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SCIENCE

The Cult of Masked Schoolchildren

History will not look kindly on our evidence-free decision to make kids suffer most

BY VINAY PRASAD

As we enter the third year of the pandemic, every child age 5 and up is eligible to receive a COVID vaccine in the United States. Oddly, this development has been accompanied by *increased* pressure on kids to wear masks in school. Some private schools have gone beyond cloth-masking and N95 (or equivalent) masks for children as young as 4. The Berkeley Unified School District in California recently began students to N95-level masking. This isn't a matter of protecting children, their teachers, or their grandparents; it's delusional and dangerous cultlike behavior.

The way to reduce scientific uncertainty when it comes to practices like masking young children is to conduct randomized studies. When it comes to masking kids in schools, the global scientific community has launched no such studies during the pandemic. The U.K. government recently commissioned a report on the efficacy of masks in school settings, which any clear evidence in favor of this practice. Moreover, the authors write:

Wearing face coverings may have physical side effects and impair face

identification, verbal and non-verbal communication between teacher and learner. This means there are downsides to face coverings for pupils and students, including detrimental impacts on communication in the classroom.

Let's start with cloth masks, which have been the most common type of facial covering used to cover kids' faces in school. In the only cluster randomized trial conducted during the pandemic among adults, cloth-masking to improve the primary outcome of COVID cases that were confirmed with a blood test. In an I conducted with Jonathan Darrow of Harvard and Ian Liu of the University of Colorado, we concluded that cloth-masking simply doesn't work. A month later, the former health commissioner of Baltimore told CNN the same.

The United States is uniquely aggressive in masking young kids. Contrary to scientific evidence, the Centers for Disease Control and the American Academy of Pediatrics advise that children as young as 2 should wear masks. Europe has always been more relaxed on this issue, and the World Health Organization advises against masks for

kids under 6 and only selectively for kids under 11.

Data from Spain on masking kids is . The figure below shows the R value—a measure of how fast the virus spreads—by age. Spain mandated masks at a specific age cutoff. If masks have a visible effect, we should see a step down in the graph at the age kids start to wear them (i.e., the spread should drop at the age masking begins). But as you can see, there is only a slow, deliberate, upward trend with no steps down. Based on the evidence only, it would be impossible to guess which age groups are wearing masks and which are not.

This simply means that masking was not associated with a large effect in slowing spread. (If you're curious, kids started to wear masks in this study at age 6.)

Now let's consider N95 or equivalent masks that are designed to filter a high percentage of particles. To achieve this goal, N95 masks require a snug fit and validation. Notably, there are no approved N95s for kids these masks have not been subject to validation for young people. All masks sold with this moniker are merely "N95-style" masks thought to be equivalent, possibly. Berkeley and other school districts have mandated them anyway, even though no study suggests the policy can slow the spread of COVID.

What is the goal of masking policy? Does it at least help to "slow" the spread? Pre-vaccine, it made sense to try to delay infection until all those who wished could be vaccinated, the latter being an intervention that does have a demonstrable effect on rates of serious disease and death. While cloth-masking does little if anything to delay infection, universal N95-masking might have indeed been helpful. But does this goal still make sense after vaccines and omicron?

Omicron has shown it is able to infect even vaccinated people relatively easily (even though, yes, vaccines do still appear to protect from severe disease). The fact that omicron is widely spread by vaccinated people, coupled with its rapid rate of spread, means that sooner rather than later we will all be infected—a conclusion earlier this month by Anthony Fauci. But if infection is

"In all of human history we have never masked so many children for so many hours a day for so many years."

inevitable for everyone, then it no longer makes sense to wear a mask. Even the most effective mask can't avert infection; it can only delay it while causing inconvenience, discomfort, and difficulty speaking, all of which are detrimental to the educational and emotional well-being of schoolchildren.

Put another way, while we don't know whether Berkeley's school masking policy will in fact slow the spread, we do know it's a bad policy regardless: If it works, it merely delays an inevitable brush with COVID, and is therefore unnecessary; if it doesn't work (and the impossibility of children maintaining a proper fit and seal for hours on end suggests it can't), it is simply a piece of public health theater whose side-effects are likely to be severe, and is therefore unnecessary.

Should kids and parents be afraid of COVID? Parents of kids with immunosuppression and other severe medical problems should seek the guidance and advice of their pediatrician in order to decide what is best for their child. But the majority of parents of healthy kids should put their fears of COVID into perspective. A (pre-vaccine!) from Germany shows that if a child is infected with COVID—with or without preexisting conditions—there

is an 8 in 100,000 chance of going to the intensive care unit. According to the same study, the risk of death is 3 in 1 million, with no deaths reported in the over-5 age group. These risks are astonishingly low.

What about the effects of long COVID? The we have suggests that between 0% and 2% of kids who are infected will experience symptoms beyond any control measures. But the larger point is that if infection is inevitable—if it is just a matter of time—then considerations of long COVID are moot. No matter how we reach the destination, we will have to help children who develop long COVID. This is true whether we make them wear masks or face shields, or hold their breath every time they go indoors.

When it comes to the downsides of masking kids, I want to be clear that no prior study truly informs the moment: In all of human history we have never masked so many children for so many hours a day for so many years. As such, we have very little data from which to draw lessons. We simply do not know the long-term impacts of this evidence-free intervention.

Yet the preliminary evidence that we do have is illuminating. Fifty-nine percent of U.K. teachers in April 2021 that asking pupils to wear masks made understanding them a "lot more difficult." We that when someone conceals their lips it's harder to comprehend what they're saying. This effect is of course among children with hearing and learning disabilities. For this reason, a recent "evidence summary" from the U.K. Department of Education concluded, "Government guidance continues to be that children aged under 11 years old should be exempt from requirements to wear face coverings in all settings including education."

One justification I often hear for masking kids is some variation of, "My kids are masked and they're doing just fine." I hear and see this frequently from professional colleagues—people with doctorate-level training and considerable financial resources to help support the children in question. But is the same true for a child whose mother works long hours and spends prolonged time

in day care? Do all kids get the same stimulation outside of school to compensate for the pandemic-era deprivations we subject them to? The answer to these questions is likely no. While the assertion is often made that masking kids is a form of *unselfish* behavior—and that those who oppose it are the real selfish ones because they put others at risk—the data appears to support the opposite conclusion.

Because U.S. masking policies are largely forms of virtue-signaling and public health performance, it's not surprising that they are often blatantly self-contradictory and absurd. Recall that the CDC and AAP have both advised masks for kids ages 2 to 5, in contrast to WHO guidelines. To get a sense of this policy in practice, think of the day care centers that made toddlers wear cloth masks except during nap time, when they sleep side-by-side with their peers in the same room. Similarly, schools that mandate masks have little choice but to lift those requirements at lunchtime.

Due to the failures and absurdities of these measures, some doctors, educators, and public health authorities have been working on coming up with

offramps to school masking policies. But the difficulty of doing so is a direct byproduct of the lack of evidence to support masking kids in the first place. If you don't understand the circumstances in which masks actually help or don't help, it's hard to know when to stop. The logical moment for a masking reset was the widespread availability of vaccination for kids ages 5 to 11, but that opportunity came and went at the end of last year.

Masking is now little more than an appealing delusion. It arms us with a visible symbol that communicates our commitment to minimizing the pandemic's damage. It makes some of us feel empowered by giving us something "we can do" in the face of a largely invisible threat. To a certain extent, this is understandable. But most of the masks worn by most kids for most of the pandemic have likely done nothing to change the velocity or trajectory of the virus. The loss to children remains difficult to capture in hard data, but will likely become clear in the years to come.

Less forgivable is the decision we've made as a society to shift the anxieties of adults onto the youngest members of society, who count on us to defend their

interests before our own. It is thanks to the nature of this particular virus, rather than the foresight of American institutions or adults, that COVID has been relatively impotent against children. The majority of kids who have been infected have recovered without sequelae. And yet we continue to impose the most harmful and onerous restrictions on the youngest among us. While we purportedly do it to protect other age groups, empirical analysis suggests, for instance, that school closures in a given community have done nothing to slow the spread among the elderly in the same community.

When the history books are written, we will not look wise or kind for insisting that kids and toddlers wear masks for hours on end, year after year, without ever testing this policy with controlled trials. We will look ignorant, cruel, fearful, and cowardly. We might even look worse than our primitive ancestors who, when faced with great plagues, engaged in all sorts of bizarre, superstitious behavior—but which rarely included making kids suffer most. ■

This article was originally published on January 19, 2022.

ARTS & LETTERS

Why Jews Are Annoying

Part of a longer conversation with Bernard-Henri Lévy

BY DAVID SAMUELS

David Samuels: There's a question that sometimes people ask me, and I feel 98% positive I know your answer to it, but I will ask it anyway. Why is your attachment to Judaism not simply a form of the identity politics you claim to deplore?

Bernard-Henri Lévy: Because what the Torah says, and what the Talmud confirms and repeats over and over, is that every letter of the Torah, every character,

has to be read as if it had 70 faces. Very simple. This is one of the things you find over and over in the Talmudic commentary. Being a Jew means reading the Torah as if each verse, each word, each letter, had 70 faces. Which means that being a Jew means to believe in a text in which the 70 faces—the whole of humanity, the number of the nations—can recognize themselves.

When you believe in a text which is

built, constructed, in order to allow anyone to recognize part of himself, to subjectivize himself, to start the adventure of becoming a subject through the mirror of this text ... when you believe in that, you are fully vaccinated against identity politics.

DS: Jewish particularism also contains the world's most powerful form of universalism.

BHL: The idea of election, of a chosen people, what does it mean? The word employed in Hebrew is *segula*, which is treasure. It means that the Jew is a treasure, a treasury, not for himself but for others. The meaning of being chosen is that the Jew is a treasure for the sons of Noah. And a treasure, what does it mean? It means someone who silently, in secret, like the treasures of the

Jewish kings, which are kept secretly, without anyone being aware of it, escorts the others on the path of their redemption. Any way you take the Jewish thought, it supposes, it implies, a hypothesis about the destiny of humanity.

DS: I have a friend who said something to me once about the resentment that's inherent in Christianity toward Jews. The friend is Christian. He said something very smart. He said, both Jews and Christians are God's chosen people, but the way that they become chosen is fundamentally different. The Jew was chosen as a Jew. The Christian is called out from among the nations to be chosen. The Christian must break his tie with his tribe, and lose the tribal person's idea of eternal life, and instead look to heaven, to the afterlife. Whereas for the Jew, their chosenness is inherent in the tribe; they do not have to break with the tribe. So when Christians see the Jew able to have heaven on earth, to enjoy chosenness without having to forgo the tribal tie, this touches a sensitive nerve. It's an interesting explanation. What do you think of it?

BHL: First of all, yes, it's interesting, but my feeling is that the resentment of the Christians, when it existed strongly and still exists today, because it's not completely finished, of course, comes from the fact that they owe too much to the Jews—the sense of debt sometimes is unbearable, too heavy. It's not easy to owe so much, even in private life.

The other cause of resentment is the

“I think a human being is a secret. A man without secrets is no longer a human.”

stubbornness of the Jews. If you take seriously the thought of Judaism, there is no problem that Christians exist. If you take Christianity seriously, it is a real problem that Jews continue to exist. The fact that this little people continues to assert its message, persists in waiting for the Messiah among the beggars at Rome's gate—for some Christians it is absurd, scandalous, and can only feed resentment.

DS: Is digital technology a threat to the idea of the human, or is it becoming our new image of God? Is it good or bad?

BHL: In the dictatorships, strangely enough, I believe, from experience, that the new technologies are more helpful than damaging. Dissidents often being more articulate than tyrants, they make better use of technology. I saw this in Iraq and in Ukraine. In the West, the effect of new technology is a disaster. And a disaster not only because of control, because you have big companies that have all data which can fall into anyone's hands, we know that. But it's a disaster for two other reasons, which are less often underlined. The first is that everyone watches everyone. I really believe that the freedom of human beings is absolutely

dependent on the secret part that everyone keeps alive in themselves; this intrusion of the technology in my life, the possibility for so many people to know so many things about me, is absolutely the real threat.

DS: Describe how this obliteration of the idea of privacy is destructive to the idea of the human.

BHL: I think a human being is a secret. You can judge the quantity of humanity you have by the depth and amount of secrecy which you shelter. A man without secrets is no longer a human.

This is the part of us that just makes us different from the others. This part of privacy. This part of darkness.

And there is a second reason why the new technologies threaten our humanity. It is because of memory. Humanity is secrecy, OK? But it is also memory; this is what make us human. The new technologies and the internet and so on have generated an exfiltration of our memory into our devices, into our telephone, an exfiltration, a derivation, and *une vidange, vidange* means to make something empty.

DS: And once your memory has been exfiltrated into the machine, it becomes communal property and is then daily rewritten according to the needs of the moment, so that you are always as an individual being confronted by a collective memory that says you are a liar. Which to me is one of the creepiest things about these machines. “Actually, what happened to you was the opposite of what you saw with your lying eyes. Let us re-describe your reality for you so that you can remember it better.” There's something shameless about it. There's something absolutely disrespectful about it. There's something mutilating about it.

BHL: One of the reasons I stay as far away as I can from these machines is the sneering voice which now dominates all the platforms—a voice that reflects the fact of control and the knowledge that you are reliant on the machine, so what are you going to do about it, asshole?

There is in the history of France a very famous figure of French Christianity, a

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saint, called St. Denis. He's famous because he was decapitated by Romans or whatever, but when his head fell on the ground, he retained the strength to pick up his own head, to put it under his elbow, and to climb the hill which is called now the *colline de St. Denis*. What I'm saying is that we are now all like St. Denis, with our head not exactly under our elbow, but in our pocket; it is not exactly our head; it is our memory. So we are in this nightmarish situation, which was previewed by probably the most lucid of the Christians 17 centuries ago.

And second, what you say, what I did not think of, but you are right: It is the dream of Stalin. The collectivization of memory and rewriting; collectivization plus collective rewriting. And for me Wikipedia is the embodiment of this modern horror—Wikipedia.

Who among your readers can say that when he has to check a piece of information he doesn't go on Wikipedia; but Wikipedia is what you say, unsigned, a collective memorialization of humanity, ever-changing, authored by no one. Ever-changing, which creates madness. By no one, which is a nightmare scenario, like ghosts.

I remember the story of Philip Roth, when he said, I'm sorry, but this information regarding my life is not exactly accurate. Wikipedia told him, "Who are you? You are not a reliable source." The reliable source about Philip Roth was no longer Philip Roth; it was the collective wisdom, based on changing information, about Philip Roth.

DS: In the end, anyone who's been trained as a philosopher imagines, in their heart, that it is possible to create a small group of people, a cohort, well-trained, morally and ethically disciplined, and that in one way or another those people can be given power within institutions and networks, and they can be the ones who will decide, and who will instruct. This is a belief that's been inherent in the practice of philosophy, statecraft, whatever, at least since Plato. Lately what you see now is this dream of ending this idea of elites, because it makes people feel guilty, because they've lost the confidence in the ability to choose, and because we have all

"The greatest scientific inventions don't come from a mega-calculation of the spirit; they come from, from a dreamy way of thinking, a floating attention."

committed so many crimes. Instead, we will turn it over to a machine; we will build God out of AI; and the machines will take away this burden of having to decide our own fate. And this God that we build will be infinitely more intelligent than we are, with infinitely more processing power and capacity. It will never feel tired or bored [laughs].

BHL: The only problem is that sometimes the most original thought comes from tiredness. Sometimes it comes from boredom.

DS: Often!

BHL: The tireless machine, the machine that will not know boredom, maybe will not be able to invent anything, number q. Invention is truly dependent on boredom and dreams. When you read the epistemologists—if you read Bachelard, Canguilhem—the greatest scientific inventions don't come from a mega-calculation of the spirit; they come from, from a dreamy way of thinking, a floating attention. The machine does exactly the contrary. The theory of the reflex, cell theory, relativity theory, would never be invented by a machine.

I believe that the best work of humanity has been made by communities

of friends. I really believe that. Friends. Communities of people who were not due to be together and who nevertheless, because of chance, because of circumstance, because of common creed, because of common goals, because of whatever, got together, communicated together, exchanged ideas, dreams, and so on. All the important events in the history of humanity happened this way.

The apostles, they were a community of friends, right? Researchers in a lab, that's a community of friends; the great literary movements, communities of friends, yours and mine, all communities—that's how humanity works. And maybe, one of the last disgraces of the new technologies will be to extinguish, to throw back into the past, to make un-useful this idea of community.

You are not on Instagram; I am. I have some friends on Instagram. I have friends on Facebook. This disfigurement of the notion of friends or followers, fake followers, and fake friends, empty of any meaning, whose true meaning is that you are swallowed in the bubble of the void, this is the ultimate grimace of this new system we are entering. ■

This is an excerpt of a longer Q&A with Bernard-Henri Lévy that ran on January 14, 2022. To read the full conversation, go to <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/nomad-bernard-henri-levy-david-samuels-interview>.

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Beyond Conservative and Reform: The Rise of the Unaffiliated Synagogue

The lines within and between denominations are shifting, blurring, and being crossed more frequently

BY PAULA JACOBS

Temple Ohabei Shalom is the longest enduring Jewish congregation in Massachusetts. Founded in Boston in 1842, the congregation—now in Brookline—will celebrate its 180th anniversary this year.

The synagogue, which is affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism, traces its Reform roots to the latter part of the 19th century. Yet, for the past several decades, its clergy have not trained at a Reform rabbinical seminary. Its current spiritual leader, Rabbi Audrey Marcus Berkman, was ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College while Assistant Rabbi Daniel Schaefer is a graduate of the pluralistic Hebrew College Rabbinical School.

Members include Jews by birth and Jews by choice, interfaith families, and a diverse range of ethnicities, nationalities, and sexual orientations. “We are a uniquely diverse and pluralistic congregation with different levels of ritual practice, and the rabbis reflect that,” said Berkman. “People want to connect to meaning, history, and be part of a larger story.”

Today the lines of Jewish religious denominations or movements have blurred, fueled by a combination of factors that affect synagogue affiliation patterns. Experts point to a paradigm shift in the American religious landscape,

social and technological disruption, the loosening of social mores and boundaries, intermarriage, and economic considerations. These changes are reflected both in contemporary synagogue life and in rabbinic education.

“Most people just want something that touches them and connects them to their identity beyond denomination,” said Rabbi Rolando Matalon of Congregation B’nai Jeshurun, an 1,800-unit unaffiliated congregation in Manhattan. Founded in 1825, BJ has a storied history as the first Ashkenazi congregation in New York City, evolving from Orthodox to Reform to Conservative to unaffiliated.

In the late 1980s, BJ became unaffiliated after 70 years as a Conservative congregation. Rabbi Marshall Meyer, the spiritual leader at the time, introduced a new vision reflecting the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish law and social justice, together with a vibrant neo-Hasidic spirit—all which remain today. “You don’t have to be Orthodox to love Torah, Reform to do *tikkun olam* and social justice, Conservative to believe in change in Jewish life, or Hasidic to find fervor and devotion of service to God,” explained Matalon, who joined BJ in 1986 and has been spiritual leader since 1993.

Current times demand being responsive, not relying on old boundaries of Judaism and becoming pigeonholed, said Rabbi Felicia Sol, who has served

at BJ since 2001, and was appointed senior rabbi last year. “What BJ did 30 years ago was a foreshadowing of what came to be,” she said. “It’s an amalgamation, taking the best of all different forms and transforming it to something that is meaningful and purposeful. It’s how our community is run and how the rabbis lead.”

BJ clergy represent a variety of religious traditions (Conservative, Reform, and nondenominational)—like its 25-year-old network of rabbinic fellows, learning from each other to enrich Jewish life. As an unaffiliated congregation, BJ has been able to respond quickly to changing community needs, such as embracing LGBTQ Jews two decades before the Conservative movement.

“We now have a mixture and blending of Jewish identity and community boundaries themselves, which is forcing institutions to think how to speak when there are no longer Jewish identities with strong boundaries,” said Rabbi Irwin Kula, co-president of Clal-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. What’s occurring, he says, relates to the shifting American religious landscape. “We have had a dramatic, unprecedented weakening in America of religion. The greatest social transformation in America is the de-institutionalism of the American parishioner.”

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among younger generations. Compared to older Jews, younger Jewish adults—ages 18-29—include large shares of people with no denominational identity, reports the 2020 Pew Study of Jewish Americans released this past May.

A key factor impacting denominational identification is interfaith marriage, emphasizes Bruce Phillips, a sociologist and professor of Jewish communal service at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. Only 51% of Jews ages 18-29 grew up in homes with two Jewish parents, compared to 85% of those ages 50-64, according to his analysis of Pew research data. Respondents who grew up in interfaith homes are less likely to join a synagogue and identify with an established branch of Judaism than those with two Jewish parents.

Meanwhile, diversity has become a fact of Jewish life. It's the truest expression of the Divine, said Rabbi Adam Zeff, spiritual leader of the Germantown Jewish Center in Philadelphia. He grew up Reform, experimented with Orthodoxy in college, studied at a Reconstructionist seminary, and is a member of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly.

For more than 40 years, the Germantown Jewish Center—a 520-family-unit pluralistic and egalitarian synagogue affiliated with the Conservative movement—has been a “community of communities,” fostering multiple prayer communities, with different perspectives.

Shabbat morning prayer communities within the Germantown Jewish Center include these choices: The Charry Minyan is a rabbi-led service that emphasizes learning, with a shorter *Shacharit* (morning) prayer service that uses *Sim Shalom*, the Conservative siddur, and includes an extended study period. Dorshei Derekh is a member-led Reconstructionist minyan egalitarian prayer service that uses *Kol Haneshamah*, the Reconstructionist siddur, and features lively singing accompanied by rhythm instruments. Minyan Masorti is a member-led, egalitarian minyan incorporating a complete traditional prayer service and full Torah reading. Kol D'mamah is a monthly one-hour volunteer-led service with chanting, meditation, and movement. The bimonthly Rising Song Jewish Music Residency merges traditional *nusach* (prayer chant) with soulful *nigunim* (wordless melodies).

These diverse paths encourage people to be open-minded about what Judaism can offer, explained Zeff: “In our synagogue and in our structure, there is more than one way to be Jewish, and they are all right and all valuable,” he said. “It's the sign of the future. Young people don't have the patience for people saying there is one right way, whether it's religion or gender expression.”

As the American Jewish community has evolved, institutions have shifted accordingly. For instance, Hebrew College was founded in 1921 to train American-born Hebrew school teachers, and

preserve Hebrew language and culture in America; classes were taught in Hebrew, reflecting the secular *Tarbut Ivrit* or Hebrew culture movement ideology inspired by Ahad Ha'am, the founder of cultural Zionism.

Eighteen years ago, in 2003, the Boston-based institution launched a pluralistic rabbinical school, followed a year later by a cantorial program. The goal was to create a place for different denominations to come together in a vibrant pluralistic setting, as well as for those who didn't find a place within the different denominations, said Hebrew College President Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld: “Our vision of rabbinic education is a commitment to pluralism ... People are entering Jewish life through different doorways ... Communities that can reinvent themselves to the moment are thriving ... The capacity for reinvention is critical.”

This vision is reflected in its planned December 2022 move to a campus shared with other organizations. It's also at the core of the rabbinical school curriculum, where students study traditional Jewish texts with *hevruta*, or study partners, while searching for the *hiddush*, or new Torah insight. “Young people see themselves as innovators in the rabbinic tradition. We are all part of that ancient and ever-new conversation,” said Anisfeld, quoting the Talmudic precept, “There is no study hall without innovation” (BT: Hagigah 3a: 15-17).

Reform and Conservative congregations are beginning to work together, sharing resources, staff, and programs. “Today there is an openness about denomination and Jewish community,” said Rabbi Dan Judson, dean and chief academic officer of Hebrew College. “That speaks to our transdenominational vision.”

This deemphasis on denominational identity is not a new phenomenon. Innovative Jewish spiritual communities such as Hadar, Ikar, Nashuva, Romemu, independent minyanim, and dozens of nonaffiliated synagogues have enriched Jewish life across America for years. “There have always been small numbers of congregations that are not

affiliated with a synagogue denomination,” said Ellie Ash, a doctoral student in the religion and society track at Boston University, who has been researching halachic innovation.

What's significant is how the growth of transdenominational seminaries has created a competitive religious marketplace for clergy leadership. For example, among Hebrew College rabbinical school alumni who serve congregations, 32% work in independent synagogues, 24% in Reform, 34% in Conservative, and 10% in Reconstructionist.

Synagogues can now tap into a wider candidate pool, bypassing movement-placement policies and avoiding movement dues. “While it is pleasant to imagine that everything is guided by ideas and theology, don't underestimate the base economic motivations at play,” said Jonathan Sarna, professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University.

In the 21st century, denominational boundaries have blurred. While some refer to this changing religious landscape as “post-denominational Judaism,” that may be a misnomer. Denominations remain a vital presence in American Jewish life and their rabbinical schools still produce important scholarship and graduates who contribute creatively to contemporary Jewish life. However, given shrinking membership trends, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the cost of movement dues, more synagogues may think twice about remaining affiliated.

“I see a slow restructuring. It won't be radical because synagogues are so normative,” predicted HUC's Phillips. “I don't see denominations collapsing. There will be a process of reinvention and rethinking.”

“In the end, change is the norm. We are in a moment of profound social and economic change,” emphasized Kula, the Clal co-president. “Training the next iteration of religious leaders to be entrepreneurial and speak beyond their own tribal community is a big job ... The need for leaders to manage the paradigm shift is essential. ■

This article was originally published on January 20, 2022.

THE REST

→ Malik Faisal Akram, 44, the British national who took **four people hostage in a Texas synagogue** on Saturday while demanding the release of a convicted terrorist, had a criminal record in the United Kingdom and was the subject of a 2020 investigation by domestic intelligence service MI5. The picture that has emerged suggests that U.S. security officials **missed numerous red flags** when allowing Akram to enter the United States and misled the public by initially saying that the targeted attack on the synagogue was “not directly connected to the Jewish community”—a statement that the FBI subsequently retracted. Reports that Akram stayed at a local homeless shelter in the vicinity of the synagogue he targeted and was dropped off there by people who appeared to know him, point to the possibility of a broader network assisting his attack on the synagogue.

→ With tens of thousands of Russian troops still massed on the Ukrainian border, the United Kingdom has started **shipping tactical weapons into Ukraine**, along with roughly 100 British soldiers to act as trainers. “We have taken the decision to supply Ukraine with light anti-armor defensive weapon systems,” British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace announced in Parliament Monday. Wallace also made clear that Britain would not send troops to Ukraine in the event of war, declining to hold out a promise of assistance that he termed “false hope.”

→ Another day, **another heist on the blockchain**. This time, the NFT platform Lympo lost \$18.7 million after attackers broke into its platform and stole crypto tokens that were quickly liquidated for other digital currencies. The value of the type of crypto coin, LMT, swiftly plummeted 92% after the breach was announced Monday.

→ New research shows a **link between the pandemic and extended lockdown policies and a crisis in early childhood development**. “The magnitude is massive—it’s just astonishing,” is how medical biophysicist Sean Deoni describes the deficits in cognitive functioning that he and his colleagues observed in infants. A different group of researchers at the New York–Presbyterian Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital found “the infants born during the pandemic scored lower, on average, on tests of gross motor, fine motor, and communication skills compared with those born before it.”

→ When whales were being hunted down on the open seas in the 19th century, did the animals communicate about the threat and share ways to avoid being captured? Researchers analyzing logbooks from North Pacific whalers have **found strong evidence that the animals were in fact capable of organizing** a shared defensive response. “Our models show that social learning, in which naïve social units, when confronted by whalers, learned defensive measures from grouped social units with experience,” writes the team of researchers from several North American universities.

→ While Omicron has Fauci throwing his hands in the air, the United States’ remote workers are putting their foot down on going back into the office. According to a new Morning Consult survey, some **55% of remote workers said they’d quit their position if their employers asked them to return to the office** before they believed the office was a safe place to work.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

Last year, Alan Jope, the chief executive of Unilever, which makes Hellmann’s mayonnaise and is one of the biggest consumer goods companies in the world, staked out an agenda “to prove incontrovertibly that sustainable business does drive superior financial performance.” He hasn’t proved it yet, as Unilever’s stock dropped 9% over the past year while competitors like Nestle and Procter & Gamble enjoyed terrific growth.

This week, one of Unilever’s biggest shareholders, Terry Smith, penned a scathing critique of Jope. In response to Jope’s vision for Unilever’s widely known mayo brand—“Fighting against food waste—that is the purpose of Hellmann’s,” Smith countered:

“A company which feels it has to define the purpose of Hellmann’s mayonnaise has in our view clearly lost the plot. The Hellmann’s brand has existed since 1913, so we would guess that by now consumers have figured out its purpose.”

Jope’s model of sustainable stewardship represents a new movement across the corporate sphere. The rise of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) priorities in the C-suite is one response to calls for company leaders to move beyond rapacious profit-making by being prioritizing the welfare of workers and the environment. That’s all well and good, but as Smith points out, executives can say whatever they want.

—Sean Cooper

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The Yiddish Bard of the 21st Century

In his new album, Daniel Kahn is a lyric beggar at the Jewish cemetery

BY JAKE MARMER

The first few times I heard Daniel Kahn sing, I had a distinct sense that he belonged to another era. That feeling had little to do with his Yiddish songs, or his Jewish work songs, or his accordion, or his lush diction and rhyme which I associated with Romantic poets of the 19th century. It was something else, something about the quality of his voice: a slight growl, and a smirk that can turn fragile, flaring at a moment's notice to invoke a lyric and historic elsewhere. It wasn't until I listened to his recent album, *Word Beggar*, that I understood where his music took me.

With the album, sung in Yiddish and English, on repeat, I realized that Kahn is a bard, in the ancient sense of that word. He's a bard of the sort you may have found roving through the world a century or a millennium ago, or even further back, all the way down to the earliest human attempts to capture their moment in history and convey it in poetic mythology.

The album's title, *Word Beggar*, comes from a short, haunting poem by Aaron Zeitlin, originally published in Yiddish in 1947, which Kahn translated and set to music:

SIX LINES

I know, this world will never find
me necessary,
me, a lyric beggar in this Jewish
cemetery.
who needs a song—let alone
in Yiddish?
the only beauty in this world is in
hopelessness & pain,

and godliness is only found in that
which won't remain,
and the only revolt is in submitting.

The poem has recently gathered momentum: The Yiddish Book Center held an event this year featuring numerous translations, including Kahn's. Though brevity is the central characteristic of the poem—as underscored by the title itself—it packs enough heartbreak to embrace a century's worth of Jewish history. Who in the world would “find” the poem's beggar “necessary”? If anything, it is the opposite—the beggar is usually seen as a sore thumb, a parasite, who continues to take without giving back. This, of course, would be the view of a culture that measures a person's worth through its “necessity” or usefulness. Thankfully, other paradigms exist too, and the poem is a yearning for these other worlds.

As a child in Ukraine, I frequently encountered scores of folks asking for alms at the cemetery's gate, perhaps because it is there that one's sense of humanity is heightened by the proximity to one's own mortality, with feelings of loss sharpening one's need to do what's right. In that way, to be a poet, especially a Yiddish poet, is not terribly different from being a “beggar.” Poetry is not “necessary” in any kind of a utilitarian sense, but our humanity hinges upon its existence. The fact that poets routinely take up the subject of mortality, and tragedy at all, is perhaps not unrelated to the reason why the despondent come to the graveyard.

So what does it mean to be “a lyric beggar” at the Jewish cemetery? The

sort of cemeteries Zeitlin wrote about are long gone. There's no one there to beg from, except for the dead. The gifts, then, also belong to the world of the dead: memories and visions, losses and language. If T.S. Eliot famously quipped: “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal,” Kahn's vision of a poet-translator as the beggar of the dead offers a stark alternative. “It's not as violent,” he told me in an interview, “not as subversive, it's a little more honest maybe, and maybe more ideal than other metaphors. At the end of the day, the thing that's given to you becomes yours. And what you do with it is nobody's business.”

My conversation with Kahn took place over Zoom. He appeared to be in a small workshop-museum room in the harbor of the city of Hamburg, Germany, where he now lives with his partner, St. Petersburg-born dancer and translator Yeva Lapsker, and their son—on a boat. It is a rare artist who not just performs his work, but embodies it as well, and it was impossible to ignore the inherent symbolism of Kahn's aesthetics of diasporism. It was a Jewish artist's vision as a life rocked by constant motion, a few steps removed from sturdy ground.

Kahn's new album contains Yiddish poems set to music, often with English verses alternating throughout the song. It also contains three songs he translated *into* Yiddish from English—Dylan's “I Shall Be Released” and “I Pity the Poor Immigrant,” as well as Cohen's “Hallelujah.” The latter track, released by the *Forward* as a video, went viral some years ago, garnering over 2 million views. It is a virtuosic work, to be sure, with a translation rich in phrases that reference both colloquial and spiritual Yiddish vocabulary, and therefore accessible for someone like me who doesn't speak Yiddish but is familiar



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with Jewish cultural references enough to contextualize their significance in the song.

Kahn's translation was so masterful that the producers included subtitles, translating Kahn's Yiddish back into English. I asked him how he accounts for the explosive popularity of this work. How many people out there speak Yiddish, anyway? "Firstly, I can't account for it because I am terrible at accounting," he quipped. "And anyway, how many people speak *Leonard Cohen*? Very few. Lots of people love that song and have no idea what it's about." Clearly, Kahn not only speaks Leonard Cohen but also locates himself in Cohen's bardic lineage, as a singer with a poetic sensibility and a prophetic stance. The video, released a few days after Leonard Cohen's passing, served as a de facto tribute, and a passing of the torch.

Kahn does all the singing and plays all of the instruments on the album—piano, guitar, accordion, and harmonica. But his acknowledgment section is longer than an orchestra rollcall. At the end of the liner notes, he writes: "*A hartsikn dank* [hearty thanks] to the *khaverim* [friends] who've touched these verses & versions," and includes an extensive group of Yiddish musicians and poets, scholars and artists. For a solo album, it's a long list. "It's anything *but* a solo album," explained Kahn, "because it's not like it's mine. That's also why it's called *Word Beggar*: There isn't a word on there that I didn't somehow take from somebody else, in one way or another. The art of translating is as much an act of listening, reading, and receiving, and analyzing, and understanding, as it is an act of production or creation."

The Yiddish revival, which by now spans over a few decades, is an attempt to engage with Yiddish literature, Eastern European Jewish history, and secular and religious culture. Its exponential growth is the result of the warm, encouraging, and collaborative spaces that made albums like *Word Beggar* possible. Kahn, who first became aware of the Yiddish revival in his early 20s after visiting the KlezKanada festival, recalled: "From the very beginning

I was turned on by this scene *because* it was a scene ... an incredibly fertile environment where people were collaborating across the lines of generations, across political lines, religiosity, national origins. It was a community and a conversation that I found fascinating ... My involvement with Yiddish song begins and ends with taking part in that conversation." In these circles, Yiddish is not an object of some half-baked sentimentalism, but a generative field of discourse, study, and transformation, or as Kahn put it, "it was the thing that was simultaneously learned about and created."

Like other ambitious projects which stemmed from the Yiddish revival milieu, his album is also a research project and a master class. Like a true encounter with a bard, it is a lesson in personal and global history, and an attempt to right a historical wrong: "I didn't grow up with this stuff," Kahn told me. "I was not told about Itzik Manger, about radical Yiddish artists, these visionaries. It wasn't a part of my Jewish education, or my secular education, it wasn't a part of my world. And part of it was that they were all hidden behind the wall of not understanding Yiddish, but I don't think it was a very good excuse because there were all kinds of other poets I knew in all kinds of languages I didn't speak. It was a part of this willful forgetting, willful insult to that culture and those people, and that was the Jewish culture I was handed as a youth."

Kahn grew up in a lower-middle-class suburb of Detroit and attended a Sunday school at the local Reform temple. Like many others, he now questions what happened to the Yiddish culture, which, after being nearly destroyed in the Shoah, continued to be erased by the mainstream Jewish establishment. I do not know if every revivalist has a manifesto on the tip of their tongue, but this bard-revivalist certainly did. When I pressed Kahn to articulate what it was about Yiddish itself that attracted him, without much ado he exploded with the following spontaneous manifesto-poem-rant:

"All the theory aside, all of the identity politics aside, all of the

Many to Remember

A poem by Rachel Kaufman, reviewed by Jake Marmer this week in 'Poems for Conversos'

Break slate. Break marble.
Break bread
over the sink. Break chimes, break
glass, break time
in pieces like fingernails. Break blades
of grass, break glory (don't
laugh). Break
the oven and burn the toast. Break a
person and
watch it melt. (The breaking is it.)
Break a ceramic plate, break
the broom,
break the dustpan, watch the house
gather stones. Break the
statue's hand,
break the mother's hand, break salt
over potatoes. Break in cycles,
break in patterns like plaid.
Break snow,
break fall, break the fast
and watch the Torah
fall to the floor. Break windows,
break walls, break rocking chairs,
break fingers.
Break spontaneity, break language,
break dough and
bake it outside. Break the tent, break
the wood,
break the matches in thirds, sit cold.
Break skin with tattoos, with
numbers, with
labels. Break codes, break Eichmann,
watch the trial
of evil's left hand. Break through,
break free, break under barbed wire,
break up into the sky.

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history aside, all of the cultural context aside, Yiddish is a goddamn sexy language. It's a beautiful language. It's tasty. It sounds good. It's flexible. It's a contortionist language. The musicality is baked in. It is so deeply colloquial and idiomatic; you get lost in it. You can never fully understand it unless you're from one of the several worlds in which it grew. There's *there* there. There's content there. The content fascinates me, and the context is what we have to create on our own, because it's not a language that has a holistically naturally occurring context ... Every

time we have a concert that has this content, we create a temporary island of context for it. We have to do it ourselves."

Word Beggar certainly qualifies as an "island of context," but it doesn't hinge on sexiness and beauty alone. This album, like much of Kahn's other work, demands rigor and commitment from its audience. Listening to *Word Beggar* is something of a project: I spent the first few hours following along with the liner notes, trying to trace the lyrics and connect them to translations, hoping for a sense of how music responds

to the meaning of words. I spent a good deal of time Googling names of Yiddish poets, and the contemporary new-to-me Yiddish masters, alongside lyrics to Bob Dylan's and Leonard Cohen's songs. It was an immersive learning experience.

Of course, that's not to say that one can't sing along with the album or listen to it while driving. But you might sing yourself into taking an unexpected turn, and then you might end up on a boat, sailing across history. ■

This article was originally published on January 20, 2022.

COMMUNITY

The New Yiddish Mystics

'Nitl nakht' and the outsider appeal of the supernatural

BY ROKHL KAFRISSEN

Though Chinese food and movies will always be a classic combination, to my surprise, in 2021 a "new" American-Jewish-Christmas ritual was ascendant on social media: *nitl nakht*, or the Yiddish Christmas Eve.

Long ago in Eastern Europe, Jewish communities "observed" the evening with a set of unusual (and in some cases, bizarre) customs. Best known today is the custom of refraining from learning Torah. Instead of learning, games like chess and cards were common. And if you were uneasy at the thought of *too much* fun, you could use the time to rip toilet paper for use on *shabes*.

The question is, why did this unique set of Jewish Christmas customs come about? It wasn't just because Chinese food hadn't been invented yet (though scholars are conflicted on this point).

Rather, *nitl nakht* was both the Jews' reaction to the dramatic seasonal traditions of their Christian neighbors, as well as an expression of their complex and uncomfortable beliefs about Jesus. For example, Jews believed that learning Torah in the name of the deceased brought the deceased benefit. It stands to reason, then, as folklore scholar Itzik Gottesman wrote in the *Forverts*, "doing anything related to Torah study on Christmas might be misinterpreted as honoring Jesus." But that's only the beginning.

Nitl nakht customs drew on a number of Talmudic and apocryphal texts that, as Shai Alleson-Gerberg writes, depicted Jesus as "born of incest," a contemptible character who "stole the Ineffable Name of God from the Temple, and made improper use of it until he was caught and sentenced to death as a blasphemer ..." This inverted, satirical figure of Jesus was so associated with excrement and bodily fluids that, among other things,

Jewish children on Christmas Eve feared going to the bathroom, where he was believed to be lurking on that night.

Pretty gnarly, huh? And yet, by Christmas 2021, *nitl nakht* had officially made it into non-*frum*, non-Yiddishist, mainstream Jewish social media, which was apparently tired of fighting over the legitimacy of the Hanukkah bush. But if the history of *nitl nakht* reveals an extremely weird and uncomfortable legacy of anti-Christian sentiment, how do you boil that down to clickable content for the liberal minded global citizens of today?

For at least three popular young Jewish social media influencers I observed, the answer was to simply erase its anti-Christian sentiment altogether. (I'm not naming or linking to these particular users because my point here is not to shame or embarrass them.) They describe *nitl nakht* as a direct response to Christian persecution. One post, with over 7,000 likes, states that Christmas was a time of particular anti-Jewish violence, and that it was the rabbis who created *nitl nakht* to convince people to stay home. But what we know about the history of *nitl nakht* shows the very opposite: Rather than being instituted by the religious authorities, *nitl nakht* was most certainly a gradual development of popular folk practices, none of which served rabbinical interests. Think about it: Why would the rabbis encourage a practice that denigrated the beliefs of

those very same neighbors they were purportedly hiding from?

And while there have been instances of mass violence linked to Christmas, it was not Christmas, but Easter, and especially Good Friday, that European Jews feared the most. That was when a chant called “the Reproaches” would be sung, in which “the voice of God accused the Jewish people of faithlessness in rejecting Jesus as their Messiah and crucifying him instead.”

At first glance, these influencer posts about *nitl nakht* seem to be merely reinforcing a narrative that is already painfully familiar to Jews of all ages: victimization and fear. But what’s noteworthy about the *nitl nakht* discussion is that it is taking place within a much larger discourse, one written from the margins by young Jews whose religious and political beliefs are heterodox, and who often identify as queer. They’re alienated by the gatekeeping done by anti-intermarriage hysteria and Zionist purity tests, not to mention a deracinated, rationalist American Judaism emptied of the mysterious and supernatural. I would go so far as to say that these young Jews are reacting to what I might call the disenchantment of the modern Jewish world. (Thanks, *Has-kalah!*) Folk practices, once trashed by the Jewish enlightenment, are now the treasure patiently waiting for those making new Jewish identities.

For young people left cold by Hanukkah’s uneasy position as the “Jewish Christmas,” *nitl nakht* is appealing because it is entirely other: a rooted Jewish practice shaped by Christmas, but most certainly not meant to compete, or imitate. Even presented in stripped down form, the revelation of a newly discovered “holiday” makes an audacious claim to enlarging the Jewish calendar, made all the more audacious by doing so in Yiddish. It points the reader toward Eastern Europe, not merely as a site of genocide and mass migration, but as an accessible source of nonnormative Jewish practice and folklore.

Nonetheless, despite this recent burst of interest, *nitl nakht* is of limited use as material to be fashioned into

“What happens if we summon the demons? Invite them to speak. Relearn their spells.”

a (post)-modern Jewish identity. At its heart lies an ugly, illiberal history of mutual animosity, one at odds with modern liberal values. Not to mention that the demographic reality of American Jewish life today has a large part of American Jewry with at least one non-Jewish family member. How are you going to explain to them that you’re hosting a Christmas Eve reading of the insanely offensive anti-Jesus apocrypha *Toldos Yeshu*?

Far more attractive is the vast cosmos of the Jewish supernatural, especially as it flourished in Eastern Europe. Bliema Books, a self-described “small Jewish press for Radical Jewish Literature in Jerusalem and Berlin,” just put out a new issue of their exquisite zine *The Barnacle Goose*. This new issue is dedicated to the theme of Jewish demons. The letter from the editors invites the reader to this seductive, though slightly disreputable realm: “Perhaps the pages which follow can serve as an incantation bowl, its lines of text circling and swerving around potent images. What happens if we summon the demons? How can we acknowledge their atmospheric presence? Invite them to speak. Relearn their spells.”

Indeed, some young Jews have already begun to take up that invitation.

Ezra Rose is a freelance illustrator, zinester, part-time educator, and small farmer in western Massachusetts. I recently stumbled upon their demon-infused Jewish art on Twitter and became an instant fan. Their work merges Goth aesthetics with Ashkenaz in ways that are both delightfully dramatic and subtle. Their *Six Songs* zine draws on a mystical work describing the extreme dangers awaiting those who hear the angels sing. Panel borders framing the suitably gruesome descriptions are full of details inspired by Ashkenazi gravestone carvings.

In a recent conversation, they told me that their artwork is part of a reconnection to Judaism: “I had sort of turned my back on something that I thought had no place for me. As a queer and trans person, I just had no model for what my participation in Jewish life could even look like—it wasn’t that the communities I grew up in were hostile to me (they were generally liberal), but that queerness and transness didn’t appear to even exist there.”

And what is the appeal of supernatural entities like golems, *sheydim*, and the Shamir Worm? “I’m really interested in supernatural and folkloric entities and creatures, maybe because I find it a lot easier to connect to them? Gender is less of a barrier to my identification with these things. It took me a long time to realize that part of the reason I never really connected to more mainstream Jewish stories is that I never saw a role for myself in them, because all the human roles are gendered.”

Orah Ruth is another young Jewish artist claiming the Yiddish supernatural for their art. She was raised in a “post-denominational” environment and began playing klezmer music, and learning Yiddish, as an adult. As she recently told me, “I’m inspired by the balance of mystical/practical in Eastern European Judaism and halachically chaotic.”

Already experienced in creating Tarot decks with traditional imagery, she is currently working on a Yiddish-infused, 22-card trumps deck. Why tarot? “I wanted a deck that has a similar charm [to the standard Rider-Waite-Smith],

but a context where I can see myself and my loved ones.” For the images, she’s been using Yiddish woodcuts available in online archives, and taking cards and themes from the old French-style tarot and translating or adapting them into Yiddish.

Her work is not just inspired by folklore, but by her own Daf Yomi practice: “The way in which the Gemara (and following through to Ashkenazi writers through today) effortlessly weave the practical with the ritual, the mundane and the sacred, the natural

and the supernatural into one continuous undifferentiated worldview has inspired me to make the effort to do the same in my own life.”

What both artists describe is how their art, and their engagement with Yiddish and Jewish folklore, has allowed them to fashion a holistic Jewish identity that is both very modern, and deeply rooted in tradition. It’s work to which we should be paying attention. As the editors of the Barnacle Goose wrote in the “Demon” issue:

“Among the many later Jewish terms

for demons, perhaps the most troubling is *hitzonim*—literally, Outsiders or External Ones. This is a xenophobic, metaphysical projection. ‘Demonization’ becomes more than a mere turn of phrase. At our worst, we have not just disassociated ourselves from the demons, we have entirely denied their existence. We are overdue for a reckoning. The demons we’ve disinherited may very well be our future.” ■

This article was originally published on January 18, 2022.

ARTS & LETTERS

Leib in Love

Did Michiko Kakutani ever receive L. Goldkorn’s \$6,000 worth of messages in a bottle?

BY LESLIE EPSTEIN

I In the history of Western literature, has a character fallen in love with his critic? Leib Goldkorn did, at the age of 97. And how could he not? Did not Michiko Kakutani, and in *The New York Times*, speak of his “commodious talent”? Of his “high seriousness,” his “humanity,” his “ease in story-telling and screwball feeling for comedy”? Did she not complete her review of *Goldkorn Tales* with the following passionate peroration: “The reader is moved to celebrate the redemptive power of the imagination—and to applaud [his] artistry and ambition”? Was this not, as Americans say, an insinuation? Little wonder that in his next book, *Ice Fire Water: A Leib Goldkorn Cocktail*, the aged flute player should write his “Laplandic lass” a letter inviting her to a lunch. Yes, Laplandic, for Mr. Goldkorn is convinced that Madam Kakutani—“Kakutani? Kakutani? Michiko? What kind of name is that?”—is a Finn. Thus does he arrange an assignation with his hellion from Helsinki at the

Hotel Plaza. Who knows? If a true meeting of souls should occur, Leib might find himself beaten—“Yes, you can beat me! Beat me! I will not cry out”—on the back and the loin sector by his *innamorata* during a Finnish bath.

The first public response to this romance came from the *Boston Phoenix*. While *Ice Fire Water* was still in galleys, the paper wrote that local author Leslie Epstein must really have it in for *The New York Times* reviewer. *Pas du tout!*, I protested: I had nothing but the greatest respect for Ms. Kakutani, whether she be Japanese, Javanese, or a Finn. Which was, in fact, the truth. To this day I regard Michiko (may I use the familiarity, Madam?) as a superior reviewer, one possessed of a good deal of artistry and ambition herself. The only occasion on which she truly angered me was when she launched a preemptive, and lethal, strike against J.D. Salinger’s beautiful novella, *Hapworth 16, 1924*, before it had a chance to draw a single breath as a book. It is true that I, too, once sent the reviewer a letter of appreciation

that went unrequited. But is it likely that such a long-buried rebuke to an author, no matter how forlorn it left him, could lead to a love-struck Leib? In any case, if the Kakutani would but finish the book (page 258, Madam), she would discover that all her motives are ascribed not to meanness or malice but exclusively to the claims of art.

Though the *Phoenix* was in error about Michiko, what it said gave me an idea about *other* reviewers for the *Times*. “R. Bernstein” was already in the novel, as the Kakutani’s “lackey.” Now I seized on the galleys and added a new trio of *Hustler* models and experts at telephonic titillation: Anatola Boudoir, Diva Evian, and, of course, Bitch Adder, who offers to give the naughty nonagenarian a good paddling. Madam Boudoir has departed for whatever circle of hell Dante reserved for reviewers who think Henry Green a greater novelist than Dostoevsky, but the others know who they are and for what sins they must, in my pages, eternally burn.

Now, a few months before publication, news of Leib’s infatuation was moving closer to Miss Michiko’s actual

ARTS & LETTERS

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abode. *Harper's Magazine* ran the entire contents of his *billet-doux*, along with an account of the long afternoon he spent at the Court of Palms, awaiting the arrival of his sensuous Scandinavian. While it is true that the banner on the cover, *Michiko Kakutani's Hot Date*, was displayed in every newsstand in New York City, there was no guarantee that the Kakutani had seen it herself. It was at that moment that the muses struck me with all their arrows. Could I not arrange for Leib Goldkorn to declare himself in *The New York Times* itself? And on the very front page at that? Certainly then the minx, Michiko, must acknowledge the existence of her admirer.

W.W. Norton & Co. has not remained the last, best independent publisher in America by tossing away its dimes. It was not surprising, therefore, that when I approached them with the proposal to take out a series of classified ads, every one of the house's talented skinflints turned me down flat. Leib, it seemed, was to be left in the lurch. I then calculated that my pitiful advance might just cover the sort of campaign I had in mind—an ad a day for the month that followed the book's publication. I picked up the phone and called the *Times*.

That the tiny bottom-inch personals are a 19th-century embarrassment to the current management of the paper became instantly apparent not only in the prohibitive prices they quoted—\$440 a line, minimum of two lines per ad—but in the dozens of rules and restrictions they threw in my path, and above all in the voice of the callow youth who after many rings answered my phone call as follows: "Front page classified and pet supplies." This is not a joke. By the time I'd recovered from sticker shock and from the regulations about what words I could use and how many characters I'd be allowed in each line, I felt much as I had when—a Jew boy, an American, a grad with briar pipe—I attempted to pry a sporty two-seater from the clutches of its British dealer: "You have to truly *want* a Morgan, Mr. EpSTEIN." Well, by then ego, stubbornness, and desire had combined to make me truly *want* my series of ad-orations; I ultimately settled upon 10 two-line personals, with a special

three-line \$1,320 valentine thrown in at the end.

The first advertisement was meant to be a parody of the notice the board of Rabbis used to place each Friday in our newspaper of record: "JEWISH WOMEN/GIRLS LIGHT SHABBAT CANDLES TODAY 18 MIN. BEFORE SUNSET."

This is what ran at the bottom of the front page on Oct. 25, 1999: "JEWISH WOMEN/GIRLS. GENTILES TOO!—LEIB GOLDKORN IS BACK."

\$880, poof! Just like that.

Here are the next six advertisements and the dates on which they appeared:

October 27: "SONYA HENIE, CARMEN MIRANDA, ESTHER—OH, YOU LEIB GOLDKORN!"

October 29: "DEAR SWEET MISS MICHIKO K.—CALL YOUR LEIB GOLDKORN"

November 1: "LEIB GOLDKORN FOR PRESIDENT!—A CHICKIE IN EVERY POT!"

November 3: "WHAT IS A LEIB GOLDKORN COCKTAIL?—READ *ICE FIRE WATER* TO FIND OUT"

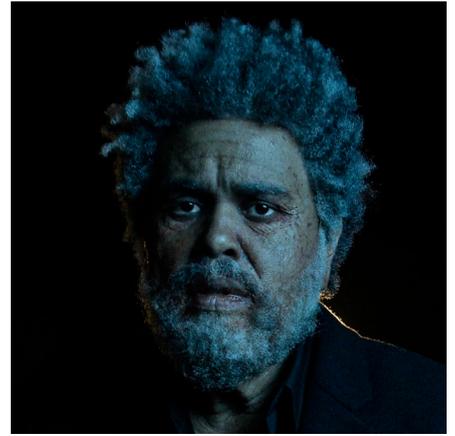
(That last lame effort was necessitated by the *Times*' rule that every fifth ad reveal the "product" being sold. So much for the human heart. Even a Morgan Dealer would have been kinder).

November 8: "WHO TOOK RUDY GIULIANI'S TOUPEE? LEIB GOLDKORN!"

November 10: "TWAPFT! TWANK! TWIRRUP!—IT'S LEIB GOLDKORN ON FLUTE"

The next day, Nov. 11, I returned from a tennis match to find a message on my answering machine asking me to call the paper. Could it be? Had the Kakutani seen Leib's message inside a bottle? His arrow into the blue? Advertisement No. 3? But when with trembling hand I dialed the New York number the person who answered was not Miss Michiko but an ex-Marine, a Mr. Bob Smith, whose Orwellian title was, I believe, *acceptability manager*. "You've got a problem," he told me, and went on to explain that the object of Leib's affection had indeed seen not only the advertisement of Oct. 29 but the one planned for Nov. 15: "YOO-HOO! MY CUTE KAKUTANI!—LEIB GOLDKORN IS CALLING."

Instead of asking for Leib's number, or some other memento, she had



Album of the Week

The Weeknd, *Dawn FM*

When Abel Tesfaye, also known as **The Weeknd**, announced his list of collaborators for his new album **Dawn FM**, there was something for everyone. Quincy Jones for the fans of *Bad*-era Michael Jackson, Oneohthrix Point Never for electronic hipsters still listening to *House of Balloons*, and Jim Carrey for everyone else.

These elements all work together well for Tesfaye, who is one of the most interesting musicians working at his level of Super Bowl halftime-show stardom. *Dawn FM* shows an artist pushing his sound and refining his message, moving somewhat beyond the sex and drugs of "Can't Feel My Face."

Not entirely, of course. There's his single "Take My Breath," which is hard-driving and fun to dance to at the same time. Its opening riff sounds a little like Destiny's Child's "Bootylicious," which means it sounds like the opening of Stevie Nix's "Edge of Seventeen." With a shimmery disco sound, it wouldn't feel out of place next to Daft Punk.

"Now that all future plans have been postponed / Were you high or just stoned?" asks Carrey in character as the host of Dawn FM, in what could be purgatory or the pandemic. And an album filled with songs about betrayal and relationships asks listeners to loosen the grip drama has on their lives.

—David Meir Grossman

Kasha Varnishkes

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 2 large onions, sliced in rounds**
- 2-3 tablespoons chicken fat or olive oil**
- 1 large egg, slightly beaten**
- 1 cup medium or coarse kasha**
- 2 cups water, or vegetable or chicken broth**
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 12 ounces large or small bowtie-shaped noodles**
- 2 tablespoons chopped parsley or cilantro**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Saute the onions in 2 tablespoons of the chicken fat or olive oil in a heavy frying pan with a cover until golden. Remove to a plate and set aside.

Step 2

Beat the egg in a small mixing bowl and stir in the kasha. Mix, mashing with a fork or wooden spoon to make sure all the grains are coated. Put the kasha in the same frying pan, set over a high heat. Continue to flatten, stir, and break up the egg-coated kasha for 2 to 4 minutes or until the egg has dried on the kasha and the kernels brown and mostly separate.

Step 3

Add the water or vegetable or chicken broth, salt, and pepper to the frying pan and bring to a boil. Add the onions, cover tightly, and cook over low heat, steaming the kasha for 10 minutes. Remove the cover, stir, and quickly check to see if the kernels are tender and the liquid has been absorbed. If not, cover and continue steaming for 3 to 5 minutes more.

Step 4

Meanwhile, bring a large pot of water to a boil. Cook the bowtie noodles according to the directions on the package. Drain.

Step 5

When the kasha is ready, Stir the noodles into the frying pan. Adjust the seasoning and sprinkle with the parsley or cilantro. If desired, add a bit more chicken fat or olive oil. Serve alone with a salad or with pot roast.

Yield: Serves 6 to 8