool allegedly constructed in the shape of the Black Sea, the estate became a gathering spot for Hollywood elites—or, as one reporter put it, "the best dressed and best undressed in the land."

In 1921, shortly before *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* catapulted Rudolph Valentino to stardom, Alla cast

the then-obscure Italian actor in her production of *Camille*, an avant-garde adaptation of the novel by Alexandre Dumas. She soon became embroiled in a high-profile scandal involving Valentino, her protégé Jean Acker, and production designer Natasha Rambova (Rambova, who had her own Hollywood-worthy biography, had narrowly escaped death by shotgun from her ex, a Russian ballet dancer). Valentino had been previously married to Acker and became involved with Rambova on the set of *Camille*. After the couple married in Mexico, Valentino was arrested on bigamy charges in California, where Alla had attempted to skip town. Instead of flying under the radar as intended, she was slapped with a subpoena and forced to testify at his trial.

On top of that, *Camille* was a financial failure and resulted in Metro Pictures terminating its contract with Alla. Shortly before the break, Alla and Rambova had planned to collaborate on two more projects: a film adaptation of *A Doll's House* and a wildly experimental art deco film titled *Salomé*, based on the Oscar Wilde play of the same name. Unable to secure financial backing for either, Alla decided to fund both films out of pocket.

Of the 18 silent films that Alla made throughout her career, *Salomé* is one of three to have survived—despite bombing at the box office and being labeled “vulgar” and “sacrilegious” by critics, all but destroying Alla’s reputation. The plot loosely follows the story of King Herod and his execution of John the Baptist at the request of Herod’s 14-year-old stepdaughter Salomé (played by Alla, who was then 42). *Salomé* is often referred to as one of the first American art films, and its elaborate set and costume design (again by Rambova), allegedly all-gay cast, and Alla’s famous “dance of seven veils” have cemented the film as a cult favorite and legend of LGBTQ cinema. When asked about her motivation behind the making of *Salomé* and *Camille*—two very expensive flops—Alla coyly remarked, “I made them to please myself.”

Meanwhile, Alla’s relationship with Bryant was in shambles. In 1923 she

“But the real waste was not that Nazimova made movies. She made the wrong movies, ruling out ... exceptional directors of the time with whom she might have worked.”

filed for divorce from Golovin, who was still in Russia, in order to legally marry and subsequently divorce Bryant. But before she could go through with her unorthodox plan, Bryant ensured that in the event of an IRS audit, Alla would be forced to pay penalties for their 12 years of false joint returns. Possessing information that could lead to her deportation if leaked, Bryant had the upper hand, leaving Alla no choice but to give in to his demands. After their much-publicized split, Bryant settled for Alla’s New York apartment and half of her remaining cash. She applied for American citizenship shortly thereafter.

Her funds depleted, Alla returned to the vaudeville circuit and in 1926 signed an agreement giving power of attorney over her Sunset Boulevard estate to her manager, Jean Adams, who—after repeatedly begging Alla for cash—converted the property into a hotel called The Garden of Allah, complete with two-dozen newly built villas. Ultimately, Adams and her husband made off with the hotel’s proceeds, bankrupting Alla and forcing her to sell the property to a real estate developer. Shortly thereafter, The Garden of Allah became famous, attracting the likes of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and many others—including, eventually, Alla herself.

In a period that Lambert refers to as the third act of Alla’s life, she enjoyed a number of screen credits and renewed success on Broadway. In 1928 she opened in a critically acclaimed production of *The Cherry Orchard* for the Civic Repertory Theatre in Greenwich Village, co-starring with its founding director Eva Le Gallienne, with whom she’d had an affair 10 years prior. Le Gallienne’s commitment to low ticket prices laid the groundwork for off-Broadway theater and saved Alla’s career. At the Rep, Alla met a 19-year-old Nazimova superfan named Glesca Marshall who became her most enduring lover and close companion for life.

Alla was now in her fifties, and though her career was making a comeback, her health was on the decline. In 1936, less than a year after taking 31 curtain calls for *Hedda Gabler* on Broadway, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a life-saving mastectomy. Three years later, she moved with Glesca into a bungalow (“Villa 24”) at The Garden of Allah, where she counted Frank Sinatra, Orson Welles, and Sergei Rachmaninov among her more famous neighbors and where she was also paid a visit by her goddaughter, the future Nancy Reagan. Nancy, herself the daughter of a Broadway actress, would later recall her impressions of the visit: “It was so small, nicely furnished but ... how terrible it must [have been for Alla] after all that fame and glamour.”

By now, perhaps sensing the sunset on her life, Alla had finished writing her autobiography and was quietly reflecting on her fall from grace. Just a few months before her death, she told an interviewer, “I’ve reached the heights, but it’s a puny success. I could have done so much more.” Lambert writes:

“Above all she deplored wasting seven years of her life as a silent-movie star, the period she looked back on as ‘unbelievably horrible’ ... But the real waste was not that Nazimova made movies. She made the wrong movies, ruling out ... exceptional directors of the time with whom she might have worked.”

On her 66th birthday, Alla drove with

Glesca to actor Franklin Pangborn's house in the Valley. By now, Glesca was involved with another woman, but she and Alla were still extremely close. A few weeks later, Alla suffered from a series of heart attacks, and Glesca was by her bedside when she was pronounced dead on July 13, 1945.

Though far from being a household name today, Alla left a legacy that lives on among devoted fans like Martin Turnbull, a novelist and Hollywood historian who founded the Alla Nazimova Society with Jon Ponder. The society is devoted to the promotion and

preservation of the memory of Alla, whose estate also inspired Turnbull's *Garden of Allah* book series. (The hotel was eventually leveled and turned into a parking lot.)

Turnbull has his own ideas about why Alla, whom he endearingly calls "Nazyzy," faded into obscurity. "I think it's a case of 'you're only as good as your last movie,'" he writes. "Her last handful of movies were notorious flops, so she retreated to the theater, where fame is far more fleeting ... Plus, her openly fluid sexuality made her a controversial and rather scandalous figure at the time."

With such a captivating life story, it's

hard to believe that Hollywood has yet to honor Alla with a biopic. For actress Romy Nordlinger, who wrote and stars in the one-woman show *Garden of Alla*, playing at New York's Theaterlab from June 17 to 26 this year, setting the record straight about Alla has become a calling: "We are all the stories we tell, and as Nazimova said, 'An artist is only dead when the last person to remember them dies.'"

In that case, long live Alla Nazimova. ■

*This article was originally published on June 1, 2022.*

## HOLIDAYS

# The Modesty of Ruth

There is a right time, and a wrong time, for naked legs

BY SHIRA TELUSHKIN

I think about Ruth every time I drop a notebook. The protagonist of her own biblical book, this woman knew how to retrieve things from the floor. It's one of the first things I learned about her, as a third grader in an Orthodox Jewish day school: The other women in ancient Israel, the midrash tells us, would bend over at the waist when gathering in the fields to harvest the remnant grain, their dresses indecently riding up their legs. But Ruth would kneel at the knee. (She also let everyone else have their fill before collecting what she needed, and she didn't laugh with the male farmhands as the other women did.) In crouching down this way, she preserved her modesty. This, we were told, is how a true daughter of Israel picks things up off the floor. This, we were told, is why Ruth was noticed by Boaz, the eligible bachelor and wealthy owner of the field who was also her distant relative and would go on to marry her.

The teaching has its sources: In Ruth 2:5, Boaz asks the head of his workers about the new woman, and he is told that she is a Moabite named Ruth who has come back to Israel fleeing famine, with her mother-in-law, Naomi. There is already the hint of interest in Boaz's question, just three Hebrew words: *L'mi ha'naarah hazeh?* To whom does this woman belong? As it turns out, she belongs to only Naomi. Her husband is dead. But Boaz and his question mildly scandalized later Jewish commentators. Rashi, writing in the 11th century, comments, "And was it the way of Boaz to ask about women?" (Subtext: Surely not! What kind of a man asks about women?!) Rather, Rashi quickly explains, Boaz asked only because he noticed her modest habits, the way she kept her skirt lowered while the other women hiked theirs up, that she would only take two sheaves of grain when three were available, that she would pick the fallen sheaves from a sitting position instead of a standing position so "as to not bend

over." Subtext: The modest woman does not take too much, she bears the discomfort of a clinging skirt, she is mindful, always, of who is watching. There is a right way and a wrong way to gather a notebook from the floor.

There are many reasons we read the story of Ruth on Shavuot. The most obvious is that Ruth is the hero of the harvest story, and Shavuot the holiday of the harvest. But the personality of Ruth, the gentle passive femininity of her doe-eyed modesty that's passed down through the telling of the story, always felt antithetical to me, to the story of Mount Sinai. Shavuot is not just the harvest holiday, but the celebration of the mysterious, momentous moment that happens at Mount Sinai: the moment God takes Israel as a bride, offering the Torah as a betrothal ring, the mountain held over our heads like a chuppah, or maybe like a threat. A moment of such stillness, not even a bird flapped its wings. And then we accept, and the slaves of Egypt become the Jewish people. We celebrate. We stay up all night, because what bride is expected to sleep the night of her wedding?

How unlike Ruth, the whole thing. The people of Israel are no quiet lover, hopeful in the field. They are brash, angry, full of demands and wants. They are not grateful for their gifts of parched grain. They are stiff-necked, complaining, loud. They are scornful of God on

almost every page. The union, in some accounts, was practically forced.

What of them and Ruth, this woman scrubbed of needs? This woman, poor and hungry in a strange land who demurely declines her full measure of grain. The Ruth I was given has no complaints. She is modest. This modesty frees her from the suspicion of want that her circumstances suggest. The other women, we are told, take as much as they can as quickly as they can. The desperation of the other women is sad. Ruth is not sad. She is modest. Subtext: There is something immodest about a desperate woman. Dangerous.

Only later did I question the modesty of Ruth, the woman I think of whenever I drop something I need. This is a woman who, after all, in just a few verses will go down to the threshing floor at night in her finest clothes and slip into the bed of Boaz while he sleeps. She will “uncover his feet and lay down” just as her mother-in-law instructs her. In the Bible, Boaz will awake in the middle of the night, startled to find a woman at his feet. He says, very simply, into the night: *Mi at?* Who are you? Ruth gives him her name before asking directly, “Spread your robe over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” Boaz, the distant relative of her now-dead husband, is the man to whom the responsibility of marriage has fallen. He is a *go’el*, a redeemer, of Ruth. The law is clear. *To whom does this woman belong?* As it turns out, she belongs to him.

Boaz is full of happiness at her request. Ruth has not gone after some younger man, but after him, and he calls this a great kindness. His delight, in this moment, has always surprised me. She is a Moabite stranger, late arriving to a new place, in acute need of a husband to ensure her ability to eat, and he is a wealthy man who owns many fields and has shown her kindness. Of course she chose him. There are no other men at her door, that we know of. But I like how his happiness balances the score, a little, between them. Suggests the possibility of choice. She is not desperate. She is choosing Boaz, and he is delighted. Some complications ensue. There is another redeemer who must

be dealt with, there is the matter of the field, there is the matter of getting Ruth home safely in the morning before anybody realizes that a woman has been on the threshing floor. But in the end, Ruth and Boaz end up together and have a child, and through that child the Messiah will one day come, and until then, the daughters of Israel will bend at the knees and not the waist, and men will come to marry them.

But that is not the only story. The modest Ruth attracts the eye of Boaz, but it is the brazen Ruth who prompts the marriage. I had never noticed that. The contrast between her covered legs in the field and his uncovered feet at night. The way the brashness is rewarded. Here is Ruth, modest, beautiful Ruth, lying at the feet of Boaz, asking him to redeem her. Here is Boaz, full of joy. And here is the Israeli people, asking for more water, cursing the God that redeemed them from Egypt, from gleaning in someone else’s field. A triangle of ancestors. What do we make of this trio, the night before Shavuot? Is it better to grab everything one can carry from the field or to live by the restraint of the marriage bed? The people of Israel seem unsure. The mountain is held over our heads. For a still, silent moment, we look at the list of modesty norms presented to us, alongside the promise of protection. And then the people of Israel, full of doubt, agree. A flash of joy. A union. A fate set in motion, as evolving as the seed destined for bread, destined for redemption. There is a right time, and a wrong time, for naked legs. A modest woman knows the difference. A modest woman knows how to retrieve what she wants from the threshing floor. The Ruth I remember when I bend down at the knee is also the Ruth who uncovers the legs of Boaz, a woman unworthy of being forgotten. A people worthy of God’s love. A love story either way. We remember the value of being demure and discreet, and we remember all that is possible when we are immodest about what we want, about our love. To whom does this people belong? To a God delighted. ■

*This article was originally published on June 2, 2022.*



## Album of the Week

### Nilüfer Yanya, *Painless*

For every overnight social media celebrity, there are many more people struggling in the shadows and working under systems that aren’t designed for them to win. For Nilüfer Yanya, the British singer whose sophomore album *Painless* is one of the year’s strongest rock records, it took the shape of former One Direction member Louis Tomlinson.

In 2014, Tomlinson was involved in an effort to get the talented Yanya in a “manufactured girl band.” To hear Yanya tell it, the plan was, “let’s go and pinch some young people, tell them we’re going to make a really successful group but we’re obviously going to make a lot more money than them.” It was a “very selfish thing to do,” she says.

Luckily, Yanya avoided the trap. Her 2019 debut *Miss Universe* skewered wellness culture with a ’90s scuzzy alt-rock sound. Her latest, *Painless*, continues this sonic exploration, with a jazzy and melodic post-punk sound that feels removed and passionate at the same time. It’s a personal sound, like someone trying to approach their life objectively in a diary. And *Painless* is an album that draws from the ever-experimenting PJ Harvey and the clever vulnerability of Liz Phair. Fascinating.

—David Meir Grossman

# Ultimate Blintzes

BY JOAN NATHAN

## INGREDIENTS

### FOR THE FILLING

- 1 pound (2 cups) farmer cheese**
- 2 ounces (1/4 cup) cream cheese**
- 1 large egg**
- 1/4 cup sugar**
- Dash salt**

### FOR THE BATTER

- 1 cup milk**
- 1 1/2 cups water**
- 5 large eggs**
- 2 cups all-purpose unbleached flour**
- Dash salt**
- 6 tablespoons (about) salted butter or coconut oil for frying**
- Sour cream for garnish**
- Blueberries, raspberries or strawberries for garnish**

## PREPARATION

### TO MAKE THE FILLING

#### Step 1

In a medium bowl, mix together thoroughly the ingredients for the filling: farmer cheese, cream cheese, egg, sugar, and salt. Set aside in the refrigerator at least half an hour.

### TO MAKE THE BATTER

#### Step 1

Now make the batter: Put 1 1/2 cups of water, 1 cup of milk, and eggs in a blender, and pulse until well mixed. Next, add the flour and salt and mix until all lumps are dissolved. Let the batter rest for half an hour. It does not have to be refrigerated.

#### Step 2

Heat a non-stick 8-inch skillet or omelet pan over a medium-low heat. When the pan is hot, add about a scant teaspoon of butter or coconut oil to melt. Lift the pan off the heat, and pour about 1/4 of a cup of batter onto the frying pan. Tilt the pan so the batter just covers the bottom. Return the pan to the heat and cook until the crepe blisters, about 1 to 2 minutes. Do not flip. Turn the crepe gently onto waxed or parchment paper, cooked side up. You might need a spatula to help you. Continue cooking the crepes, adding more butter or coconut oil between every 2 to 3 times. Stack the finished blintzes on top of each other.

#### Step 3

Take one crepe and spread 2 tablespoons of cheese filling along the end closest to you, leaving an inch of space. Fold that inch over the filling, then turn the sides over so they meet in the middle. Roll up the filled end away from you until the blintz is completely closed. Repeat with the remaining filling and crepes.

#### Step 4

In a large frying pan, melt about a tablespoon of butter or coconut oil a medium heat. Place the filled blintzes in the pan, leaving about an inch of space between them. Fry until golden brown, then flip and repeat. Remove to a paper towel-lined cookie sheet. You will have to do this in batches. Serve immediately with sour cream and fresh berries.

Blintzes can also be frozen and reheated in a 425-degree oven for about 30 minutes.

**Yield:** About 30 blintzes

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