



ALTAR

PASSOVER JOURNAL 5774



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Artwork by Ilan Block

A Jewish Poet

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It is hard to be a Jewish poet.
You cannot say things about God
That will offend the disbelievers.
And you always have to remind someone
It wasn't your people who killed their savior.
And Solomon and David are always laughing
Over your shoulder
Like a father and son ridiculing the unfavored brother.
And you cannot entice people with the sloping
Parts of a woman's body
Because you must always remain pure.
And every day you have to ask yourself why you're writing
When there is already the one great book.
It is hard to be a Jewish poet.
You cannot say things about the disbelievers,
Which might offend God.

Words From a Stone

by Joshua Fleet

Great is my pain and great my anguish,
O, my God, my God, be a help in my trouble,
Find for me the graces of expression,
Grant me language and the gift of utterance,
I shall declare before the multitudes
My fragments of Your truth, O my God.
--Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, "Expanses, Expanses"

This sentence was torture.

This sentence is therapy.

My life is a conflict of interests. I am a writer plagued by the ineffability of my visions. I am an editor prone to shaking the tree free of every leaf. I am a dreamer with no morning memory.

Words war across pages and consume my mind. I often lose myself for hours at a time within the borders of a good book. But ask me to describe the terrain, and I will not know where to begin or how to end.

Words swirl in the well of my heart and stream through my veins, until my arms begin to burn if I don't reach for a pen. But ask me what I've written, and I will show you an empty stage.

Words appear in their proper places. Chaos gives way to order. But my soul -- O my soul! -- knows that all of our pains and triumphs and questions and praises are nothing but empty letters, that the song of our redemption has no words.

And yet, letters make words and words make claims and the life of text calls out my name. Now, then, always.

At freshman orientation, before choosing classes or moving in or finding friends, they made us pick a major. No big deal. Just the next four years of your life. Just a make-or-break chance at a lucrative career. So I thought about my interests, my hobbies. In high school, I kept a pen in every pocket, wrote scraps of verse on gas station receipts, and self-published and distributed a subversive (or was it angsty?) 'zine that questioned the authority of clipboard-carrying hall pass jockeys everywhere. Also, I'd had a girlfriend who wrote novels in the margins of her notebooks and had an internship at a newspaper.

So, I picked journalism. I thought college classes in that department -- Reporting, Editing, Magazine Writing, Fact Finding -- would teach me how to write, how to tell stories. I thought joining the editorial board of a student-run Jewish newspaper would bring me fame and fortune.

I wasn't too far off. In fact, after graduating and hopping on a one-way flight to New York City with a dream in my heart and an entire industry crumbling on the horizon, I landed a (paid!) editorial internship in the religion section of a fast-growing Internet newspaper based on the strength of my prior experience at the abovementioned student-run Jewish newspaper. The internship turned into a real job, and soon I moved off of a friend's couch in Harlem and into my very own possibly haunted, but relatively cheap room on the edge of a hip neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Things were looking up. At my job, I was encouraged to write about whatever interested me, but if I wasn't feeling inspired or didn't have the time, that was OK, too. There were plenty of words from other people to edit and search-engine-optimize, and because the driving mission of our page was to "share light in the digital darkness," I got to spend my days reading life-affirming, boundary-transcending calls to peace and progress. And when I did choose to write, suddenly my ideas were published on a platform that literally reached millions of people. It was unbelievable. I felt like I was making a difference. I felt empowered.

So empowered that I left the job, decided to move to Israel with the love of my life. She wanted to pursue a teaching degree, and I needed a change of pace. If I could make it in New York, I could make it anywhere. So after hopping on a one-way flight to Tel Aviv with the dream of peace in my heart and the world's most contentious strip of sand on the horizon, I landed a full-time job as a reporter at a Jerusalem-based news agency whose editors were committed to telling the untold stories, to publishing real, balanced journalism.

Words can heal wounds. Words can open eyes. Words can move millions.

In Israel, most people work multiple part-time jobs to pay rent, so when I nabbed this full-time gig as a journalist, everyone said I was lucky, that I should be grateful and happy.

But words can go unread. Words can become stale. Words can torture or fail.

Every day, on the 15-minute walk from my apartment to the office, "I can do this!" wilted into "I will die if I have to do this for one more minute." Friends who saw me in the fading light of evening after work said it looked as though my life force had been sucked away. My fiancé worried for my health. I walked the streets of Jerusalem followed by a black cloud of doubt, confusion and depression.

From flying to falling. From seize-the-day existentialism to nothing-matters nihilism. Whereas in New York I'd felt that my work was a benefit to all of humanity, a very similar job in Israel felt like hammering a thousand nails into my own coffin. I'd forgotten that the industry was crumbling. I'd ignored the fact that conflict feeds on the attention it receives. The sight of a blank page paralyzed me. The joys of language laughed in my face and ran away. I no longer wanted to throw punches at my shadow while tumbling from the 100th story window. I lost the will to tell stories. I forgot what brought me here in the first place.

Falling, falling, falling, a fragment, perhaps only a figment, of memory: On the playground among the North Florida pine, my best friend can't contain the excitement. His older brother wrote a play that will soon be produced and performed. In the community newsletter's report, the budding playwright says he wants to pursue writing as a career. I'm repulsed. Writing is like homework and homework is like torture. I know I will never be a writer. This conviction is visceral. It is emblazoned on my psyche.

My friend's brother, a lawyer, did not pursue writing as a career. I did, and here I sit, writing about my reflection in the flame, remembering another shard of self, the text that first set me on the path, though only now can I see and understand the words. It says in Shemot, the Torah portion of my bar mitzvah:

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the thorn bush, and behold, the thorn bush was burning with fire, but the thorn bush was not consumed. So Moses said, "Let me turn now and see this great spectacle why does the thorn bush not burn up?" The Lord saw that he had turned to see, and God called to him from within the thorn bush, and God said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am!" And God said, "Do not draw near here. Take your shoes off your feet, because the place upon which you stand is holy soil."

The Midrash says that Moses was not the first person to walk by the burning bush. Dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions passed it by. Innumerable were the eyes and ears closed to the flaming divine revelation. Not yet the greatest of all prophets, now just a shepherd on the lam, Moses is just the first person to notice the miraculous sight. He's the first to stop, turn and investigate.

God sees Moses turn and calls out to him. Moses sees that God sees, and he responds. Immediately. No hesitation. Perhaps Moses knows something funky is afoot. Perhaps he already is the greatest of prophets, and he sees the whole exchange unfold before him. Perhaps he fled from Egypt and headed straight to the burning bush to hear God's command that he should return and redeem the Children of Israel from slavery. All we know is how Moses responded: "Who am I?"

All we know is that the man who hearkened to the voice from the shrub feared that the people he was meant to redeem would not believe what he'd seen.

All we know is that even after God gave him the keys to set the slaves free, Moses protested: "I am not a man of words, neither from yesterday nor from the day before yesterday, nor from the time You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Exodus 4:10).

All we know is that Moses returned to Egypt, brought the Children out of slavery, led them through the wilderness and scribed the greatest story ever told. Somewhere along the way, to appease the haters, God told him to speak to a stone, compelling it to provide water. Moses chose force instead, and, yes, water came forth, but for striking the stone with his staff he was not allowed to enter the Land of Israel.

Which calls do you answer and which do you ignore? What moments of pain do you endure? When do you enter the land and when do you flee?

What are the fragments of your truth?

All I know about myself is this: I am a writer brimming with self-doubt, fearful of the depths of my imagination, stunted by the idol of silence, blinded by the searing light of an empty page. And despite this fear and doubt, despite this deaf-mute-blindness, I will continue to write. I have no choice: It's homework assigned from the Teacher on high, the One who asks, "Who gave man a mouth? Who makes one dumb or deaf, seeing or blind?"

What I write, however, will be for prayer, not pay. When I write, it will be from an outpouring of my soul, not a doomed attempt to feed the black holes of viral Internet and violent conflict.

Sometimes you must quit the job to get your life back.

Sometimes, God is the One who strikes stone with staff.

All the water I will ever need flows at my feet.

O, my God, my God, grant me the strength to crouch down, dip my hands in and drink.

Josh Fleet is a Jerusalem-based writer, editor and listener, currently completing a book about ecstatic improvisational rock music as a Jewish spiritual practice. Reach out on Twitter: @JoshLyleFleet and @PhishTalmud.



Artwork by Ilan Block

God's Optimism

by Yehoshua November

For Norman Maranz

Because the nature of a stone
Is not to fly,
It remains in the air only
As long as the thrower's force
Acts upon it.

And in the inner Torah
The same is said of this world,
Which comes from nothing
And whose nature, therefore,
Is not to exist. It remains
Only as long as God pushes it into existence.

Think of optimism of God, then,
How, every second, he recreates our lives—
I who have not served Him honestly,
And you who believe you have never served Him.

The Joy of Jail

by Elad Nehorai

I'm sitting in a holding cell. In jail. I was arrested a few hours ago, and I'm not sure what's going to happen to me. And I'm shaking with happiness. This is the best day of my life.

Four hours earlier:

The bong was beautiful.

It was strong, with an intricate glass heart coming out of its side.

I thought about all the money I had spent on it - my money - made from selling to dorm-mates, friends, and anyone that heard about me.

I was celebrating my new purchase with my dorm friends in my room. One friend, a girl, who I had been close with since freshman year. My other friend, a dude. And my roommate who didn't smoke pot, for some reason, was there. He was nervous and twitching. I told him he could leave but he shook his head, he wanted to hang out, he said.

The room filled with smoke. Each rip sent another huge plume into the air of the tiny area.

We were getting lost, floating.

And as this plume of smoke grew and grew, we coughed, coughed, and smiled, smiled.

And then came a knock on the door.

knock knock

We all jumped in our seats.

We did the standard pot-smoker's move of rushing around quietly as possible while hiding everything in a mad panic. I took the Febreze and sprayed it around the room for a full minute.

How much Febreze do you need for huge plumes of smoke that have been exhaled over 2 hours?

knock knock

When everything was hidden, I whispered to everyone, "Just be quiet. Pretend no one's here."

We sat in silence now, no one making a move. Hardly breathing. Hardly blinking.

knock knock

Whoever it was hadn't left.

knock knock

My roommate got nervous. He started scratching his neck and fidgeting. I gave him a look that said, "Chill, bro, chill." But he didn't.

knock knock

And now he was out of his chair, and for some reason I will never understand, he pushed the blinds a bit aside and looked outside.

The rest of us, the three of us, let out this collective gasp.

knock knock

I let out a sigh, gave my friend one last glaring look, and stood up.

I went to the door. I opened it.

There were five cops in front of me. I gulped. I heard a gasp from behind me.

"Can I help you?" I asked, acting like they were solicitors or something, and pretending that I didn't have a scale and four ounces of pot. Or that you're considered a drug dealer in Arizona if caught with that haul. It was like looking prison time in the face.

"Oh yes, I think you can help me," the taller, bigger cop in front said. "You been up to anything tonight, son?"

I shook my head and shrugged, as if that was a personally normal question for a policeman with four others behind him at 11 pm to ask a dude in a dorm room.

"Nothing."

He stuck his head in my door, gave me this sly sort of smile and said, "Doesn't smell like nothing."

I could feel my whole body shrivel up when he said that. The room behind me was completely silent. My poor friends.

I grasped at the last straw of an opportunity. Something I remembered one of my stoner friends tell me to say when things got real: "Technically I don't have to let you in here, do I?"

"You're absolutely right, son, absolutely right," he said with this kind sort of smile, "But honestly, I don't think you want that. Things will be a lot harder for both of us that way. Trust me, you want it like this."
He had a voice like a silky businessman, knowing he had already made the sale. And he was right.
I turned around, looked at my friends. Their faces were ashen. They were all sober too. What a waste.
I turned back around and let out a heavy sigh.
"Okay, come in."
And all five cops came in and proceeded to look through all my things.
The main cop asked me what I had in the room. I didn't see any more reason to fight it now.
I just wanted it over with. So I listed everything. Told him that I had four ounces of pot. The utensils. All that good stuff.
And then I proceeded to watch them find those things, one by one.
The first thing they grabbed was the bong. The beautiful bong with the heart. Another cop found my pipe.
As I watched them take these things, I felt like I was watching my life get actively destroyed in front of my eyes. This was it. Prison. I was going. There was no way out.
They found my scale. They found my mini-bong. They found everything.
Except... they kept looking... what was happening? What was missing?
The pot.
They were starting to get frustrated. Looking deeper and deeper. Five cops, and none of them could find two big bags of pot.
The cop asked me where it was. I looked at him, and I told him the G-d's honest truth: "I don't know."
I was so high and so scared when we were madly hiding everything that I totally forgot where I had thrown the stash.
And so they kept looking.
And the funny thing was, the funny thing was that inside, as this was going on, I knew that I should feel scared. Freaked out. In the corner, my friends were shriveling in fear. Looking outside, I could see students peeking out of their rooms and looking at me. All of them knew me.
But I didn't care. In fact, the more the cops searched, the more this weird sort of joy crept over me. This certainty that they wouldn't find anything. This belief that I was okay.
I even started to joke with the boss cop. He asked me if I was sure there were four ounces of pot in my room.
I couldn't help myself. I laughed. I said yes. He actually laughed back.
Soon, I got bored. I said, "Let me help."
And there I was. Searching my own room with four other cops for the pot that would land me in prison for who knows how long.

Still, no one could find the pot. No one remembered where it went. My friends had no clue.
Even my sober roommate.
And then I reached for my desk drawer... and an image flashed across my mind. My hands with two big bags of pot.
Throwing open my desk drawer and stuffing them madly inside.
I looked down at my hand. It was touching the handle.
I let go. I felt some sort of divine hand guiding me. I was laughing inside and out. I was free, and I knew it.
I moved away.
And I started looking in the trash can. I looked under my mattress.
I started pointing the cops to different places, asking them if they had checked any part of my room besides the desk drawer. They looked everywhere I told them to look. I was their boss. It was divine.
With each move, with each misdirection and signal to the cops, I felt like I was fulfilling a will bigger than mine.
I remember the cops starting to look down dejectedly, starting to look up at the ceiling, as if they'd find something there. They were giving up... I was so close.
Finally, the boss cop said, "Okay, guys. Let's wrap this up."
They all turned around and looked at him. He asked one of them for a list of everything they found. He nodded. They spoke a bit more.
Boss Cop asked me to come outside with him.
As I stepped outside, I could see all the students in my dorm peaking out their doors or windows.
Furtive eyes. Some of whom I had sold to.
"Now, son, I need you to tell me whose pot, whose things these are," the cop said.
I knew what to do. I took one look at my friends, who were still in the corner, looking like scared squirrels surrounded by foxes.

"It's all mine. I take full responsibility. They knew nothing, didn't do anything, didn't touch or smoke anything."
The cop nodded, didn't ask any questions. Instead, he read me my Miranda Rights and slapped some handcuffs on me. It was the first and only time I was arrested. The first and only time I would feel cold metal against my wrists. And yet, I was happy. They hadn't found the pot. I wasn't going to prison.
Jail... but not prison.
My friends looked at me with this look of just total gratitude. I smiled at them.
The cops led me down the stairs of the dorm, out the door. Into the courtyard. The group of us passed students who were coming home from partying or hanging outside to smoke cigarettes.
They all stared at us.
I felt like a star.
They took me out the gate, where there was a car with flashing lights waiting for me. My chariot.
My limo.
A moment before they stuck me in the back, I looked up. A guy was standing in his window, smiling at me. He stuck his fist in the air in solidarity and gave me a big grin.
And as they stuck me into the back of the car, I laughed.

The experience of being in the holding cell was nothing like I had seen in the movies. I wasn't put in a room with bars and ten drunk dudes. Instead, I was in a room made all of steel. Alone.
There was a toilet made of steel in the corner. A bed made of steel sticking out the wall.
I was all alone.

This was one of the defining spiritual moments of my life. Part of an awakening; a metamorphosis. A piece of a larger journey that meant falling deep but also preparing for the rise that would follow. The rise that would come from looking back and realizing that this had all happened for a reason. This was a note in the symphony that I was only beginning to listen to.
I meditated as I sat in there. I meditated and thought about all that had just happened. I tried to calculate what the chances of four policemen searching my room and not looking in the one area of it that would destroy my life was. I had a feeling it was low. I had a feeling this was a miracle.
Each moment that passed in those hours took my heart deeper and deeper into a part of my soul I had been avoiding for too long.
I had been avoiding my life, my parents, my purpose. I had been avoiding thinking about how far I was falling. And this moment, this moment was a break; a brief reminder that my life mattered.
That I was meant for something bigger than being a pot dealer who was failing school. That all the emotional issues I had been facing weren't empty moments, but a part of a bigger picture.
And, most importantly, that somebody, or something, was watching over me.
And I remember how they opened the holding cell and told me I could go home now. They asked if I wanted to call a cab. I told them I lived close by and I would be fine walking.
They opened the door and they let me out. The warm air of an Arizona night slapped me in the face.
I literally skipped home. I danced. My knees hit the air like I was a gymnast. I flew home on a cloud of faith and belief.

The next day, I got all my friends together, put my four ounces of pot on the table, and said,
"We're not leaving until this is all gone."
We smoked the day away, partying. They were partying because there was four ounces of pot to smoke. I was partying because I knew I mattered. I was partying because I knew I would never sell this pot again, no matter how addicted I got, no matter how bad my life got. I was partying because I knew that the cops would drop the case. That I wasn't going to get in any trouble.
Deep in my heart I knew. Because something was looking out for me.
And I was right.

Elad Nehorai is the creator of Pop Chassid, a blog whose goal is to bring out the creative energy of the Jewish world and the larger world as well. He is also the CMO of Charidy, a crowdfunding platform for nonprofits.

“It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. ... The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living. Yet it is possible to practice the art of living even in a concentration camp, although suffering is omnipresent.”

-Viktor Frankl

My Holocaust Problem (not as big as my grandparents')

by Mark Mikhly

It was a first date, and we were eating ice cream. She'd just finished telling me a fun story about getting matching tattoos with her dad. "My family is quite conservative," I explained, "but my grandparents had matching tattoos." "Cool!" "Yea, right across their forearms." I cringed myself through the subsequent awkward pause and light chuckle.

I cannot stop making casual references to the Holocaust. I consistently manage to weave mentions of the Holocaust into party conversations, job interviews, first impressions, professional essays, etc. They're often dry and sometimes even funny, though I wouldn't say I intend them as jokes. What I've come to realize is that my lighthearted everyday references are better understood as pathologic compulsions than grasps at hilarity.

If you don't appreciate the problem, consider whether you would want to be that weird guy making unnecessary Holocaust jokes. Sometimes I get lucky – that girl actually thought it was uncomfortably hilarious, stuck with me and is now my girlfriend. But most times, as you might imagine, the Holocaust as conversation fodder makes people uncomfortable and, almost inevitably, Holocaust jokes just don't pay off. Should I get a free pass on my Holocaust comments? It's not like I survived the Holocaust. It feels like I should get a free pass, though.

In searching for an understanding of why I feel the unceasing impulse to bring up the Holocaust, I am reminded of an elderly male member of my family's synagogue who had a very specific descent into dementia. He would relate harrowing, emotional accounts of his Holocaust childhood to everyone at shul. Though he was the right age, he was born and raised in New York and was not in fact a Holocaust survivor. He'd been surrounded by Holocaust survivors, refugees, remembering, storytelling and analysis his entire life, and now with his memory fading his mind inevitably came to the conclusion that he too was a Holocaust survivor. The Holocaust had inextricably integrated itself into his reality. I think I can relate to that. I anticipate my own chapter of senility developing similarly.

I've been living with the Holocaust for my entire life. My comments are part of how I relate to the horrible tragedy. Overwhelming and constant, the presence of the Holocaust in my subconscious bubbles over in the casual, coarse Holocaust humor that has become my own twisted version of never forgetting.

Six-Million Holocaust Firsts

I borrow from Sholom Auslander to explain the extent to which the Holocaust is part of my life and psyche. Like his protagonist in *Foreskin's Lament* (a Portnoy's Complaint for our times), the first naked female I ever saw was in a picture of a group selection at a Nazi concentration camp. It wasn't my only first flavored by the Holocaust.

My first nightmare was a Holocaust nightmare, a recurrent one. Night after night, my parents would forego food to provide me with a birthday slice of bread. Details fluctuated but often involved horrible sacrifice, deprivation, and at times Nazi besiegement of my family's Brooklyn apartment. I was probably in first grade. My mom says her first nightmares were also Holocaust nightmares; what a unique family tradition!

My first tears of empathy came after a Holocaust presentation in second grade. I was wearing blue and white and cutting out a yellow star to wear to the school-wide assembly. Perhaps I was only a child having a simple reaction to the overwhelming traumatic images routine in youth Holocaust education but in my recollection I was actually experiencing a deep and abstract empathy for the millions of children who died during the Holocaust. I'm proud of that precocious moment of insight but I don't wish it upon anyone else. My mother's father, Zeidy, didn't speak English and I never learned Hungarian or Yiddish, so even though I spent nearly every afternoon of my childhood playing cards and chess or watching Wheel of Fortune with him, we'd never really had a conversation. Years after his death, my mother thought to translate a letter he'd written documenting his Holocaust experience for the sake of receiving reparations. Reading his story in his own words, I realized it was my first time hearing my grandfather's voice and I cried.

What Can We Do But Laugh?

All four of my grandparents survived the Holocaust and lost the majority of their families to it. Growing up, their stories, as related by my parents (victims of their own years of Soviet-brand anti-Semitic oppression), were an everyday part of life. Perhaps in an attempt to relate stories that were “age-appropriate,” many of the stories were framed humorously. A couple of these chuckle-producing vignettes come to mind. My grandfather, narrowly escaping a slave-labor camp with another man, is forced to spend a freezing winter night dangerously exposed in an open cow pasture. The punch line arrives in the morning on his companion’s face in the form of a pile of warm cow shit.

In another, my grandmother, leaving her elderly mother (for the last time) in their forest hiding spot to forage for food in town, is captured by a group of fascist Hungarian Brown Shirts. The men do not know this Czech girl speaks Hungarian and are apparently not aware of the irony of calling her the prettiest girl in town as they subject her to a lengthy beating. My family was, though, and allowed this story to serve as my own early and dark introduction to the concept of irony.

These hilarious anecdotes, so casually offered to a very young me, were my first experiences with morbid humor.

An often-proffered observation is that those in emotionally taxing situations use humor as a mechanism to relieve stress. I’ve certainly seen and participated in my share of laughter in inappropriate situations as a medical student: while dissecting human bodies, during medical emergencies, while discussing critically ill patients, and after patient deaths. Still, morbid humor goes beyond a mechanism of situational stress-relief. Morbid humor is an exercise in absurdity; it’s an acknowledgement of the seriousness of an issue. It’s a faux indifference. If one were really indifferent, there would be no humor. My casual approach to the Holocaust is the evidence of the weight it bears ever-presently in my mind.

Never Forget the Holocaust

Every time I go home the Holocaust is referenced. Really, we probably have a conversation about it every day. Every time I visit my grandmother, the Holocaust is referenced. Just seeing her feels like a reference to the Holocaust. I can hardly think of my family without thinking of the Holocaust.

For my family, the Holocaust never really ended. My parents are themselves religious refugees and victims of persecution. They grew up not in the mythical Edenic lands of America, but in Eastern Europe, the physically, psychologically, and spiritually scarred land of the Holocaust. For my parents, home was a place where no one had grandparents (all had been murdered), property (all had been collectivized), family heirlooms (family furniture furnished the dining rooms of neighbors), religious expression (my mom still weeps during high school choir performances at the sight of “all the Jewish children”), and of no prospects (with a Master’s degree in Cybernetic Mathematics, my mother taught a night school high school equivalency course to drunken factory workers; the word Jew on your identification was severely limiting for professional advancement). The Holocaust and religious persecution weren’t aspects of Jewish history for my parents; they were Judaism for my parents.

The Holocaust wasn’t my fault – why do I feel guilty?

Children of immigrants struggle to relate to their parents. Our childhoods couldn’t have been more different. I was born in the USA, in a time of historically unparalleled religious and economic Jewish privilege. Further, I grew up in Brooklyn, home of the largest concentration of Jews outside Israel. Completely surrounded by Jews on my block, at school, at camp, and in the street, I didn’t meaningfully interact with a non-Jew until I was 18.

Leaving this bubble led to a strange and rapid secularization. This transition is not uncommon among my cohort of modern-orthodox-raised, secular-college-educated young adults. Each of my friends struggles to explore the limits and limitations of their personal relationship with Judaism.

So what about me? What keeps me Jewish? What made me limit my OKCupid searches to Jews? Why do I throw Chulent parties and bake hamentashen? My long and tortuous journey of study and introspection on Jewish religion/ethnicity/heritage/people is a story for another time. My relationship to Judaism lies outside of practice. "Cultural Judaism" doesn't quite appeal to me either. I can't believe that the promises of shared memories of summer camp, gefilte fish, and the dreidel song are at the root of my desire to marry a Jew.

On serious reflection, a good portion of what's keeping me committed to Judaism is the guilt of the Holocaust. I cannot bear to make wasteful the experiences of my parents and grandparents. These feelings aren't necessarily rational, but as I've tried to illustrate in this essay, for better or worse, my history and my family are a deep-rooted part of my identity. My casual allusions to the torture and murder of 6 million Jews are not boorish and immature jokes, but expressions of my deep bond to Jewish heritage seeping out of my psyche and into my daily speech. I was going to end with an inappropriate joke or pun, but I was afraid it would make the message of my essay seem hollow....caust.

Mark Mikhly is a lifelong New Yorker fulfilling thousands of years of tradition and his parents' wildest dreams as a medical student.



Artwork by Ruthie Matanky-Skaist

Yours is a Silence
by Dovid'l Weinberg

Yours is a silence
reminiscent of
familiar hearts
beating for You
beaten for You.

Mine is an invocation
stirring up memories
of ancient fore-bearers
searching for You
surging for You.

Ours is a chord
three times persuaded
bent, twined, berated
but never faded
never faded.

For Kemal, an Obit

by Anonymous

I found out yesterday that Kemal died.

When I Google his name now, the first thing that comes up is a Gothamist headline: "6 Men Fatally Shot in Violent Start to Weekend." I learned that "At 2:50 p.m., 28-year-old Kemal Haddock* was found at Spender Place and Fulton Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant with several gunshot wounds to his body; Haddock, who lived on Jefferson Avenue between Bedford and Nostrand Avenues, was taken to a nearby hospital where he was pronounced dead."

And, according to the New York Post, "An ex-con was gunned down in Bed-Stuy, authorities said yesterday. Kemal Haddock, 28, was hanging out at a building on Spencer Place near Fulton Street at 2:50 p.m. Friday when gunshots rang out, cops said. The victim was shot several times and rushed to Interfaith Hospital, where he died, police said. Haddock previously served a stint in state prison for selling drugs, records show. Police did not know what sparked the violence and no arrests have been made."

Kemal was my client this past summer, when I worked as a legal intern in the Criminal Division of The Legal Aid Society in Queens. He was arrested in May and charged with felony criminal contempt. The mother of his child had an order of protection against him, and Kemal was arrested when she showed up at his doorstep, and an altercation ensued. Unable to make bail and without a resource in the world, Kemal was in jail until we could negotiate a deal for him. I worked on his case from beginning to end.

I met Kemal, or Mr. Haddock as I called him, on one of my first days of work. We first met in the Pens under the courthouse. As a petite 24-year-old woman, I'd often get catcalled as I walked through the Pens, looking for my client, but Kemal was very respectful. As we talked, our goal emerged, and it was simple: get him out as fast as possible, but make sure the Assistant District Attorney (ADA) agreed to maintain Kemal's visitation rights for his son, La-El. During one court appearance, the ADA tried to place a two-year order of protection against Kemal on behalf of his son. Kemal broke down crying in the courtroom.

After some negotiation, the ADA agreed that Kemal could plead to a lessened misdemeanor charge, and be released if he agreed to participate in an anger management and batterer's intervention program. She would also let him see his son.

We subpoenaed Kemal's records from the NYC Board of Education. Reading them, I learned that Kemal's mother had died of alcoholism when he was still in elementary school, and that his father had left him with a family friend one day when he went out of state for a funeral and never came back. Kemal had lost touch with all of his siblings, or they had passed away. He was declared "mentally retarded" in one of his psychological evaluations, and received consistent low marks for insight and judgment. He was in an out of Juvenile Detention homes as an adolescent. He had been out and clean for a couple of years now, with no criminal charges. He was extremely frustrated to find himself in this cycle again.

Throughout the summer, Kemal and I spoke face to face in the Pens or through a video conference while he was at Riker's Island. One time, Kemal was having a particularly bad day. The day before, he was supposed to have come to the Courthouse to take his plea, but he didn't show up. I finally got in touch with him, and he told me that he had been on lockdown, because other prisoners had gotten into a fight, and prison authorities thought that he was involved. Through the video, I could see that he had new cuts on his face. I tried to talk him through it, telling him that he should go to his cell and read for the day and try not to talk to anyone, because he was now less than 24 hours from release.

He got out the next day. He didn't have a phone, so I gave him my number at work so he could figure out when and how to come to the Legal Aid office to meet with his social worker so he could start on his programs. He called later that week to coordinate and thank me. "Thank you," he said, "I can tell you're going to be a real good lawyer one day."

And for the Kemals of the world, I really hope I can be a real good lawyer one day. I struggled with whether to go into public interest or corporate work after I graduate. It's not just the financial incentives that draw me to the corporate world. I'll admit it: it's the easy way out. It's easy to be adversarial when you're fighting over huge amounts of money. It's less easy to be adversarial when you're fighting about someone's life. And once you've seen a grown man and stranger cry over seeing his kid, it's not just about some criminal's life. The accused has a face and a story. He has feelings and goals. And struggling to defend someone like that, who has the world stacked against him, is emotionally draining and painful.

After Kemal was released, my supervisor, who has been a devoted Legal Aid Criminal Defense staff attorney for almost thirty years now, told me that our work was done. After the case is settled, the attorney steps away. There's nothing else that we can do, and we just have to hope that the client makes the right choices. But it's almost impossible for someone like Kemal to make those choices. And that's where the work gets tough. Some people think that the hardest part about public defense work is the clients. But I'm sure that the clients I had this summer will be some of the most grateful I'll have in my career. The most difficult thing for me about public defense work is the helplessness that I felt as a legal advocate trying to help Kemal. It's always too late. And now La-El Haddock, less than a year old, will be raised fatherless as well. It's a never-ending cycle that we as a society have to do something to break. I'm not sure what that is, but I hope I'm strong enough to help. And for Kemal, I'm going to do my best and try to be "real good".

Note: Names have been changed as attorney-client privilege extends even after the death of a client.

The author is a young professional living in New York City.

The Meditation of Travel

by Yehoshua November

To warm ourselves before a stove
In a foreign province,
To rise early,
The wayfarer's prayer
On our tongues,
To watch fish blaze through shallow streams
And think of home,
To shift our load from one shoulder to the next
And be reminded of the faces
Of lovers that failed us
Ages ago.
All these form meditation of travel,
All these are not unlike carrying a cello
Through a winter night,
The dark wood rotting
In the snow.

Free Birds

by Aaron

And so there I stood, my first morning in Chiang Mai, a labyrinth of a city scattered with crumbling temples.

The journey north required a truck, a boat and two trains, but it only took ten minutes of wandering the streets before I turned a corner and found a weathered woman who offered me three birds in a cage. A mere one hundred Baht and I could free them, she explained through a toothless grin, and metaphorically free myself as well. I turned her grin into a smile as I purchased the birds and set them free across the sunny temple grounds. The next 48 hours unfolded as much of the last three years of my life has: disconnected, unpredictable, and utterly satisfying.

From my experience, when you make a genuine effort to learn about others, you learn more about yourself in the process. I had been working for close to four years since graduating college, had learned everything I could about how to be good at my job, and yet knew little about the things I cared about in the big picture. With each passing day, the questions inside raged louder, until it was less of a choice and more of a necessity to respond. So, I took a leave of absence from my job, traveled 6000 miles, and made a decision to share experiences with new people in a new place.

As the birds flapped their wings to the beat of freedom, I couldn't help but yawn. I was exhausted from yesterday's 700 miles of traveling, and my old self would have indulged in the luxury of napping, and the isolation it offered. Defiant, I forced myself to continue on and rented a bike instead.

Whipping through side streets I saw two men drinking beer over a makeshift cardboard coop. Inside was the tail-end of a bloody cock fight. The men explained, in broken English, that training was in progress, and that these little animals trained like this daily as part of a six-month program before being given a chance to fight for their lives. My stomach turned from the vapid display of animal cruelty, but was placated by a morning beer with two friendly locals.

After the practice bout, I uncrumpled the map from my pocket and ventured North toward an icon of a monkey. I threaded through traffic for an hour, pulled in a deep breath of pollution, and gave up my search for monkeys. It felt like it was time to head back to the safety, and isolation, of my room, but instead of heading back, I found myself pedaling towards a gun range conveniently situated on the side of the road. It was expensive to shoot, so I ordered a fresh juice and sat in the stands behind the range. Invigorated by my drink, and empowered by my earlier camaraderie with violent locals, I struck up conversation with a man who was enjoying a day with his guns. His English was good. We swapped a few stories, and shot at a few targets for over an hour. A relatively new feeling rose up inside me. I was having fun, sure, but it was uninhibited in a pure way and of my own making.

As we cleaned his guns I told him I wanted to see monkeys and he offered to ride with me and, with a wink, mentioned that he partially owned the monkey attraction. He pushed my bicycle from behind with his left leg as his right leg shifted the gears on his motorbike. Within minutes my wheel was slowly becoming unhinged; a reminder that I was going above the suggested speed limit for a bicycle rental. The chaos of the dusty road seemed lethal on this side of the world. Also, there's the chance this man was in the business of human trafficking. I let the reaction pass through me and followed my gut. We arrived. Entering the attraction the security guard saluted him. With another wink, he informed me he was a sergeant in the Thai military on his day off and we watched the monkeys put on a show. On the way back to the city center we stopped by his base and received some more solutes from his officers. I probably looked like a suspicious companion next to the sergeant with the stupid grin etched on my face.

That evening, after a tasty local dinner at a restaurant without a menu, we arrived at my hostel and I thanked him sincerely for the great time. The travelers at the hostel witnessed my unusual entrance and asked about my day. We exchanged stories, went bar hopping and danced to live music until sunrise. It's easy to forget how tired and insecure I am when I'm happy. With a few hours of sleep, I managed to make it to the truck that was waiting at the front of the hostel at 9:00 am to take me, along with a group of nine other people, to the mountains for a trek through the jungle. By noon I was riding an elephant. After lunch we hiked through the dense Asian jungle up mountains and past waterfalls. As the sun set, we set up camp with a local mountain tribe and, following dinner, I found myself in a bamboo den doing drugs with the chieftain.

It was a good few days by my account. I felt unlimited and connected at the same time. I explored the boundaries of my power, and discovered they stretched further than an arbitrary degree I had long ago imposed on myself. And, it all happened within a three month stint when I made an intentional choice to abandon convention as a crutch, did not make a phone call, or wear proper shoes. I was on my great adventure, and it was an outcome of deliberate choices I had to make to get me to where I was-- in that country, in that city, with those people.

A fence had always existed that insulated me from what was outside my community, and, while doing so, provided me with what was inside – structure, context and support. There was a clear distinction being made, and my choice was crossing to the other side of that fence. Now, as I peer back over, I oscillate between enjoying the benefits and contemplating the costs.

A naturally curious person, it has always been hard for me to have one foot on each side of the fence: on the one side, a modern world of questions, and on the other, a traditional world of answers. It was a delicate balance I was never able to strike, and it seemed disingenuous on both sides. I was losing my footing.

I felt compelled to explore. When I considered myself a religious person, I certainly learned new things and had fun. I think it's even possible for an observant Jew to have a similar adventure as the one that took place over those few days in Chiang Mai. But, I never could figure out how. As a result, I began to position myself to the world first as a genuine person, rather than an observant Jew. Although the difference is subtle, and probably says more about how I relate to myself than to others, this shift was significant for me. My motivation was not to abandon my values, but rather to tweak a personal code that just wasn't working. I made an attempt to address the source of my discontent, a pure motive, which made it a decision I can tolerate.

The decision was not instantaneous. It was something that evolved over a few years and, since then, I've strung together the wide range of experiences with a diverse set of people. This was a major development for someone who graduated from a state university without a single friend not of my faith. That day in Chiang Mai, and many other days since, I made a choice not to isolate myself, but rather to engage with people I find interesting regardless of their background. Now I feel as though I have achieved what I set out to do. I can enter a new environment and bring forward a fundamentally different attitude: open and honest. The results have often been exhilarating. Uninhibited curiosity, while it often led to unstable circumstances, actually made me feel like a more stable person. I attribute this to the fact that by exposing myself, I learned to interact with people in a genuine manner and see them through a lense that was unobscured by expectations I never personally set.

The cost is that I've compromised the foundation that supported me through most of my life. A series of unorthodox decisions rendered me in the position I am in today – non-observant, single and generally unsure of what I want to do. Through my travels I have played the role of the only Jewish person to many people, and I still maintain a connection with my religion, culture and history. I admit, though, that I may be further away now to knowing what I wanted then when I was younger, and observant, and in a serious relationship. I confess that my existence may have less depth than it did when I tried to live on a spiritual plane. But, this is the only side of the fence that makes me feel like me. Before it felt like trying. Now it feels like doing.

Not knowing the answers to such questions is a scary prospect, but so is the prospect of living my life for the sole sake of being born into it. I freed my birds. Because of this, I feel like a more authentic version of myself. Perhaps that makes me a worse Jew, or perhaps a better one. Regardless, I acknowledge the cost was steep; far steeper than the 100 Bhat it appeared to be that morning in Chiang Mai.

As for where the road leads, I try to stay optimistic. All groups, on all levels, from a basketball team to an entire nation, require individuals to play different roles. My aim is to play my role, whatever it may be, as a more complete, honest Jewish person. I've elected to take a path that wasn't prescribed to me and that makes things more complicated. The destination is unknown, and, therefore, there are countless paths.

What I do know is that while my anchor currently is in New York City, in close proximity to a Jewish community, my next adventure is going to be a new place, with new people. It may be in a third world country, but it won't be a mission to find myself. It'll be another experience, along a line of experiences that stretches far ahead, which I'll look back at with some apprehension and a bit of pride. Hopefully, soon, I'll be able to see if the line is truly moving toward a fulfilling and happy place -- a place where my anchor and my adventure are one and the same.

Aaron enjoys traveling.



Artwork by Ilan Block

How a Place Becomes Holy

by Yehoshua November

Sometimes a man
Will start crying in the middle of the street,
Without knowing why or for whom.
It is as though someone else is standing there,
Holding his briefcase, wearing his coat.

And from beneath the rust of years,
Come to his tongue the words of his childhood:
"I'm sorry," and "God," and "Do not be far from
me."

And just as suddenly the tears are gone,
And the man walks back into his life,
And the place where he cried becomes holy.

We Have To Look to Each Other

by Hillel Liss

When someone is teaching, they must connect themselves to the soul of each of their listeners, so that they are both sharing an idea, each using it and shaping it along the way. Moses' sin of hitting the rock, explains Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, was in fact a failure to properly connect himself to his People. And, this is perhaps the same failure some of our Rabbis are committing today. Their inability to relate to the day-to-day issues of their congregants is not merely concerning; it's a paradigm shift.

Reb Yisroel Odesser, the father of the 'Na Nach' movement, said that all the Rabbis of his time "were not tzadikim" and that he had "no connection to them." It was this aspect of disconnectedness that he was referring to. Rabbis today take a test and get a certificate like a university degree. Our spiritual leaders of the past didn't just take a test, however, they were consciously accepted by the collective, as the most refined souls of the community, with the most sensitivity to the needs of the congregation in which they found themselves. To me, valuing a person with a great mind alone is like valuing a beautiful empty bottle over a simple one that is filled with fine wine. Personally, I would rather be lead by a kind, moral person, than someone brilliant.

Rebbe Nachman explains that Moses' staff represented his power as a leader, while the rock was meant to serve the needs of the community, in this case, water in the desert. Moses was meant to speak to the rock, to serve the need of each individual with compassion, to pray amongst the needs of each person. Instead, he forcefully imposed his own agenda with his staff, his power as leader. Today, we can see this approach in some pretty extreme forms.

However, there exists a different model for leadership. It's old, but in my opinion resonates better today than anything else being offered.

In the nineteenth century, Rebbe Nachman supported a leadership style that we would be smart to take a closer look at. He emphasized a leader's connection to his people, as a direct expression of their own personality and charisma. A leader is not a politician, a leader is a poet. Their leadership is an intimate understanding of their people's needs, seen through the brilliant eyes of somebody who feels deeply the current running through the present day. They do not sit on an elevated platform looking down and providing an answer. At what point did shul Rabbis start sitting on a higher platform than their community during prayer services? Today, does this at times only exemplify and exacerbate some of the disconnection between our spiritual leaders and our spiritual seekers?! A leader stands eye-to-eye, and prays side-by-side, as a friend would.

That's why a person must pray to connect to each listener before beginning to teach, because Prayer itself is the ultimate equalizer. Through Prayer, one encounters a clarification of their desires, and sorts out what is essential about him or her. It is on this common ground that we're all striving to give solace to our collective yearning soul. I have found it very inspiring to pray on Yom Kippur in the synagogue I went to as a kid and seeing my childhood dentist crying out to Hashem to do tshuvah. It makes me realize that there is no essential separation between the dentist and the rabbi. And this, in it of itself, is the fruition of all prayers, for the moment we can be ourselves, without the masks and negative traits which stem from fear and distrust, all good is achieved, certainly in desire and we are already in the redemption together. Practically, Rebbe Nachman is discussing giving over a drasha. It's something every rabbi, of every shul, does every shabbos. When was the last time you heard a drasha that pierced your soul? How many times have you sat in shul while the rabbi speaks about the parsha, while your mind wanders towards more relevant things like happiness, fulfillment, work, and relationships?

If our drashas aren't suited for us, how can the leaders who give them be?

We live in a time when people are searching for success and fulfillment, yet are being lead by people who simply graduated from the right schools without necessarily having captured it themselves. But maybe our priority should simply be connecting to each other in the search itself; finding an other in a word we speak and our self in a word we hear.

Perhaps we are reaching a time when we are truly a nation of teachers and we're all becoming leaders, listening to each other. Perhaps Moshe Rabbeinu, when he said (Num. 20) "*Shim'u Nah Ha'morim,*" "Listen, rebels" before hitting the rock, was also saying, "Listen, teachers" foretelling of future generations who will also thirst, but not for water. They will also drink, but not because of a staff or platform. They will be each other's students, and a generation of teachers.

We need to look to each other to lead. We must look no further. We already have friends who are compassionate and caring. Let us make them our rabbis and leaders. Let us finally end the one thing that the holy Ba'al Shem Tov himself said would halt the redemption: The Rabbinate.

Hillel has spent the past 10 years studying Torah, philosophy, music, economic science, and many other contemporary fields. He current works at a fruit store.

Moonlight

by Dr. Benjy Epstein

Every human being has the freedom to change at any instant.

--Viktor Frankl

The moon, unlike the sun, will not cancel the darkness that surrounds it. A dark night, despite the presence of the moonlight, remains. However, in that time and place of darkness, regardless of what has transpired within it, the moon's light can still be perceived.

In Egypt, a place that embodied personal and national bondage, surrounded by an abyss of despair, a new beginning was granted. A tiny speck of moonlight was given to a single moment. When this gift was handed to the slaves in Egypt, it was offered as 'a gift of becoming' with a simple message: in the midst of being bound by your dark, cold chains, you can still feel the opportunity to renew. This was our liberation.

We were constricted, enslaved physically, mentally, and spiritually in the dark night of Egypt, within a system that told us nothing will change. As slaves, we lacked the clarity and precision to know that the freedom to change and transcend time, resided within, not without.

Our entrance into the moonlit Torah, was an entrance that offered us the key to escape servitude for time everlasting. It was freedom from the past, present, and future, enabled by the now. The only way to freedom was through a direct encounter with this moment. The first commandment of blessing the moonlight of the new month was the sanctification of the now, taking this moment back for yourself, choosing to transcend the bonds of time.

This was our instruction on how to truly be free – sanctify the moon, sanctify this moment, the essence of freedom as your means to redemption. The gift of the present is that ultimately it provides the true freedom to unwrap our passions and unhinge from our fears because, right now, I am lit.

The Torah therefore teaches us to remember the Exodus every day and on each holiday. We need to constantly bring ourselves back to the present moment. We need to find the moonlight within, that freedom suspended above any bondage, and let it act as a meditation, as a guide back to the moment. Remember you are free. Remember how to be free. Remember that you never have to be a slave again.

Living in Jerusalem, Benjy holds a PhD in Clinical Psychology. His practice utilizes Mindfulness, spirituality and Acceptance-Commitment Therapy. In a nutshell - More Light, More Cowbell. Follow him at: @levitejester, and his work at @MBCTIsrael.