

The New York Jewish Week/end

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The author's ID badge allowed her to enter a NYC morgue and sit vigil over the remains of Sept. 11 victims. In the background, a "Wall of Peace" at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan features images of those missing in the destruction of the World Trade Center by terrorists. (JTA montage by Grace Yagel. Badge courtesy Jessica Russak-Hoffman; photo by Dave Hogan/Mission Pictures/Getty Images)

Must read

ADL CEO: We 'Apologize Without Caveat' for Opposing Islamic Center Near Ground Zero / Page 4

My Jewish Father Volunteered at Ground Zero. Here's How We're Honoring Him Now. / Page 5

Dungeons & Dragons Has United a Diverse Group of Rabbis / Page 6

Editor's Desk / Page 9

Opinion / Page 10

Sabbath Week / Page 14

Musings, David Wolpe / Page 15

Books / Page 15

Arts and Culture / Page 18

Events / Page 20

● 9/11: 20 YEARS LATER

I Sat Vigil for the Souls of 9/11 Victims. 20 Years Later I Still Feel Their Presence — and Absence.

Memories of "guarding" the bodies still leave me raw.

By Jessica Russak-Hoffman

Two nights after the Twin Towers fell on 9/11, we were instructed to evacuate our building. There was talk of a potential attack on the nearby Empire State Building. My roommates and I covered our mouths and noses with towels to protect against the still fetid air and walked east from our midtown Manhattan Stern College apartment to get out of the danger zone. Every telephone pole was plastered with hastily printed "MISSING" signs, each with a different smiling face and a phone number to call.

THESE MEN AND WOMEN LEFT A LEGACY THAT'S NEEDED NOW MORE THAN EVER.

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Through their generosity they are helping to repair our world, making it better for generations to come. May their memories be a blessing.

When we reached the barricades, staffed by state troopers and police, we'd gone as far as we could go. And at the corner, right where the barricades met the Bellevue Hospital Center, two lines formed behind folding tables on the sidewalk.

"What are these lines?" I asked a state trooper from behind my towel. The air was thick and I could see motes of debris floating in the light of the street lamps.

"One to give the name of the missing person and check to see if they're in the hospital. The other to provide DNA," he said.

Indeed, when I looked closely, there were people in the lines clutching Ziploc bags of hair brushes and toothbrushes. As the days passed, the line for the hospital names grew shorter and the DNA line grew longer. Survivors in the hospital were rare. The missing were presumed dead.

So when I traveled from the eerily empty Grand Central Terminal on Friday to spend Shabbos at the University of Pennsylvania — wracked with guilt for leaving the city a few days after the attack, but doing as my worried mother requested — I was mortified to hear someone at Hillel joke: "Some guy trying to leave his wife is for sure faking his death right now."

One train ride. That's how far this person was from an actual terrorist attack with thousands presumed dead. One train ride was enough for him to feel detached. To feel that this tragedy wasn't relevant to him.

I said nothing. I was still in shock from the attacks, but this tragedy was not mine, either. I was a witness, not a victim. I knew no one who had been killed. Any attempt at "how dare you" felt like centering myself. Yet watching an airplane hit a nearby occupied building from my apartment balcony is something I could never unsee, never unfeel. Every passing airplane for the next 20 years would bring me back to that moment. I could not detach.

One month later I was asked to help organize Stern students to sit shmira at the New York City Medical Examiner's temporary morgue outside Bellevue every Shabbos — keeping the Jewish custom of watching over the dead, and in too many cases the unidentified remains of those lost in the attack until they could be buried. I found myself, an idealistic 20-year-old student, sitting

across from Dr. Charles Hirsch, the chief medical examiner, to arrange for a badge that would let us Stern girls in and out of the morgue site. Every Friday night I took the midnight shift and arrived at the very spot where the two lines had formed. Fate brought me there the week of the attacks. A mitzvah brought me there again and again.

A state trooper would welcome me with a smile and move the barricade to let me in, and every single time it felt like I was walking onto holy ground. I recited Psalms in a large tent alongside freezer trucks that were parked across from the entry to the morgue where medical examiners worked night and day to identify victims.

We were a constant flow of young Jews; the same few volumes of Psalms passed from hand to hand for months on end. Sometimes, when I took the first shift that brought in Shabbos, I would be overwhelmed with the massive effort and organization of this operation. After a New York Times piece came out about our vigil, my face became the face of the 9/11 Shmira, and my guilt in placing myself at the center of the tragedy deepened. A mitzvah for the dead is meant to be selfless, ideally anonymous. It was too late to be anonymous.

What started off as a catastrophe that I happened to witness became something different. During my once-a-week midnight Shabbos shift, my job was to offer comfort to the souls that lingered there in that makeshift outdoor morgue. I felt connected to them. They filled that space. I lived inside that space for nearly nine months, and when it ended, I emerged to a world that had been using those nine months to recover. It was my turn to recover.

"I lived inside that space for nearly nine months, and when it ended, I emerged to a world that had been using those nine months to recover."

Twenty years later, I can honestly say that I haven't. It is raw. I still think about that Penn student who joked about the missing, and perhaps it has made me stronger in teaching my own children about empathy and the right words to say. Every year there are new documentaries, new footage released, new phone recordings and last words. My children learn about it in school and ask me questions. As a writer I've attempted to process my grief in essays and fiction, but none of it ever feels like

enough. There's a feeling, a shared experience, that I could never capture in words.

Instead I seek closure, frequently searching how many of the bodies are still unidentified — as recently as 2019, the remains of 40% of the victims are too damaged to identify. I visit the memorial and see the waterfalls flowing into the memorial pools, imagining the towers inverted into the depths below ground. I run my fingers over the names engraved on the edges of the pools, wondering if they remember me. If they remember all of us who sat our vigil. I remember them.

In the depths, in their company, inverted into the ground below memorial waterfalls, I go back to one of the Psalms in particular when I want to honor the victims. To the one I'd memorized and could recite over and over when I was too tired at 4 in the morning to read from the book. Tehillim 130, which begins: "A song of ascents. Out of the depths I call You, O Lord."

Every year around this time I am brought into the depths.

Out of the depths I continue to call.

Jessica Russak-Hoffman is a Seattle-based author represented by Emerald City Literary Agency. For more information, visit www.jessicarussakhoffman.com.

● 9/11: 20 YEARS LATER

ADL CEO: We 'Apologize Without Caveat' for Opposing Islamic Center Near Ground Zero

By Philissa Cramer

Eleven years ago, the Anti-Defamation League surprised many by opposing an Islamic center planned for Lower Manhattan, blocks from the World Trade Center site the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, even as its leader denounced anti-Muslim bigotry.

Now, the ADL's CEO says the position, taken four years before he joined the civil rights organization, was a mistake.

"We were wrong, plain and simple," Jonathan Greenblatt wrote in an op-ed published Saturday morning on CNN.

Greenblatt said the group had tried to offer a compromise by supporting the ideas behind Cordoba House, described by its leaders as a prayer space that would facilitate healing and cross-cultural understanding, but recommending that it not be located near Ground Zero. But that compromise hurt Muslims, he said, and ultimately contributed to the project yielding a condo building with little from the original proposal in place.

The apology comes days before the 20th anniversary of the 2001 attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York City, Washington, D.C. and Pennsylvania. It also comes in the days before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, holidays that ask Jews to take stock of their misdeeds and commit to improved behavior.

Greenblatt noted the timing in his piece, which he said he wrote in a spirit of teshuvah, or repentance, and also linked it to what he said was a rising tide of Islamophobia in the United States.

"We can't change the past," he wrote. "But we accept responsibility for our unwise stance on Cordoba House, apologize without caveat and commit to doing our utmost going forward to use our expertise to fight anti-Muslim bias as allies."

Greenblatt's apology is notable because he has largely refrained from undercutting his predecessor, long-time ADL chief Abraham Foxman. It is not the first time, though, that he has openly criticized a choice Foxman made: Earlier this year, he said he would not give an award to Rupert Murdoch, the media magnate who owns Fox News, because he said that network has given a platform to far-right ideas.

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● 9/11: 20 YEARS LATER

My Jewish Father Volunteered at Ground Zero. Here's How We're Honoring Him Now.

By Elisha Gechter

My father, Michael Horen, was an artist by training and a graphic designer by profession. But the word I most often use to describe him is “humanitarian.” That’s not because he ever did any international aid work, but because throughout his life, he really sought to make connections with others — with an ear to how he could help.

When families from the Former Soviet Union started attending our synagogue in Riverdale, New York in the '90s, my parents were among the first to invite them for Shabbat meals. Over one such lunch, my father learned about an upcoming bat mitzvah of a child and immediately offered to create the welcome sign-in board tailored to the whims of that kid who was in a moment of transition. These small acts of connection and kindness were in my father’s nature, but his path towards observant Judaism as an adult also gave him a religious and cultural framework for his activism. He deeply believed in the Jewish values of chesed, caring for others; tzeda-kah, giving what you could and being a mensch — an upstanding citizen who contributes to a better world.

His last job before retiring was as the director of special projects at a telecom business. One of his projects was operating a kosher soup van; he drove it several times a week to help feed the homeless in Newark. I loved riding with him in that van during my school breaks and seeing my dad in action, treating each client with rachmonous. It was during this time, 20 years ago on September 11, 2001, that my father looked out of the large windows in his office in Newark and watched the Twin Towers burn and collapse.

My dad told me that, as he watched the horrors of that day unfold, he experienced a mix of emotions — disbelief, panic and, very soon, a desire to help and to connect. For the next month and a half, his company dedicated that kosher soup van to serving meals to first responders at Ground Zero. Five days a week, my father spent hours queuing up to get into Lower Manhattan to help those who were helping others by bringing 400 meals a day to feed police, firefighters, volunteers and anyone who needed a kosher meal. At the time, I was 19 and studying in Israel, and for the first time the tables were turned — I was worried about my dad. But I was also proud of him and I knew his heart was telling him where he needed to be.

It’s hard to believe that was 20 years ago — so much has changed in my life and across the globe. I moved from Israel to New York to California, and have been settled in Boston for the last 16 years. I’ve found a partner I love, as well as a pluralistic Jewish community that I love on a personal and professional level. I’m a mom of two kids whom I’m trying to both protect from the harsh parts of the world (pandemic, terrorism and wars) and motivate them to positively impact the world.

In 2009, my dad was diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia (CLL) during a routine checkup — a surprise, as we had no family history of this terrible disease. He started to work with a team of doctors to monitor his white blood count twice a year and for many years he was stable, though the possibility of his condition worsening always loomed in the background.

In 2018, a family friend who knew about my father’s condition, as well as his service at Ground Zero, suggested a possible connection between the two. It was just around that time that the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund extended medical benefits to affected individuals until the year 2090. My mother and father began researching and, among the long list of acknowledged illnesses associated with people who had been at Ground Zero and “the Zone” (anything below Canal Street) in the months following 9/11, they found my father’s condition, CLL.

My parents raised this issue with his doctors, who verified that his health issues were squarely aligned with those who had prolonged exposure to the toxic air in

Lower Manhattan after the terrorist attacks. My dad, though a bit reluctant — because the helpers never find it easy to accept help themselves — registered with the WTC Health Registry and with the Victims Compensation Fund. I remember asking him if he regretted his actions, which had put himself in danger. He didn't hesitate with his response. "Not for a moment — people needed help," he said. "I'd do it again."

The WTC Health Registry provides medical monitoring and treatment for related health conditions for 9/11 responders and survivors, and enables people to register for the Victims Compensation Fund. The Victims Compensation Fund is a federally-funded program that was established to compensate for physical harm or death caused by the terrorist attacks on that day. It provides remuneration to individuals (or representatives of a deceased individual) who were present at one of the areas targeted in the attacks and have since been diagnosed with a 9/11-related illness. Many people incorrectly assume that the fund, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Justice, is limited to first responders. But all of its services and resources are available to anyone who worked or volunteered (or even lived or went to school) in the exposure zone through May 30, 2002. The CDC estimates that the September 11, 2001 attacks exposed 500,000 people to toxic contaminants and emotionally stressful conditions — there are now 105,272 members enrolled in the World Trade Center Health Program.

In early 2019, my dad's CLL worsened and he needed chemotherapy. It was a scary time for our family — six weeks into his treatment, we gathered for Passover, my dad's favorite holiday, and he didn't have the strength to make it to the seder table. A few months later he seemed to be on the mend; my parents even enjoyed two weeks of travel in Europe. But then, in the last few days of 2019, my dad's health took a turn for the worse. He had been feeling quite sick and went into the hospital. He was diagnosed this time with Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML), an aggressive and fatal form of leukemia. A few days later, on January 1, 2020, my dad, age 78, became one of the nearly 4,000 people who have died from illnesses related to 9/11.

In honor of him, my family is trying to spread the word that help is available to those affected to cover the costs of health treatment. If you or a loved one or friend spent

time volunteering near Ground Zero, please register with both the WTC Health Registry and the 9/11 Victim Compensation Fund and read up about the differences at https://www.vcf.gov/sites/vcf/files/resources/VCF_Just-theFacts.pdf.

Even though my dad is gone, I talk about him constantly with my kids, who are now 9 and almost 5. We love to discuss our shared memories of the funny things he used to say, his favorite ice cream order (maple butter walnut in a waffle cone), my memories of the bedtime stories he told me at their ages and the excitement he had when he learned that each of them were on the way. But one story I haven't really talked to them about is his connection to 9/11. Maybe this year, on the 20th anniversary of this terrible day, I'll find the courage to do so. And I hope that, as a family, we can continue to spread the word about our unsung heroes, the values that motivated them to lend a hand, and the support out there for them and their loved ones. (Kveller)

● NEWS

Dungeons & Dragons Has United a Diverse Group of Rabbis. But Their Commitment to Social Justice Has Faced a Challenge.

By Andrew Esensten

The adventurers arrived at Morgur's Mound, an archaeological site ringed with dragon bones. There they stumbled upon some treasure: a fire giant's gold-plated tooth. They grabbed the tooth and tried to leave the site, but suddenly the ground began to shake.

"Four animated thunder beast skeletons erupt from the mound and attack you," the dungeon master said. "You desecrated a holy site, and these are the guardians of the holy site. Everybody roll initiative."

“Are you allowed to roll on Shabbos?” a player wondered, breaking the fourth wall of the game.

“You’re allowed to roll on Shabbos,” another answered, “but you’re not allowed to pick up a pencil and write down your hit points.”

So began a recent session of Dungeons & Dragons, the classic fantasy role-playing game once associated with hardcore geek culture that has been more widely embraced in recent years.

As evidenced by the banter, this is a special group of D&D players. They’re all rabbis, but for one rabbinical student and one rabbi’s son, and live around the country. They are “a cross-section of American Judaism,” as one put it, representing the major denominations, from Reconstructionist to Orthodox.

“We did not intend to be a demonstration of Jewish pluralism,” Emily Dana, a third-year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, wrote to the Jewish Telegraph Agency in an email. “We just wanted to kill some giants.” Yet their sessions have shown her “it is possible to have people from incredibly different backgrounds be able to converse and debate in a friendly way with each other.”

Many of the group members identify as queer, Jews of color (or both) or disabled. Most have never met in person. But since August 2020, when the idea to form an all-rabbis D&D group began circulating on Twitter, the eight of them have spent many Sunday evenings together on Zoom trudging across mythical lands and fighting goblins, occasionally live-tweeting their campaigns — all while bonding over their shared love of Judaism and D&D.

For them, the sessions are more than just escapism. They are opportunities to open up about difficulties they have experienced in their field and hold meaningful dialogue about issues of identity and inclusivity, both inside and outside the Jewish world. They’ve also used the space to provide emotional support to each other through the pandemic, mentor younger group members and incubate personal projects. And when one rabbi left his pulpit after he was found to have sexually harassed his cantor, their sessions became a space for teshuvah, too.

“Rabbis are nerds,” Rabbi Erik Uriarte said when asked

why a group of rabbis would want to play D&D together. “You kind of have to be if you want to do this job, so there is a lot of overlap with sci-fi, fantasy and gaming.”

A lifelong D&Der who plays a half-orc bard named Gronk Zolzdown, Uriarte recently moved to New York to take a position at Temple Israel in suburban Lawrence after several years as a student rabbi in Billings, Montana. Board game meetups in Billings had been “a big social outlet” for him, so when COVID closed off the opportunity to attend them, he was excited to join the D&D group.

For Rabbi Sara Zober, playing D&D with her fellow rabbis has helped sustain her through the pandemic. In addition to leading Temple Sinai in Reno, Nevada, with her rabbi husband, Zober has four young children. She said she eagerly anticipates the game sessions, when she can shed her public persona and lose herself for a few hours in her character, a dwarven barbarian named Cadha Stoneshield.

“We all look for places where we’re not the rabbi, or where we’re not ‘Rabbi’ as our first name, and finding those spaces has been even harder since the pandemic because many of us are isolated,” Zober said. “This lets me be the ragey, shoot-em-up action figure that I wish I could be sometimes.” She added that she appreciates the relaxed atmosphere, where “if I drop an F-bomb, we’re not going to have a board meeting about it.”

Zober has been playing D&D since age 14, having learned the rules from her uncle. Historically, she said the role-playing world has not been overly welcoming to women, while the Jewish world has not always been inclusive of multiracial Jews. The rabbis D&D group is special because it breaks both molds.

“We all bring our full selves to the table, and what that means is I get to deal with the fact that I’m Hispanic and queer and a Jew by choice,” she said. “When we talk about [our identities], everyone in the room is on the same page. And we can laugh about stuff that in other spaces wouldn’t be funny.”

Indeed, joking is a big part of the game sessions, and no topic is out of bounds in such a diverse group.

“We can joke about the differences between the various streams of Judaism, and the different experiences between white Jews and Jews of color,” said Uriarte, whose

father immigrated to the U.S. from Nicaragua. "It's a way to get a whole lot of different perspectives on things."

To Rabbi Shais Rishon, a prominent Black Orthodox rabbi and writer in New City, New York, the group represents a place where everyone can be their unfiltered, imperfect selves.

"This is a space where it's like, hey, there are things that we don't know, and it's OK to say that in this space without it being seen as a knock on our scholarship, or our knowledge base, or our authenticity," he said.

It is also the place where Rishon first raised the idea of writing a new, anti-racist Torah commentary, which his colleagues encouraged him to do.

The first edition of D&D was published in 1974, and while it is now in its fifth edition, Uriarte said there are still elements that some players find dated and problematic. For example, he and his fellow rabbis wrestled with why particular "races" of characters like goblins and orcs are considered evil, while other races like dwarves and gnomes are considered good. They decided to ditch the standard races in favor of more complex character identities.

"We're deconstructing and decolonizing certain tropes that have been harmful," Uriarte explained.

This commitment to social justice faced an early test when Rabbi Jonathan Freirich, the group's dungeon master (a D&D term for the game's narrator), left his real-life congregation following a sexual harassment investigation.

In fall 2020, only a few months after the D&D group's formation, The Buffalo News reported that the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Reform movement's leadership body, had censured Freirich for five ethics violations he committed while serving as rabbi at Temple Beth Zion in Buffalo.

According to CCAR's confidential fact-finding report obtained by The Buffalo News, Freirich's violations included making "inappropriate comments" about and around his synagogue's then-cantor, Penny Myers, who had lodged a formal complaint with the CCAR in 2019 accusing Freirich of creating a hostile work environment. Freirich left the congregation in December, and Myers subsequently resigned after 14 years at TBZ, citing the way synagogue leadership handled the conflict.

Asked to comment on the situation, Freirich told JTA, "I said some things I regret, and I have been trying to be a more respectful and more caring person."

As his censure became public, Freirich was still getting to know most of the other members of the D&D group. (His 13-year-old son, Jude, is also a member.) He said he shared what was happening with them, and nobody left or expressed qualms about playing with him.

"This is a supportive group of friends and colleagues," he said, his voice full of emotion.

The two other Reform rabbis in the group, Zober and Uriarte, told JTA that they believe Freirich is committed to making amends.

"Jonathan is going through the teshuvah process that the CCAR has set out for him, and I have every faith that he will complete that process," Zober said. "As a woman who considers myself a colleague to both Rabbi Freirich and Cantor Myers, I believe in the power of the teshuvah process and hope that all parties are able to heal and rejoin the Jewish community."

Uriarte shared similar thoughts, saying that he believes Freirich is "sincere about hearing things that are uncomfortable and doing things in the pursuit of teshuvah."

In an interview, Myers told JTA, "If there was really a teshuvah process, I would think that I would know about it, or that he would have made an overture to me. That has not happened."

Other group members include Rabbi Emily Cohen, spiritual leader of the West End Synagogue in Manhattan, and Rabbi Herschel "Brodie" Aberson, who leads Temple Beth Shalom of the East Valley in Tempe, Arizona. A Reconstructionist rabbi and a self-identified queer millennial, Cohen said her half-rogue character, Skreech, "has a little bit of me in it, being off the beaten track slightly from what people might expect."

Cohen is a D&D newbie, while Aberson is a veteran who estimated that he plays at least 12 hours of the game a week with different groups. Aberson said he hopes to pass on his passion for D&D to the young members of his Conservative congregation.

"Once this pandemic thing is a little bit less problematic, I have dice sets and dice trays to give to kids to run a

game for them at my synagogue,” he said.

For now, the rabbis say they will continue to play on Zoom as their schedules permit. There is a waiting list of those who want to join their sessions, Freirich said, but “the group is as big as it can get right now.”

Back at Morgur’s Mound, the adventurers fought off the thunder beast skeletons with surprising efficiency with the help of some lucky dice rolls. Dana rolled a “nat 20” (the maximum value on a 20-sided die) and a 92 on her percentile roll, allowing her character — a half-elf paladin, or holy warrior, named Delilah — to smite one of the beasts with a longsword at close range.

“I am waiting for the day when we [rabbis] get ‘divine smite,’” said Zober, referring to one of the paladin’s magical powers.

“We know why we don’t have ‘divine smite’ — we wouldn’t have anybody in our congregations!” Rishon joked.

“Fair point,” Zober replied.

“So you have your relic, and you survived the thunder beasts’ assault,” the exiled dungeon master told the group. “What are you guys going to do now?”

● EDITOR’S DESK

The Most Annoying People You Miss in Synagogue

Getting back to normal will mean complaining about the guy who sings way too loud.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Synagogues like mine are stumbling back into what they hoped would be the post-COVID era, with a combination of services held indoors, outdoors, on Zoom and beamed telepathically directly into our heads using a technology developed by the Rothschilds. (I may be

wrong about that last one.)

The New York Times reported that Central Synagogue in Manhattan had rented out Radio City Music Hall for a grand return to live High Holiday services, but cut back to 30 percent capacity in the face of the Delta variant.

There’s an intense debate about the decisions being made by rabbis, and what is lost and gained as we enter a second set of High Holidays with restrictions on who can and can’t sit in the pews. People lament the loss of spiritual energy, the power of communal song, the deep need for human contact.

I support any policy that puts our health and safety first, even if that means delaying our return to the kind of synagogue experience people are longing for. As Jeffrey Cahn, the executive director of the “eclectic” Romemu congregation told The Times, “The rabbi may not like me saying that, but he would probably agree with me at the end of the day: Protection of life is always more important than any other commandment or ritual in Judaism.”

But I do find myself missing something essential to synagogue life, but seldom talked about: The people who really annoy me, despite my best efforts to be spiritual and generous.

You know who I mean: The guy who keeps correcting the Torah reader, even though there is a gabbai who is assigned to the job. The person who insists on saying “Amen” a beat or two after everyone else. The show-offs who like to harmonize with every song. (That would be me.)

A few years ago I began a list of the people in synagogue I love to complain about, and added contributions from readers. Here’s a sample:

- The person who namedrops during the prayer for the sick — you know, when the rabbi asks for congregants to call out the name of their ailing loved ones, and the guy who says “Henry Kissinger” to remind you that they once worked at the same consulting firm.
- The synagogue officer who reads the list of upcoming events extending into 2023 — as if anyone is sitting in the pews entering appointments in his iPhone.
- The guy in the pew who is entering appointments in

his iPhone.

- The sermonizer who never heard of the expression “to make a long story short.”
- The sermonizer who says “in conclusion,” and then goes on for another 10 minutes.
- The cantor who introduces a new “Adon Olam” melody based on the 12-tone scale.
- The non-Jewish bar mitzvah guest who sits politely for the entire three-hour service, shaming you me fidgeting and checking my watch every 10 minutes.
- At kiddush, the folks who pile food on their plates — and refuse to step away from the buffet table as they eat. (Remember buffet tables?)
- The kids at kiddish who fill their plates with the best of everything — including the last chocolate-covered strawberry — then take one bite and leave the rest.
- The flimsy paper plate that can’t hold even a marshmallow, let alone a slab of kugel. (Technically, this is not an annoying person, but it is still very, very annoying.)

In all seriousness, this is the kind of human comedy lost in all the talk about what COVID has done to our spiritual lives. Synagogue is never just about divine communion or reaching spiritual heights. It is about the hodgepodge of people who come together each week, to pray and study, yes, but also to eat, schmooze, laugh and kvetch. It’s about talking with someone you might not call a friend exactly but would miss if you didn’t see her in her usual seat. It’s about joking with and about your neighbors, pretty confident that everyone will get and appreciate the joke.

That’s my High Holiday prayer: That we’ll get back to normal and get right back to loving – and annoying – each other. That’s as good a definition of community as any.

Andrew Silow-Carroll (@SilowCarroll) is the editor in chief of *The Jewish Week*.

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● OPINION

My Abortion Was a Blessing. As a Rabbi, I Will Fight for Others to Be Able to Make Their Own Sacred Choice.

By Rabbi Rachael Pass

On the second night of Rosh Hashanah, in my second year of rabbinical school, while working at my first-ever High Holiday pulpit, I accidentally conceived.

I had my first bout of morning sickness in our introductory Talmud course, and my first pregnancy craving during Hebrew Literature and Grammar (I still swear that pickles on pizza is a million-dollar idea).

I took my pregnancy test on Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan, and whispered the blessing “asher yatzar et ha’adam b’chochmah,” who created human beings with wisdom, when it read positive.

That night, I attended a required class Shabbat program at Kehilat Romemu on the Upper West Side, where I discovered that morning sickness could indeed happen at night in a shul bathroom.

I prayed. I read every piece of Jewish literature on abortion that I could find. I read every opinion article on the internet about “why I’m happy I had an abortion” or “how I came to regret my abortion.” I made a pros and cons list. I consulted the would-be father and my rabbinic mentor, Rabbi Jen Gubitza. I cried on the phone with my mom. Ultimately, I made the choice using the instinctual wisdom inside myself, heeding nobody’s opinion but my own. And perhaps God’s.

We Jews are commanded, in lines that appear in this week’s Torah portion: “I have put before you today blessing and curse, life and death. Uvacharta v’chayyim,

Choose life.”

That commandment has been coopted as a rallying cry for those who support restrictions on abortion, such as the Texas ban on abortions after six weeks that went into effect this week when the U.S. Supreme Court declined to block it. But for me and so many others, this verse is a clear rebuttal to that law, the most significant infringement on abortion rights in America since the Roe v. Wade protected a women’s right to choose 48 years ago.

I chose life when I left Literary Artistry of the Bible early on a Thursday afternoon to walk the few short blocks from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion’s New York campus to the Margaret Sanger Planned Parenthood on Bleecker Street. I took the first pill in a quiet office, sitting across from a doctor who looked just like me. The next morning, my Medieval Jewish History class took a field trip to the Met Cloisters. Our professor was late because she had to prepare her brisket for Shabbat dinner. I felt so sick I could hardly stand. That night, I livestreamed Shabbat services while holding the four Misoprostol pills in the four corners of my mouth, waiting for them to disintegrate. I bled all night.

A week after the bleeding stopped I went to the mikveh, the Jewish ritual bath, with ImmerseNYC, a liberal mikveh project founded by Rabbi Sara Luria. I did an adapted version of a post-abortion ritual written by Rabbi Tamar Duvdevani. I listened to Debbie Friedman’s “Sow In Tears, Reap In Joy” on repeat the entire way there and the entire way home. I looked at my naked body in the giant mirror in the preparation room and saw every change that that short pregnancy had wrought. I felt weak and I felt strong. I sang to myself because I was still scared, as I dipped under the water and came back up: “Elohai n’shamah shenatata bi t’hora hi,” My God the soul you have given me is pure.

The next morning, our class took a field trip to that same mikveh. I asked five of my classmates, now colleagues, to come early. They were pretty much my only friends in New York at the time and some of the only people that I had told about my abortion. We stood on the corner of 74th and West End Avenue on a windy morning with a challah that I had baked and a little bit of honey and finished the ritual together. We dipped the challah in

the honey, a symbol of sweeter times ahead. I cried. We stood in a circle and they wrapped their arms around me. “Hazorim b’dimah b’rinah yiktzoru,” I repeated, “those who sow in tears will reap in joy.”

You may have noticed that my abortion story is very Jewish. Everything from the timing of the accidental conception to the decision and procedure itself was brimming with my Jewish practice, learning and living. It is impossible to extricate my Judaism from my abortion.

And yet you might also assume that my abortion would not have been Jewishly “okay,” permissible under halacha, or Jewish law, because I simply did not want to be pregnant — because mine is the kind of abortion that anti-choicers most disdain. The standard Jewish line on abortion is that Judaism traditionally permits abortion when the pregnancy endangers the life of the mother. This derives from Mishnah Ohalot 7:6, which states that “[for] a woman who is having a hard labor — makshah leiled — they cut up the fetus in her womb and remove it limb by limb, mipnei shechayeiha kodmin l’chayav, because her life comes before its life.” Chayeiha kodmin l’chayav, her life comes before that of the fetus.

What does it mean that the life of the pregnant person comes before that of the fetus? Over the centuries, various rabbinic authorities have offered their answers. It means that her physical needs and pain levels are prioritized over the birthing of the child (Rabbis Josef Trani and Jacob Emden). It means that her mental health is prioritized over the birthing of the child (Rabbi Mordecai Winkler). It means that her dignity and her honor are prioritized over the birthing of the child (Rabbi Ben-Zion Ouziel). It means that the primary consideration in the Jewish question of abortion is the needs of the person giving birth, their life, their health and their dignity.

The Texas abortion ban, SB8, denies human dignity. This ban not only removes the option of safe choice for individuals seeking abortion care in Texas, but it also empowers and incentivizes individual citizens to report and pursue legal action against those who aid people seeking abortion, from doctors to family members to cab drivers.

As a result, it criminalizes care — something that in itself violates Jewish law. As Jews we are commanded over and over again to care for those on the “margins” of so-

ciety; the poor, the widowed and orphaned, the queer, the people of color, people with disabilities, the systemically oppressed. These are the people who are already and will continue to be most devastated by this abortion ban and by the abortion bans that anti-abortion activists hope will follow all over the country. The lack of care for those in our society who need it most is a prophetic call to us as Jews.

Americans who want to fight back against SB8 can do many things. We can donate to organizations such as the Lilith Fund and the Buckle Bunnies Fund, which provide financial assistance to those in Texas seeking abortion, or to Jane's Due Process which provides teens with abortion care and birth control, or Fund Texas Choice which provides out-of-state transportation and accommodations. We can share websites like abortionfinder.org or needabortion.org, which direct people to safe clinics. We can call our legislators and lobby for the federal Women's Health Protection Act, which would protect women and people of all genders against state-level legislation such as SB8.

As Jews, another strategy is available to us. If anyone, ever again, tries to argue that abortion restrictions are justified under the prerogative of religious freedom, we can explain that our religious freedom demands that we have access to abortion care when it is needed and wanted.

There is nothing more sacred than the right to live one's life as one chooses — and to choose life, and to choose blessing. In having an abortion, I chose my life. Now I will do what I can to ensure that others — including the countless women, nonbinary individuals and trans men affected by SB8 in Texas — can retain the sacred choice to make their own choices and their own blessings.

Rabbi Rachael Pass is the associate rabbi and director of spiritual counseling at the T'Shuvah Center, a Jewish home and recovery community for individuals with addiction of all kinds. She was ordained from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 2021.

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● OPINION

This Is Not a Drill: The Climate Change Emergency Demands a Jewish Response

By Jakir Manela and Nigel Savage

"Who shall live and who shall die ... who by water and who by fire ... who by earthquake and who by plague ..."

Twenty years ago, people cried when they said these words on Rosh Hashanah, six days after the attacks of Sept. 11. The ancient words suddenly held intense contemporary force.

Twenty years later we are being bombarded by climate-related disasters, one after another — each year worse than the last — and again our ancient machzor, the High Holidays prayerbook — carries fresh, urgent force for all of us.

Who by water? On the 16th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina's horrific impact in New Orleans, another monster hurricane tested the rebuilt levees, cut off power and left catastrophic damage. Then the storm traveled up the East Coast causing widespread tornado-like conditions and massive floods, killing at least 24. All this just months after hundreds died in Germany due to unprecedented flooding.

Who by fire? Raging wildfires everywhere: in California, Oregon and Canada; in Greece, Italy, Turkey and Russia. Californians confronting dangerous air quality for months at a time, year after year. Eerie red-orange skies, smoke cascading across the continent, impacting cities as far away as the East Coast.

Who by plague? COVID reveals just how fragile we are — as individuals and as a society — and how it is always those most vulnerable who lose the most amid crisis.

Hundreds of thousands of American Jews enter these High Holidays having been deeply moved and inspired by Jewish environmental education, action and advocacy over the past 20 years and more. Our rising tide

movement faces this historic inflection point in a deeply Jewish and universal posture. The IPCC Report, published just last month, makes clear that things are going to get worse before — if — they get better.

Confronting this crisis seems monumental — because it is. So much so that individuals might believe there is nothing they can do in the face of forces that have transformed life on the planet so quickly and negatively.

This crisis is so enormous, so global, so existential, many of us wonder how much our individual, institutional and/or communal actions can help turn the tide against such a tidal wave of climate disasters.

We hear you. And we cannot promise you what the future will bring. But we can promise you that by investing in a deep, universal cultural change across the Jewish world, we will be part of the solution — in the same way that victory gardens were part of the World War II effort 70 years ago and tzedakah boxes helped launch and defend Israel throughout the 20th century.

Of course we must fight for aggressive political and economic responses as well — both of which become more achievable as we build a passionate, committed Jewish climate movement that transcends ages, denominations and geographies.

During these Days of Awe, we must face this crisis while we face our own *norah*, our fear that it may be too late.

In the spirit of the holy days, with a commitment to repentance, prayer and justice, we ask you to join us in doing three key things, which together make up the Brit Hazon, a commitment to change:

CHANGE YOUR BEHAVIOR. Drive less. Ride your bike more. Eat less meat. Use less energy at home, in your vehicle, in everything you do. Rosh Hashanah calls us to return to our best selves through *teshuvah*, repentance. It challenges us to own our mistakes and pushes us to do better in the year ahead.

GIVE. Time, money, advice, in-kind services and/or other support. So many inspiring leaders and powerful organizations are working around the world to respond to the climate crisis. When you consider giving *tzedakah* this season, please consider donating to Indigenous Climate Action, 350.org, Eden Village Camp, Jewish Cli-

mate Action Network (JCAN), Dayenu, Wilderness Torah, Urban Adamah, Shoresh or any other Jewish environmental or general climate organization on your radar. And yes, please support our work at Hazon as well. Give wherever you feel called, but please give. This is a global emergency of epic proportions. We need your support now more than ever.

SUPPORT SYSTEMIC CHANGE. It is time for Jewish communities and institutions across the country — synagogues, day schools, camps, federations, JCCs, Hillels and countless others — to summon the will and leadership to join the hundreds of Jewish institutions that have blazed this trail for many years by prioritizing sustainability and caring for creation as a fundamental Jewish value. When institutional leaders commit to the Hazon Seal of Sustainability, we embark upon a multi-year journey together as partners, integrating Jewish environmental education, action, advocacy and adaptation into your community/organization.

In every age group, demographic and organizational structure — from *b'nai mitzvah* experiences to capital campaigns to interfaith partnerships and everything in between — we must rise up to confront this challenge with the full might of our institutions, our culture, our communities, and the power of Jewish wisdom, ethics and spirit.

This Rosh Hashanah also begins the *shmita* year, quite literally a supersized, yearlong Shabbat. Like Shabbat, it's an end and a beginning, a time to look back over the last period and forward to the next.

So may this Rosh Hashanah inaugurate a year of Jewish communal reflection, facing the full threat of this crisis and our unique responsibility to take action for everyone alive today, and for our children, grandchildren and many generations to come — in America, in Israel and worldwide. These actions are inspired by a great love, a deep joy, hope and faith — and powerful communities that together will spark a Jewish cultural renaissance interconnected with a global transformation toward a brighter future for our people and all people everywhere.

The Jewish people have a long history. Our ancestors endured unspeakable suffering and calamity, then rose to meet the next challenge. In this moment we can do no less.

Jakir Manela is the CEO of Hazon. Nigel Savage is the founder and former CEO of Hazon.

● SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT VAYEILECH

One Good Turn Is at the Heart of Repentance

Moses 'went' to his people in an act that models our need to turn in humility to one another.

By Freema Gottlieb

According to a midrash, Cain, after murdering his brother, left the courtroom rejoicing. On the way out, he met up with his father, who asked how he was bearing up. "I did teshuvah," the first murderer replied, "and I was forgiven."

Hearing this, Adam couldn't believe why it never occurred to him to do the same.

Shabbat Shuva, coming between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, takes its name from the opening words of this week's haftarah — "Return, O Israel!" — in which the prophet Hosea appeals to the whole nation to repent.

What exactly is teshuvah? The word, like shuva, contains the root "shuv," meaning "to turn" or "to return," implying a small physical movement or adjustment.

What may link the haftarah and this week's portion is their emphasis on a movement that promotes change. While the haftarah addresses itself to the whole nation, bidding them to return to God, the portion trains a spotlight directly on Moses, our teacher, who signally demonstrates a more positive range of teshuvah.

"Vayeilech Moshe," begins our reading. "And Moses went." Where did Moses go? We'll see that a seemingly small movement on the part of Moses is literally a turning point in his life and that of the nation.

For most of his career, our greatest prophet enjoyed an ideal communion with the Divine. "The Lord would speak to Moses face-to-face as a man speaks to his friend." (Exodus 33:11) Here, speech serves as a metaphor for

the relationship between God and Moses. A midrash compares the reciprocal ease of their conversations to a cave on the seashore: "Once the sea penetrated it and filled it, it never left, but was always flowing in and out." Every request from God's favorite was granted.

However, anything Moses ever asked for was on behalf of Israel. When, in his old age, he made one request for himself, it was rejected. In the events leading up to this week's portion, the Almighty turned down Moses' prayer to enter the good land, pronounced a sentence of death upon him and distanced Himself from his erstwhile friend. After all this, where was Moses to go? Blocked from open dialogue with the Holy One, Moses' had only one recourse: to go to the people. If a stream is blocked in one direction, it must find another way. For once, entirely of his own volition, and without acting on divine instruction, say the rabbis, Moses reached out to the Jewish people.

Despite the consolation the Torah gives, that "Moses' eye was not dimmed nor his natural force abated," he had to endure an even greater loss: diminishment of his prophetic faculties, many of which were transferred to his successor. "Vayeilech," says the Berdichever Rebbe, "alludes to the process of the transition of Moses' spiritual powers to Joshua — and to a new kind of leadership for the Jewish people."

"A seemingly small movement on the part of Moses is literally a turning point in his life and that of the nation."

According to the Netziv, a 19th-century commentator and the author of "HaEmek HaDavar," previously, whenever Moses returned from his private consultations with the Most High, his voice would carry to the entire nation without his having to move from one central spot. Now, after God distanced Himself, Moses' capacity to receive divine inspiration was reduced, so that he had to go personally from tribe to tribe, family to family, and one individual to another, to state his situation. As he took his leave, he consoled them all, encouraging them to trust that God would still lead them on the next leg of their journey, and asking their forgiveness if he had hurt them inadvertently. A figure who had once seemed remote, ascetic and almost transcendent now showed the normal vulnerabilities of old age.

Verbalization of one's situation to the Almighty is an es-

sential part of teshuvah. Notably, Moses' verbal outpouring was directed not at God but to the people. "Vayeilech Moshe": a small shift, both physical and moral, was made possible only out of his love for them, and his perspective extends to the entire sweep of Jewish history. When his entire focus was redirected to Israel, was the great Jewish leader in a sense also doing teshuvah?

The emotional freight contained in the single word "vayeilech" — he "went" — on the part of this most selfless of leaders can be regarded as a supreme form of teshuvah. Paradoxically, God, distancing Himself from Moses in our text, was gently prodding His favorite to turn his last focus on his one unresolved issue, his relationship with flawed humanity.

Harsh as barring Moses from the Promise Land may appear, did it not contain an even deeper mercy? The Hebrew word "halach," a root of vayeilech, in this case means to grow, continue and rise in moral stature. Moses' expansive capacity to turn and reach out to his fellow Jews and thus right an imbalance not of his making is a clear indication of how far the notion of teshuvah extends. Only then was he able to hand over his soul to God.

Freema Gottlieb is the author of "The Lamp of God: A Jewish Book of Light," available as a Kindle edition on Amazon.com. She has written for the New York Times Book Review, the New Republic, the Times Literary Supplement, and Partisan Review. Her talks on the weekly Torah reading may be found on YouTube.

● MUSINGS

Yom Kippur Connections

By David Wolpe

When I was a child and left a school to move to another city, there was a good chance that I would not see my schoolmates again. There was no social media and everyone lived in their own city and their own world.

Now people can be in touch with almost everyone with whom they crossed paths. We are closer to the

population of our own pasts than was imaginable even two decades ago. Yet with all the potential closeness to others, we seem farther from ourselves.

Yom Kippur is a time to rediscover and renew one's own soul. It is not about how many friends or followers you have, or the pictures you post, or the political frame of your world. This is about you, as you stand before the Creator and before your honest inner eye. What do you see? Who have you become? What soul growth beckons?

The gates are open to prayer. The question is not who has walked through them before and who will walk through them in the future. The question is – will you?

*Named the most influential Rabbi in America by Newsweek Magazine and one of the 50 most influential Jews in the world by the Jerusalem Post, **David Wolpe** is the Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, California.*

● BOOKS

Memoirist Qian Julie Wang Finally Found a Home With Her Fellow Jews of Color

By Emily Burack

Qian Julie Wang grew up in libraries. Coming to America at age 7, she was thrown into the brand new world of New York City. Soon, she was spending all her free time in her local Chinatown library, soaking up as much English as possible. It became her second home, a place

CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

Tishrei 4, 5781 | Friday, September 10, 2021

- **Light candles at:** 6:55 p.m.

Tishrei 5, 5781 | Saturday, September 11, 2021

- **Torah reading:** Vayeilech, Deuteronomy 31:1–30
- **Haftarah:** Hosea 14:2–10; Micah 7:18–20
- **Shabbat ends:** 7:52 p.m.

of safety.

Now, she's telling her story for the first time — buoyed by the hope of reaching those in libraries who were just like her.

Wang and her parents were undocumented, and the 2016 election — which occurred just after she became a naturalized American citizen — spurred her to begin writing her memoir on her phone on the subway. Those subway snippets would become “Beautiful Country,” a gorgeous and heartfelt tale of Wang's childhood as an undocumented New Yorker, published Tuesday.

Wang is also an active member of a synagogue and its Jews of Color community. When she's not writing incredible memoirs, Wang is a litigator working as the managing partner of Gottlieb & Wang LLP — a firm dedicated to advocating for education and disability rights.

Her story is a modern day Jewish American immigrant tale, and over e-mail we spoke about what it means to have this book out in the world, her work with Jews of Color and the meaningful publication of “Beautiful Country” on Rosh Hashanah.

In many ways, “Beautiful Country” is such an American story. What inspired you to share your tale of being an undocumented child?

I'd always dreamed about writing this book. While I grew up learning English on library books, I never found a book that depicted characters who looked like me and lived in the way my parents and I did. It was my biggest and wildest ambition to write a book that might allow others out there to see themselves reflected in literature, and have them know that it is possible to survive similar circumstances. Even so, I figured I would never make it happen, because I lived under messaging from all directions, my parents included, that my past was shameful and had to be kept hidden.

It wasn't until the discourse of the 2016 election, which took place just six months after I became a naturalized U.S. citizen, that I discovered that I had a newfound power and thus responsibility to share my story, that at that juncture of my life, I was making an actual decision to stay quiet — a privilege that millions of undocumented immigrants do not have. It was then that I realized that what I had long thought of as singularly mine was no

longer my secret to keep.

What does it mean to you to be Jewish?

For me, being Jewish cannot be separated from tikkun olam, the concept that calls upon us to repair the world. For many years of my life, I operated by a set of clear and abiding principles, and asked inconvenient, challenging questions, but I had no formal spiritual framework. When I discovered Judaism, I finally felt complete. I realized that I had been Jewish all along; I simply hadn't known it. Central to tikkun olam is hearing the call of the voiceless and fighting for justice in every available avenue. It also means standing up and speaking out even when it might be uncomfortable to do so — to be rooted first and foremost in our faith in equality.

What's your favorite part about being Jewish?

Without a doubt, it has been the Jews of Color community. After immigrating to America, I was never able to feel fully at home in a public space. That changed when I started gathering with my fellow Jews of Color. In that sphere, I have been so fortunate to find lifelong friends — my sisters and family in spirit. We are not a monolith by any means, but the unity of intersectionality is a beautiful thing. There was probably no better way to discover kindred spirits with whom I share my passion for activism, racial justice, immigrants' rights and spirituality.

How did you balance working as a litigator and writing your memoir?

Balance is a concept that I think few litigators know (I certainly don't!). We are in overdrive pretty much all the time. I wrote the first draft of “Beautiful Country” while making partner at a national firm. The only way to balance it with working 60-80 hours a week was a concrete rule: As long as I was on the subway platform or on the subway on my way to or from work, I was writing on my phone. Even with this rule though, there were months (and up to nearly a year) when I just had to take time off writing entirely.

This was particularly the case in early 2019, because I was also planning my wedding at the time. I gave myself permission then to stop working on the book, not knowing if I would ever find my way back. But in late September 2019, on our flight to our honeymoon, I realized that the break had allowed me to subconsciously process

everything else that needed to go into my book. I pulled my phone out and started typing on that flight, and gave myself until December 31, 2019 to finish the first draft or forget about it for good. At that point, I had maybe one third to half of the book finished. But two months later, on December 30, I was done with the entire draft.

Something I was really struck by was how much reading, and your local library, was a safe space for you as a child (as a fellow kid who loved going to the library!). Can you talk a little bit more about this?

The public library is a cornerstone of our society and provides vital access to resources and knowledge to those who might not otherwise be able to afford it. Librarians are our unsung, modern-day heroes. For me growing up, the library was my second home. It was safe and I could always count on it to supply my old and new family and friends in the form of beloved characters — and all for free. As a child who felt lonely and lost most of the time, the Chatham Square public library branch in Chinatown was my anchor in my American life. It was where I learned English, discovered my favorite books and learned what it meant to feel comfortable in my new land. It was there that I never had to question whether or not I belonged.

What were some influential books for you growing up?

In my book, I share my story about receiving my copy of “Charlotte’s Web” (which I still have!) as a gift from my beloved third grade teacher. The book will forever represent to me the first time I felt accepted in the United States. But there are so many other titles that brought vibrancy to my childhood years: every single installment of “The Baby-Sitter’s Club,” the “Sweet Valley Twins” series, “The Diary of Anne Frank,” “Where the Red Fern Grows,” “Number the Stars,” “Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH,” “The Giver.”

What does it mean to you that other young Chinese kids will be able to read your story now? To check it out at their local library?

This is the very reason I wrote the book: this dream that another Chinese, Asian American, immigrant, poor or hungry kid might come upon it at their public library and might find in it something that gives them hope or solace to keep going. I think it is easy to forget as adults

how very difficult and terrifying it is to be a child navigating the world. There have been many times in the publication process when I have wondered whether I was crazy to go through with putting this book out into the world. But each time I returned to that vision of a pre-teen discovering my book at the library when she needs it most, all of my fears fall by the wayside.

Has your family read “Beautiful Country”? How did they react?

My parents have read parts of it, and I have fact-checked certain memories with them, but they have not read the whole thing! My parents remain deeply ashamed and regretful of the past, and I don’t think they’ve ever forgiven themselves for my childhood years. It took me six months after the book deal to work up the courage to tell my parents. And when I did, they expressed profound anxiety about the government coming after us, even though we are all on legal status now. I suspect that in many ways, my book feels to my father like history repeating itself: His childhood was marked by his brother writing a daring, honest and critical essay that had his entire family persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. I regret that the publication of my book might have awakened that sense of trauma in him, and I badly want to shield him from it.

My small hope is that if my parents don’t read the full book until it’s available to the public, they won’t know the full scale of details shared, so they won’t be sitting there, counting down the days to when ICE might be banging down their doors. And my dream is that the book’s publication might help them finally find some forgiveness and healing over the past.

What memoirs, or other books, inspired you in your writing process?

I love memoirs that read like novels — the ones that are not just factual but also artistic. On this front, Frank McCourt’s “Angela’s Ashes” and Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” were my north stars in crafting my own book.

Shifting focus, can you tell us about your work with your Jews of Color group?

American Judaism is Ashkenazi-centric, even though, historically and globally, Judaism is far more diverse.

That myopic focus in the U.S. tends to result in Jewish spaces that feel deeply unwelcoming, and often even overtly hostile, to Jews of Color. There have been more than one report of, for instance, Black Jews being followed by synagogue security guards and Asian Jews being subjected to fetishized comments during services (if I had a nickel every time a man came up to me during prayer and told me about an Asian woman he once dated...). All of us are stared at and assumed to be new converts or gentile. Rarely are we able to attend services without receiving at least some inappropriate, offensive remark.

As such, our group's mission is first and foremost to build a safe space for Jews of Color to connect and engage in their religion — shelter for when we feel utterly unwanted in all other Jewish spaces. Beyond that, we also work to create platforms for Jews of Color within our synagogue and in the Jewish community and to engage racial justice work and activism outside the temple and outside the Jewish world. Judaism is the religion of the enslaved, the uprooted, the marginalized, and the other, and we are dedicated to making sure that its American community lives up to its roots.

As we approach the Jewish New Year, any Rosh Hashanah plans you are looking forward to?

This year's Rosh Hashanah is major for me for many reasons. First, it is the day my book comes out. Second, I am delighted to be giving a speech that morning at Central Synagogue (live-streamed worldwide here) and in Radio City Music Hall. Most of all, though, I am really looking forward to getting together with family at the seder. We had to forgo one last year, so I know we will be more than making up for it this year around.

What do you hope readers take away from "Beautiful Country"?

My book is a celebration of childhood, that wondrous time when we were all still so tender and open. It's a voyage into the love, pain and secrets of family, a train ride through the confusion, resilience and delight of coming of age. If readers can take away anything from the experience, I hope it is that, beyond the external labels and divides, we are all not that different from each other. There is universality in humanity and in the childhood experience in particular. If my book might inspire readers to revisit their own childhood, to recognize and hon-

or the resilience of the child self that still dwells in all of us, then it would be a dream come true.

● **ARTS AND CULTURE**

What Happened to All the Art That Nazis Looted? This Jewish Museum Exhibit Tells the Story of Several Masterworks.

By Chloe Sarbib

Great works of art often become so present in our everyday lives — the "Mona Lisa" on a mug, "The Starry Night" on a sweater, Basquiat in Beyoncé and Jay-Z's Tiffany campaign — that it's easy to forget how fragile the originals are. These images that populate our collective consciousness all started as a single destructible canvas. But most museums don't highlight the life these artworks have had as physical objects — often because that history is wrapped up in colonialism and theft.

At the new Jewish Museum exhibition "Afterlives: Recovering the Lost Stories of Looted Art," which opened last month in New York, this overlooked aspect of a painting's history becomes the focus.

"It is often difficult to understand the 'biography' of an artwork simply by looking at it, and even more difficult to uncover the lives and experiences of the people behind it," reads the text on the first wall visitors encounter, displayed beside Franz Marc's "The Large Blue Horses."

The gallery is organized around how the artwork it features — including works by Chagall and Pissarro (both Jewish), Matisse, Picasso, Bonnard, Klee and more — came to hang there. All the pieces displayed have one quality in common: They were either directly affected or inspired by the looting and destruction of the Nazis.

"The vast and systemic pillaging of artworks during World War II, and the eventual rescue and return of many, is one of the most dramatic stories of twentieth-century art... Artworks that withstood the immense tragedy of the war survived against extraordinary odds," the text continues. "Many exist today as a result of great personal risk and ingenuity."

One of the most striking instances of bravery the exhibit recounts is that of Rose Valland, a curator at the Jeu de Paume, which housed the work of the Impressionists. During the collaborationist Vichy regime, the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, or ERR, took over the museum building. The ERR, "one of the largest Nazi art-looting task forces operating throughout occupied Europe," used the space to store masterpieces it had taken.

Valland, who had worked at the Jeu de Paume before the war, stayed on during the Occupation and collaborated with the French Resistance to track what the Nazis did with the stolen paintings. "At great personal risk," including sneaking into the Nazi office at night to photograph important documents, "she recorded incoming and outgoing shipments and made detailed maps of the extensive network of Nazi transportation and storage facilities." Pieces by Jewish or modernist artists were often labeled "degenerate" and slated for destruction. Valland was unable to save many of them, and referred to the room where they were housed as the "Room of the Martyrs."

In the exhibit, Valland's story is overlaid on a 1942 photograph of this room. Some of the works in it — by Andre Dérain and Claude Monet, among others — are believed to have been destroyed. But three of the paintings that survived are on the adjacent wall: "Bather and Rocks" by Paul Cezanne, "Group of Characters" by Pablo Picasso, and "Composition" by Fédor Löwenstein. They last hung together in the Room of the Martyrs, awaiting their fate like many of the Jews of Europe.

Some Impressionist paintings on display at the Jewish Museum, like Matisse's "Girl in Yellow and Blue with Guitar," spent the Holocaust in the personal collections of high-ranking Nazi officials — Hermann Goering in this case.

Others — like Marc Chagall's "Purim," a study for a commissioned St. Petersburg mural he never painted —

were confiscated, labeled "degenerate" for their Jewish authors and content. But that didn't stop the Nazis from selling them to fund the war effort. The exhibit calls out these financial incentives that spurred the Nazis to steal from Jewish collectors: It was as much about seizing Jewish wealth as about any ideological beliefs. Germany was in debt when the Nazis came to power, and even "degenerate" art was often sold on the international market "to raise funds for the Nazi war machine" if they thought it would fetch a good price. So the Nazis weren't even principled in their anti-Jewishness; they were happy to profit off of works by Jewish artists and were often motivated by simple greed.

"Purim," painted in 1916-17, contains "folkloric imagery and vivid colors draw from Chagall's memories of his childhood in a Jewish enclave in the Russian empire." Seeing a depiction of a holiday that celebrates Jews surviving persecution in this World War II context is poignant.

The exhibit includes documents from the collection points, in Munich and Offenbach, where the Allies traced the paths of stolen work, stored them when recovered, and eventually tried to "reverse the flow" by sending them back where they belonged. Staring at a map of how far some confiscated Jewish literature had traveled is intimidating in the sheer scope of this staggering pre-internet task.

"Afterlives" also features art by Jews who faced persecution directly — pieces made at the camps themselves or while in hiding. The haunting, delicate drawings of Jacob Barosin, who made them while fleeing to France and ultimately to the U.S., were moving. And the presence of "Battle on a Bridge," a looted painting so revered by the Nazis that Hitler had earmarked it for his future personal Fuhrermuseum in Austria, was chilling. Its inventory number, 2207, is still visible on the back of the canvas.

But what was most captivating about the exhibit was how it helps the visitor imagine what Jewish cultural life was like before the Nazis came to power. I often have the impression that accounts of the Holocaust concentrate more on the horrors of the camps and less and on the individual lives and communities they destroyed. Here, I learned about Jewish gallerist Paul Rosenberg, whose impressive gallery the Nazis co-opted — after seizing his valuable art, of course — for the "Institute of the Study on the Jewish Question," an antisemitic pro-

paganda machine. I learned about his son Alexander, who, while liberating a train with the Free French Forces thought to be full of passengers, recovered some of his father's art against all odds. I saw August Sander's "Persecuted Jews" portrait series from late-'30s Germany, and looked into the faces of people forced to leave their homes. And I saw a huge collection of orphaned Judaica and ritual objects from Danzig (now Gdansk), Poland, where the Jewish community shipped two tons of their treasures to New York for safekeeping in 1939. If no safe free Jews remained in Danzig 15 years later, these items would be entrusted to the museum. None did.

The exhibit also includes the work of four contemporary artists grappling with the contents of "Afterlives" and the era it evokes. Maria Eichhorn pulls from the art restitution work of Hannah Arendt. Hadar Gad uses her painstaking process to paint the disassembly of Danzig's Great Synagogue. Lisa Oppenheim collages the only existing archival photograph of a lost still-life painting with Google Maps images of the clouds above the house where its Jewish owners lived. And Dor Guez, a Palestinian North African artist from Israel, created an installation from objects belonging to his paternal grandparents, who escaped concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Tunisia. They previously ran a theater company, and a manuscript written by his grandfather in his Tunisian Judeo-Arabic dialect was damaged in transit. Guez blew up the unfamiliar handwriting and ink blots into abstracted prints that hang on the wall. In Guez's words, "the words are engulfed in abstract spots, and these become a metaphor for the harmonious conjunction between two Semitic languages, between one mother tongue and another, and between homeland and a new country."

I'll let the exhibit's curators sum up how I felt as I left: "Many of the artists, collectors, and descendants who owned these items are gone, and as the war recedes in time it can become even harder to grasp the traumatic events they endured. Yet through these works, and the histories that attend them, new connections to the past can be forged."

"Afterlives: Recovering the Lost Stories of Looted Art" is on view at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan through Jan. 9, 2022.

UPCOMING EVENTS

September 12 | 11:30 a.m. Free

Inscription and Imagination: How a 2,000-year-old Gravestone Inspired a New Novel

Join author Lori Banov Kaufmann — author of "Rebel Daughter" — and Dr. Jonathan Price of Tel Aviv University as they discuss her book of historical fiction and share the details of their 10-year collaboration. Moderated by Dr. Elaine Shizgal Cohen. Presented by Congregation Beth Sholom in Teaneck, New Jersey.

Register at <https://www.cbsteaneck.org>

September 12 | 1:00 p.m. Free

Hear Our Call — Climate Action Now

Join Dayenu, Jewish Climate Action Network and over 20 other organizations in Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn for a "Hear Our Call—Climate Action Now" rally. Rabbis and other rally-goers will call on Sen. Chuck Schumer (invited) to hasten the passage of climate legislation.

RSVP at <https://bit.ly/38UH1kw>

September 12 | 2:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. Free

"Into the Forest" Book Launch

Rebecca Frankel's "Into the Forest: A Holocaust Story of Survival, Triumph, and Love" is one family's inspiring true story of love, escape, and survival. Join the Museum of Jewish Heritage for a program celebrating the book's launch with Frankel and David Rothkopf, host of the Deep State Radio podcast and CEO of The Rothkopf Group.

Register at <https://bit.ly/38WzfGO>