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TEVYE'S DESCENDANTS: SIX ORIGINAL SHORT STORIES ON
JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

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Artist's Statement

When Chava marries a non-Jew, Tevye immediately excises her from the family, sitting shiva for her, as if she were dead. Soon enough, however, he wells up with remorse: “[C]ould there anywhere be a child so bad that a father still couldn’t love it?”¹ Throughout Sholem Aleichem’s *Tevye the Dairyman*, seemingly inflexible principles drive conflict.² Whether clinging to traditionalism, committing to modern social standards, or facing uncompromising neighbors, Tevye is forced to confront fixed, exclusionary attitudes as well as major social changes, and is compelled to modify his own stance as a result. A little more than a century after Sholem Aleichem published his final story, the Jewish people also appear polarized by fixed points of view. Absent an abiding, committed, and adaptive sense of intra-Jewish love, they risk a similar struggle as the famous dairyman, enduring distress and estrangement within the greater family.

The following collection of short stories reckons with absolutism and discord in the present day. Drs. Erica Brown and Misha Galperin define Jewish peoplehood as a family. The metaphor conveys “being a member of a large interconnected web of people who treat each other

¹Sholem Rabinovich [Sholem Aleichem], *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, translated by Hillel Halkin. (New York: Schocken Books, 1987.)

²Here are additional examples of destructive social/political inflexibility versus adaptation in *Tevye the Dairyman*: In “Today’s Children,” Tevye adheres to societal standards around family, success, and wealth. It contributes to his acceptance of Lazar Wolf’s proposal, his initial resistance to Tzeitl marrying Motl out of love, and Tzeitl’s resultant psychological distress. Tevye eventually responds to Tzeitl’s needs and desires. Ultimately, he shows flexibility in a way that preserves his relationship with his daughter. He even expresses misgivings about his former rigidity. In “Hodl,” the titular daughter must choose between traditionalism and revolutionary ideals. Perchik’s zealous political commitment and the czar’s intolerance to change lead to Perchik’s exile. While Tevye appears quite flexible and curious about Perchik’s beliefs, society’s rigid forces push Hodl to choose between staying with her family and joining her lover in exile. Even with Chava, Tevye expresses remorse to himself, and later, Chava is depicted in proximity, leaving the possibility of reconciliation within reach for the reader. In “Shprintze,” inflexible notions of class constrain Ahronchik’s family from accepting economically Shprintse. The story implies that she is pregnant, and she kills herself because there is no flexible place for an unmarried, poor pregnant woman in any society at that time. Likewise, due to class and economic differences Podhutsur appears unwilling to embrace Tevye as an in-law. Finally, in “Lekh Lekho,” the gentile villagers and Jewish Tevye live together amicably. However, they cannot see any room for latitude under the czar’s uncompromising view, so they enact a pogrom and exile Tevye. Time and again, ideals without moderation have damaging effects on individual and collective well-being. Reconciliatory attitudes bring the greatest bliss and peace in changing times.

with special regard.”³ In these stories, four of Tevye’s descendants reunite, but their distinct perspectives threaten to pull the family apart once more. While I strive for these characters to reflect a particular identity or viewpoint, they are not meant to be mere stereotypes; and together, they showcase the varied tapestry of Jewish peoplehood. I feature: 1.) Rafi, a secular Israeli, 2.) Elliott, a “cultural” Jew, 3.) Menachem, a Lubavitcher Hasid, and 4.) Lily, a queer activist. These characters, as well as the other Jews they encounter throughout these tales, symbolize the greater family with its diversity. When they first meet and interact, they clash pretty powerfully. They have the same bloodline, but they struggle to interact in a friendly, cooperative way. Eventually, however, they develop a familial network and authentic connection, despite manifest differences in their approach to Judaism. In each of the six stories, I interrogate how unity can exist in the face of major differences. Perhaps, generative, nourishing opportunities can indeed arise if Jewish people allow for some discomfort and approach relationships with commitment, openness, and respect. Within these pages, we will explore: **can a Jewish family illustrate what it means to retain collective identity and exchange values, purposes, and responsibilities in a fractured and ever-fracturing world?**

My first story answers the central question with a resounding no. It revolves around a Broadway producer and his assistant, Mimi, gathering the cousins—all estranged descendants of Tevye—for the first time. Mimi herself embodies the notion that peoplehood is “ultimately a conscious choice rather than an accident by birth” and is evidently on the decline.⁴ She dislikes association with other Jews, and her ordeal with Tevye’s descendants initially affirms this disavowal. To avoid the bickering, she dreams of each Jew having their own island to live on

³ Erica Brown and Misha Galperin, *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood: Can We be One?*. (United Kingdom: Jewish Lights Pub., 2009), p. 27.

⁴Ibid. pp. 19-20. Brown and Galperin cite Steven Cohen’s sociological research that affiliations with Jewish peoplehood are on the decline.

their own terms. This conclusion embodies the “conceptual unraveling” described by Steven Cohen and Jack Wertheimer.⁵ They warn that the “fluidity in relations between Jews and gentiles” and post-Enlightenment individualism, experimentation, and personal spirituality will cause a retreat from peoplehood.⁶ Mimi illustrates the willingness to abandon the construct of collective identity, opting instead for the kind of personal religion or spiritual self-expression, which is typical of American Liberalism.

While Cohen and Wertheimer blame peoplehood’s demise on external factors, I explore how internal infighting constitutes a significant factor in the unraveling of the Jewish family. My first story exposes the destructive mess that results when Jews fail to see commonality across differences. The conference room exchange touches on many of the major sticking points among the Jews – egalitarianism, the centrality of law, Zionism, and diasporism. It culminates with the characters sparring over arguably the most divisive issue – Israel-Palestine. They use some of the most charged language and sling judgments, rejections, and accusations at each other, hindering the collective endeavor. This discord contrasts with Albert Memmi’s vision of cooperation in which “differences must be lucidly recognized, embraced, and respected as such. Others must be granted their being as other with all the enrichment of life that might be possible through their very difference.”⁷ My characters deny, defeat, and degrade the other, which stymies group cooperation. Since they cannot see the value of their cousins’ and fellow-Jews’ distinct perspectives, they cannot enter into a fruitful exchange of ideas about what it does/could mean to be Jewish in the aggregate. Intolerance for difference impedes the reunited family’s cohesion.

⁵ Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer. “Whatever Happened to the Jewish People.” *Commentary*, 121, no. 6 (2006): 34.

⁶ Ibid. 35-36.

⁷ Albert Memmi, *Racism*, (United Kingdom: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 155.

The second story explores how softening some boundaries facilitates a helpful interchange. Mordecai Kaplan envisioned Jewish community helping the individual “attain those objectives which constitute for him his complete self-realization.”⁸ Community can offer wisdom, structure, and support to make sense of life's ups and downs and continue to pursue personal meaning and purpose. In Kaplan’s understanding of intra-communal responsibility, Jews make “social and economic adjustments for the individual” and they impart “cultural values and habits which can make his life significant.”⁹ Jews not only provide material support for one another’s success and well-being but also share useful insights and tools sourced from the tradition and dispersed in a great network. Individuals innovate with a common heritage to enrich each other’s lives. Although Kaplan acknowledged that religion was not the sole source of this Jewish civilization, he expressed that in its absence, “there remains a very small spiritual capital, indeed on which to build a future.”¹⁰ A Jew does not need to observe every *mitzvah* or adopt a creed, but many of Judaism’s offerings involve some connection to the religious core. As Elliott, the cousin most disaffiliated with his heritage, navigates a personal crisis, his cousins, living examples of Kaplan’s notion of Jewish community as material and spiritual safety net, come to his aid.

When Elliott receives news of his mother’s sudden death, he has no idea how to set about to plan the funeral. Having abandoned religious community, he has no schema or network to respond to the crisis of loss. Noticing Elliott at a loss, his wife contacts his Jewish cousins for help. They are fairly distant relatives with little pre-existing connection (i.e., one chaotic meeting), but their willingness to offer support conveys how Jews might take responsibility for

⁸ Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*. (United States: Jewish Publication Society, 2010), p. 285.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 325

one another through significant differences. When Menachem's devout Chabad community shows up to help Elliott with the mourning rituals, they underscore this solidarity and its power (and how it manifests especially among observant Jews). Providing social aid for a stranger, the Jewish people transform Elliott's grief from an experience of loneliness into one of community, with robust social support.

In addition to physical and material presence, the cousins swap values and habits, embodying the enriching flow imagined by Kaplan. In my stories I sought to depict an idealized model of Jews sharing religious and cultural tools to one another with accessibility and flexibility. One who receives a text or practice maintains agency. During the crisis, Menachem introduces religious elements in a way that is neither judgmental nor coercive. He provides context and assistance with what is happening, such as explaining *tahara* and supplying the words for Kaddish. Rafi mentions that such clarity and openness contrasts with the approach of many religious authorities in Israel, except for a few organizations like *Tzohar*. (Perhaps, more folks could follow Menachem/*Tzohar*'s lead.) With Rafi's encouragement, Elliott lowers his vigilance and permits religious influence. As a result, Elliott tries out a world of concepts, liturgy, and customs to cope with his loss. Elliott does not take on an observant identity, but he does find his own way to interact with elements of Jewish civilization that might enhance his quality of life. In particular, seeing people pray on his mother's behalf, shoveling the dirt on her grave at the funeral, and lighting the *yahrzeit* candle give Elliott a ritual way to grapple with his loss, and experience both comfort and community. At *shiva*, Rafi shares his knowledge of Israeli culture by sharing a classic Israeli poem, which Menachem finds spiritually compelling. These cousins consensually share spiritual capital, much of which emerges from Jewish religion.

Receiving and integrating it in a personal way enables the individuals to make sense of the trauma of death and improve their well-being.

In the third story, Menachem hosts Lily for a Friday night dinner. This narrative explores Ahad Ha'am's notion that "more than the Jewish people kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept the Jewish people."¹¹ Digging beneath the surface of this concept, I wanted to probe the notion that that shared Jewish culture and moral mission preserves and indeed, can revive individual and collective Jewish identity.¹² Menachem believes that the experience of a shared Shabbat has the capacity to elevate Lily's spirit and bring him and his cousin together, but the meal that actually takes place presents major challenges. There are the various accommodations and adaptations that are necessary for everyone involved to share a Shabbat meal. Sometimes, Jewish coexistence looks like agreeing to disagree and making space for temporary discomfort or separation. At other times, it involves *halachic* and practical creativity. In this story, these strategies come together when Menachem interprets Jewish law to permit mixed-gender singing and invites a guest uncomfortable with this mixed singing to venture to another room while it is taking place. This type of approach reflects Kaplan's idealism of a "developing civilization...with great latitude for belief and practice" that retains "some basis for creative unity."¹³ Ironically, most of the characters buy into this give and take, but Lily, the ostensibly progressive leftist, struggles the most with the dynamics of pluralism. Her roommate Ruth confronts how Lily's purism limits engagement with a diverse community. Disassociation with anything disagreeable to one's own sensibility leads to the breakdown of communal life.

¹¹ Asher Ginsberg [Ahad Ha'am], "Shabbat and Zionism," Ben-Yehuda Project March 7, 2025, <https://benyehuda.org/read/2786>.

¹² Asher Ginsberg [Ahad Ha'am], "Spiritual Renewal," in *Selected Essays*, translated by Leon Simon, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication society of America, 1912), pp. 139-158. Ahad Ha'am wrote about the renewal of a "national spirit" in which Jews bring together past tradition and enlightenment to meet their present and future needs. Ginsberg believed that a central cultural center in *eretz yisrael* is necessary for this kind of renewal. My story explores how Jews coming together over common culture can be a seed for this type of renewal.

¹³ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 222.

However, when these characters allow for some tension and pliability amidst their differences, they discover that they can find points of common interest and uncover joy, connection, and fulfillment. Shared cultural modes and space with respect for differences provide a foundation for fruitful, fulfilling relationships to develop.

Beyond surface level pleasantries, I wanted to explore how Jewish peoplehood can and should lead to a shared moral mission. Jonathan Schorsch asserts, “Without substantive values that make up this shared togetherness...[peoplehood] does not have compelling meaning.”¹⁴ Social gatherings alone fail to meet call of Jewish tradition – to work together, identify core values, and establish a world that is just. Schorsch also stresses that social justice alliances with impact and reach need to involve more than those who are “atheist, queer, and anti-capitalist.”¹⁵ Jewish activism and Hasidism come together for a powerful effect on the individuals involved and the community they serve. Lily and Menachem do not agree on everything, but at the Shabbat table, they find a place of shared concern in hunger and poverty. Their different orientations to Judaism maximize their impact in their neighborhood. Whereas Menachem grounds their movement with a spiritual-religious thrust and a community of duty-bound volunteers, Lily possesses tactical know-how and a universalist outlook. Lily and Menachem’s collaboration demonstrates the advantages of challenging the denominational segmentation of the Jewish world. Naomi and Ruth also engage a shared passion for the arts. These interactions reflect the creative unity and beneficent power unleashed when Jews push against each other’s limits and mix varied strengths and perspectives for the sake of a common interest or cause.

¹⁴ Jonathan Schorsch, “The Threefold Cord is Stronger than the Single Strand,” *The Peoplehood Papers*, 21, 2018, 24. See also Asher Ginsberg [Ahad Ha’am], “Priest and Prophet” in *Selected Essays*, translated by Leon Simon. United States: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912, pp. 132-133. Ginsberg deems the call for the “universal dominion of absolute justice” foundational to the “Hebrew national spirit.”

¹⁵ Ibid. 25.

This story also features Ruth, a Black Jewish narrator, as she observes a surprising dynamic. Sometimes, Chabad and Orthodox spaces reflect higher degrees of inclusion and diversity than so-called progressive ones. This insight aligns with my observations living near Hasidic Crown Heights and what I have heard from some Jews of color. Dianne Cohler-Esses expressed her struggle to find a home as a “searching, questioning woman” that was anything but Ashkenazic.¹⁶ Although liberal Jews claimed to value choice and equality, they did not want to showcase her history and customs.¹⁷ This description of Mizrachi erasure resonates with what Drs. Diane Tobin, Gary Tobin, and Scott Rubin called a “cycle of ignorance” in which Jews of color remain largely invisible in the Jewish consciousness and in communal life.¹⁸ In contrast, the Lubavitcher *Rebbe* spoke about respecting the customs of non-Ashkenazi Jews.¹⁹ Furthermore, multiple accounts of Chabadniks attest to how their observance of *mitzvot* puts them on visible and equal footing in their communities.²⁰ Certainly, it is not a binary; there are progressive efforts to embrace Jews of color, Sephardim, and Mizrachim, and there is racism, discrimination, and Ashkenormativity within Hasidic communities. Sometimes, Chabad leaders try to downplay differences.²¹ Such an approach risks marginalizing the positive elements and points of insight of belonging to a multicultural, multiracial community. However, this sect, traditionally dismissed as retrograde, has achieved a remarkable degree of proactive out-reach,

¹⁶ Dianne Cohler-Esses, “A Common Language between East and West,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19, no. 1 (2003): 115-116. Cohler describes finding a culture that purported values of choice and equality, yet she was told that Jews of the East had not entered the modern period and that her predominantly Ashkenazi students did not need to learn about their history and customs.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Diane Tobin, Gary A Tobin, and Scott Rubin. *In Every Tongue: The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People*, (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2005), p. 166.

¹⁹ Gershon Avtzon, “Should Sephardic Students Be Encouraged To Take On Chabad Customs?,” Chabadinfo.com, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://chabadinfo.com/beis-medrash/chinuch-and-moshiach/should-sephardic-students-be-encouraged-to-take-on-chabad-customs/>

²⁰ Elisheva Martinetti, “From Rural China to Chabad of Milan,” Chabad.org, Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center, accessed March 7, 2025, https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/6797243/jewish/From-Rural-China-to-Chabad-of-Milan.htm

Yosef B. Kulek, “Jewish & Black: Finding my identity with the Rebbe,” *The Times of Israel*, July 19, 2024, accessed March 7, 2025. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/jewish-black-finding-my-identity-with-the-rebbe/>

²¹ See Yosef Kulek, “Jewish & Black.”

audacious hospitality, and reconfiguration of the Jewish tapestry. This story spurs liberal readers to at least consider what can be challenged and learned when facing a different approach toward inclusion.

The next story sits right on the third rail of Jewish community building today – Zionism versus anti-Zionism. The narrator, Mousaleh, is a peace-oriented Palestinian American restaurant owner. I found it essential to incorporate a Palestinian voice and represent how their survival intersects with Jews’ capacity to push one another toward more constructive pathways. He asks “Can a Zionist and an anti-Zionist be friends?,” and the narrative explores holding a dialogue between opposing viewpoints. Many leaders toss around the word “dialogue” as a necessary intervention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but few further define the terms of the discourse. The first half of this story tries to convey what dialogue is *not* – showcasing a destructive exchange of talking points and insults between Lily and Rafi. Mousaleh rebukes them for accomplishing very little besides ruining his customers’ lunch and thereby undermining his livelihood. The second half of the story attempts to cast a model for dialogue across differences. It functions like a Hegelian dialectic with the characters presenting contradicting points of view. As they dig deep and empathize with one another, a synthesis of mutual understanding begins to emerge. By the story’s conclusion, Rafi and Lily still disagree, but they appear willing to keep learning and growing through considering one another’s insights. Much remains unresolved, but literally and figuratively, the ice starts to thaw.

Lily and Rafi want to write each other off. In this narrative, I try to challenge the utility of cutting ties. Progressive Jews cede crucial leverage and influence when they break their connections of culture and religion with Zionists and Israelis. In *Tablets Shattered*, Joshua Leifer asserts, “The pose of radical hard-heartedness was, and remains the easy way out— an abdication

of moral judgment costumed as sober realpolitik.”²² Instead of preaching purist ideology to an echo chamber, Jews troubled by current conditions in Israel need to participate in real relationships with other people tied to Israel-Palestine. Within those connections, one can share personal experiences and values as well as common Jewish heritage to make a case for the worth of every life in the land. The emphasis on story-telling as a means of opening minds also comes from Peter Beinart’s response to October 7th and the destruction of Gaza. Beinart believes that Jews need to work together (and listen to Palestinians) to readdress the story they tell themselves – whose life matters and how do they conceive of power and powerlessness?²³ Mousaleh, Rafi, and Lily each tell their version of a story in this land. As they synthesize narratives, a fuller story begins to emerge. Putting together the fragments reveals a larger picture, enabling leaders to respond to the varied concerns among everyone involved.

Much of how the dialogue unfolds stems from my personal attempts to forge empathy and understanding with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The characters’ accounts stem from narratives that have informed my views on Israel-Palestine through curious consideration.²⁴ Mousaleh’s rules of the road draw upon wisdom I received from Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum about how to meet the post-October 7th moment pastorally, particularly with congregants who had viewpoints quite different from my own. The advice to “listen openly enough to be changed by what someone else has to offer” has allowed me to care for others, learn, and evolve during this divisive moment. In addition to Beinart’s framework and Rabbi Kleinbaum’s counsel, the

²² Joshua Leifer, *Tablets Shattered : The End of an American Jewish Century and the Future of Jewish Life*. (New York, Dutton, 2024), p. 338.

²³ Peter Beinart, *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza*, (United Kingdom: Atlantic Books, 2025), pp. 9-10.

²⁴ I based Shira and Mousaleh’s mother collaborating on the cross-border peacebuilding of Roni Keidar, and Lily’s report on Uhm-al Khair reflects my experiences there with Extend. Rafi’s mourning of his roommate embodies how I have absorbed Israeli grief. Unfortunately, Keidar said that she fell out of contact with a close friend from Gaza amidst October 7’s aftermath, but she remains “hoping that it’s not the end.” My piece imagines what a caring, cross-border relationship could look like in the midst of trauma and violence.

i24NEWS English. “Peace Activist and Gaza Border Resident Speaks Out.” February 5, 2024, Youtube Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZ66krgEvGw>.

emphasis on compassionate, curious exchange of stories aligns with Resetting the Table's approach for pluralistic dialogue. Instead of seeking to out-persuade Rafi and Lily, Mousaleh names the various priorities before the group, aiding everyone in grasping what is driving the divergent perspectives. He "follows the meaning" of each story, identifying the values and priorities embedded in them.²⁵ At an especially contentious moment, he offers "a 'serial reflection' by reflecting to each party how they view x [Israel-Palestine]."²⁶ He asks if both parties can comprehend why an aspect of a story would feel important to their counterpart, and Rafi and Lily begrudgingly nod. As opposed to relaying talking points, this process facilitates depth of communication and acknowledgment. While it may prove slow-going, such a patient, receptive framework opens opportunities to explore how to bridge differences and address all surfacing concerns over time.

With story five, I try to complicate the Zion/diaspora, strong/weak, good/bad binaries. It begins with Elliott facing an antisemitic incident, which provokes a discussion about what keeps Jews safe and prosperous. Although Rafi learns to accept some criticism of his homeland with Lily and Mousaleh, he maintains a condescending attitude toward diaspora Judaism. Rafi adheres to a more traditional Zionist view of Israel as the negation of diaspora's weakness.²⁷ He mentions the notion popular among certain post-Holocaust Zionists that Jews were sent like "sheep to the slaughter" in the camps and needed to unyoke themselves of such passivity in forming their own strength and state.²⁸ His belief in Israel's centrality and necessity stems from Ahad Ha'am's vision that national revival is only possible with a mass settlement that serves as a geographic

²⁵ Resetting the Table, "Building Dialogue and Deliberation Across Divides," (handout for HUC-JIR Kallah, HUC-JIR at Isabella Friedman Jewish Retreat Center, Falls Village, CT, received August 19, 2024).

²⁶ Ibid. p. 16

²⁷ Brown and Galperin, *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, p. 140. Brown and Galperin cite Jacob Klatzkin's writing that "Galut [exile] can only drag out the disgrace of our people."

²⁸ Dan Porter, "'Like Sheep to the Slaughter': The Evolution of a Phrase and Its Legacy in Holocaust Memory," *Israel Studies* 29, no. 3 (2024): 104-124. Rafi also echoes Chayim Nachman Bialik's "City of Slaughter" when discussing the threats of diaspora in my third story.

and cultural center.²⁹ Rafi views Israel as the primary vehicle of peoplehood, disregarding other forms of Judaism as antiquated and unsubstantial on their own. Once antisemitism surfaces, he articulates out loud his allegations about Elliott's misguided, weak Jewishness. In response, the narrator, Patrick, seeks to defend his law partner, Elliott. Given the characters' profession, I loosely structure this narrative as Elliott, and by extension, diaspora Judaism, being on trial.

Although Patrick offers support (inhabiting the role of mentor/father figure), Elliott needs more affirmative Jewish connection in order to cope with this new, felt reality of antisemitism. Exclusion and discrimination push Elliott back into an awareness of particularity, and he initiates a process of re-engagement. Kaplan observed that hatred contributes to the revival of Jewish consciousness.³⁰ If one pursues it with "concentrated social energy" and "finer spirituality as a defense against the dangers of demoralization to which antisemitism exposes him," one may "rise to new heights of spiritual achievement."³¹ Elliott's Jewishness does not begin and end with the realization of antisemitism. He explores positive elements of belonging to a distinct people, joining a Jewish book club and forging new relationships. Similar to the sharing of rituals in story two, this journey showcases how participating in a Jewish civilization facilitates spiritual and social resilience. In contrast, Rafi mostly focuses on the physical ways Jews can fortify themselves. This element emerges from a dynamic in diaspora-Israel relationships that Jewish responsibility involves focusing on the physical strength of Israel and of struggling Jewish communities. I place this kind of support against the exchange of culture and conscience that takes place at the JCC (and flows from Kaplan's concept of exchanging not only material needs but also imparting habits and values cited earlier). Speaking with the Dominican bodega owners

²⁹ Ginsberg [Ahad Ha'am], "Spiritual Renewal," pp. 288-289. .

³⁰ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 70

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 76

next door, Elliott also contemplates safety through developing norms of vigilance and solidarity with non-Jews, but Rafi emphasizes an insular self-reliance. With these juxtapositions, I explore the limitations of relying exclusively on one way to respond to antisemitism, be it the physical or the spiritual, the inside or the outside game. A combination of these modalities establishes multiple ways to protect the Jewish people from threats.

As the scenes unfold, Patrick considers evidence of the case for and against diaspora. He notes individuals who find ways to thrive as Jews and Americans, including Sandy Koufax and Elliott's family of jurists. At the same time, he absorbs Rafi's critiques about American Judaism appearing piecemeal and shallow. I based this criticism on Joshua Leifer's writing about how "nonobservant Jewish identity seems to be tottering on the relics of the last century, lacking in substance and vitality."³² The trio's visit to a JCC book club engages Leifer's notion. While the members could read Philip Roth in a mostly nostalgic manner (and Rafi skeptically thinks they do), they thoughtfully assess how the literary work informs their contemporary identities. The book club discussion touches upon the tied up nature of Jewishness and Americanness; moving to Israel would entail ceding something essential about their senses of self. The group mentions other ways they use religion and folkways, including Israeli literature and dance, to create a thick sense of community. In response, Rafi tries to elevate the National Library of Israel, particularly praising the preservation of Moshe Willensky's cultural contributions. His appreciation reflects Ahad Ha'am's belief that the Jewish people needed a central institution in Israel to reignite and sustain spiritual and cultural flourishing.³³ The book club scene emphasizes how substance and vitality remain within reach for Jews living in a majority gentile society. However, to borrow from Kaplan, Jews will only have civilization if the individual "reaches out to the life of his

³² Leifer, *Tablets Shattered*, p. 222.

³³ Asher Ginsberg [Ahad Ha'am], "Spiritual Renewal," pp. 139-158.

people.”³⁴ Within Jewish collectivity, Israel is partial but not necessarily central to the discussion. The book club attendees search for insight from Israeli, Indian, and American Jewish authors, and later, Elliott articulates his gratitude to learn from Roth *and* Showtime at the Apollo. The diasporic sensibility hinges upon building robust Jewish community while exploring cultural resources in all their variety – the Jewish heritage from one’s particular place, global Jewish discourse and production (including from Israel), and gentile influences.

Nearing the end, Patrick asks if it is necessary to choose between Moshe Willensky’s Zion and Sandy Koufax’s diaspora. This line of thinking aligns with Simon Rawidowicz’s argument in “Jerusalem and Babylon,” which expresses “he who denies either denies all.”³⁵ Judaism today is the experience of self-determination in Israel as well as the negotiations and syncretism of the diaspora. Altogether, the Jewish people gain a fuller perspective to contemplate existence. The reader sees strength and weakness in each of the experiences. As we reach the concluding screaming match between Rafi and Elliott, we witness how negation of the other entails a lot of effort and energy with very little that is positive to show for it. This conflict contrasts with the activity at the JCC in which members dismiss absolutism and find richness in an expansive sense of culture and community. Living in both Israel and diaspora – the inevitable push and pull between these experiences – broadens how Jews consider the role of their culture and their responsibilities to one another and the wider community.

The sixth and final story brings the narrative together when the cousins and Mimi converge at an annual memorial service for Tevye. This setting comes from the annual gathering

³⁴ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p.. 184. Kaplan wrote, “One cannot live Judaism as a civilization unless the past of his people becomes his own past, unless his entire being becomes a nerve that reaches out to the life of his people.”

³⁵ Simon Rawidowicz, “Jerusalem and Babylon,” in *Jews & Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States*, edited by Simon Rabinovitch, (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2012), p. 220.

held by Sholem Alechem's family at Brotherhood Temple in Gramercy Park.³⁶ In his will, Sholem Alechem requested that his children and grandchildren read his stories together with joy and "have whatever religious convictions they will. But...guard their Jewish descent."³⁷ Framing the will as Tevye's last wishes, I quote it directly in this story (as well as in story two). In the vision for this gathering, Sholem Alechem did not expect uniformity among the Jewish people, including his family, but he imagined their capacity to come together and keep the family and culture alive. This celebration matches the conception of peoplehood established in these stories. Although individual convictions diverge, each character remains invested in their Jewishness and their relationships to one another.

Experiencing boredom in attending the ceremony for her boss, Mimi seeks to stir the pot by provoking disagreements among the cousins. Her meddling together with other circumstances at the event, including the diversity of the attendees, push buttons that are similar to those in the first story. However, at this point, Tevye's descendants, themselves have realized that "the provocation of difference gives us a chance to transcend our normal boundaries and experience Judaism from other places of interest in identity and intensity."³⁸ The resolution of Jewish

³⁶ Jonathan Mark, "Tevye's Father, 100 Years Gone," *NY Jewish Week*, May 18, 2016,

<https://www.jta.org/2016/05/18/ny/tevyes-father-100-years-gone>

Clyde Haberman, "A Reading to Recall the Father of Tevye," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2016,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/18/nyregion/18nyc.html>

Yiddish Book Center, "Sholem Alechem's Yortsayt," September 25, 2015, Youtube Video,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=967JsmLKYYQ&t=1s>.

Fenny Schwartz, "Mass gatherings mark centennial of Shalom Alechem's death," *The Times of Israel*, June 2, 2016

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/mass-gatherings-mark-centennial-of-shalom-aleichems-death/>

I based this fictional setting by blending accounts of the private family memorial ceremony and larger communal celebrations of Sholem Alechem's life.

³⁷ Jeremy Asher Dauber, *The Worlds of Sholem Alechem: The Remarkable Life and Afterlife of the Man Who Created Tevye*. (New York: Nextbook, 2013), p. 323.

Sholem Rabinovich [Sholem Alechem], "Will of Sholem Alechem," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1916,

<https://sholemaleichem.org/community/ethical-will/index.html>

Menachem invokes Sholem Alechem's wishes in story two when he speaks about their ancestor wanting the family to "live together in peace, bear no hatred for one another, to help one another in bad times, to remember one another upon occasion in the family."

The emcee of Tevye's memorial ceremony reads from "Tevye's will," actually quoting Sholem Alechem's wish to protect Jewish descent.

³⁸ Brown and Galperin, *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, p. 170.

disagreement does not elide differences. It frames them as part of what makes the civilization rich, spurring opportunities for individual and collective evolution. When Mimi confronts the characters, they describe the function of a modern family, invoking Kaplan's concept of "antagonistic co-operation."³⁹ It endures not because of acquiescence to a singular dogma but due to the commitment of its members to a "creative unity" – generativity emerging from similarities and differences.⁴⁰ During the sixth story, Elliott presents her with a choice – abandon her culture and religion in solitude or accept greater means and partners to navigate this chaotic world. Mimi initially dismisses this form of Jewish collectivity as an impossible farce. After a lonely commute and time to think, she relinquishes some of her cynicism and recognizes the frustrating yet fulfilling potential of peoplehood.

Jewish unity does not need to require uniformity. Absolutism within the Jewish people stifles the challenges necessary to refine our values and purpose. Within the variety of Israel, we possess the chance to make the case to one another about what it means to lead an intentional, righteous life. During this discussion, we derive clarity from places where we concur as well as places where we diverge with confidence and conviction. From there, we can collaborate where we identify mutually agreed upon responsibilities and respectfully continue to make our case where difference remains. Perhaps, this willingness to explore differences serves as a model to face a broader diversity. The family represents one unit of collectivity, the Jewish community another layer, and all of humanity beyond that. Navigating conflicts among Jews instills in the people of Israel the framework to search for common ground with the rest of humanity. Before grappling all 8 billion of us, Jewish collectivity presents a more manageable training ground to explore differences, and in our work with other Jews, we can develop skills that help us make an

³⁹ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 224.

⁴⁰ Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, p. 222.

even more widespread impact. By wrestling with the concept of peoplehood, I hope that these stories challenge and empower us to hone how to respect others and invite more expansive ways of being in the world.

Story 1: Mimi Moskowitz and the Jews of the Round Table

Don't call me a curmudgeon, Rabbi Adam. I just don't know what to do with the Jews these days, and I don't especially trust those *altecockers* who have been captaining the Titanic for years. It's okay if I'm this frank with you? Who can I go to with a Jewish problem but a rabbi? My daughter Emma sent me a Youtube of the sermon you gave on the priesthood and drag queens. You're still fresh at this and seem to have a good sense of humor. Maybe, you won't write me off as some crank. Maybe, I'll remind you of your *bubbe*. Maybe, you'll give me a rabbinic talking to and set me straight. Maybe, if old Mimi Moskowitz offers anything useful or wise, share it with the masses. Go wild.

Just remember that many things spark joy for Mimi. I love watching my oldest grandson toy with the family piano and listening to my youngest choo-choo at his train table. Tuesday nights, there's an exhilarating bridge tournament at the Forest Hills Senior Center. Sunday afternoons belong to the community tulip garden. Only two things put me in a truly foul mood – the Jews and this job.

Don't call me a raging antisemite either. I belonged to a synagogue once. I played cards there for years, but every game devolved into a screaming match. That was the problem. I called it Mimi's Law – Put Jews together, and anything that can result in discord, will result in discord. Two Aprils ago, Harriet and Marilyn bickered for an hour about whether to serve rice at the community seder. After that, I let my membership lapse. Who wants extra headaches?

Meanwhile, work – don't get me started. My grandson informed me that Mr. Hollander is what the kids call a "nepo-baby." His father invested early in *Rent*, *Wicked*, and *Hamilton*. Going into the family trade, Mr. Hollander has made several questionable creative choices, beginning with that rock opera romance exploring the encounter between Mr. and Mrs. Met. Or *The*

Tempest with constant real water effects to “accentuate the swirling storm inside Prospero.”

Despite mascot musicals and damp disasters, Daddy keeps him afloat, so Gregory doesn’t stop taking the big swings. And when the boss starts firing off ideas, who is stuck assembling the spreadsheets and making the calls? Cue Mimi.

“Today is going to be absolutely perfect,” Mr. Hollander said. Oh great, I thought: How fabulous that Mr. Hollander has arrived with reasonable expectations. I opened a new game of solitaire as he wrapped a bowtie around his neck. He was wearing a white button down with thin black stripes tucked into black pants with thin white stripes. I watched the mismatched zebra gaze at himself in the mirror.

“Mimi, remind me to dry clean this suit before the Tonys,” he said. As you wish, Mr. Hollander. After 7 shows and net \$28 million in losses, this was the year the American Theater Wing would give you your due. Setting aside solitaire, I scribbled a reminder in my secretarial notebook, stifling a laugh. I started a late career in the biz when my husband Jack died, but Mr. Hollander was likely the last *schlimazel* I’d have to appease. In 18 months, I’d have enough saved for a winter timeshare in Boca. Until then, work hard, redirect his missteps, and dream of January sunshine.

Mr. Hollander poured a glob of gel into his hand and slicked it to shape his high and tight pompidou. “Can you believe that I tracked down Tevye’s real-life descendants?” he asked.

Are you kidding me? *You* found them? I don’t think so, Buster Brown! Let me give it to you straight. When talks of a *Fiddler* revival began, I started some preliminary research. Some producers prefer that their secretaries remain mum behind a yellow legal pad, but on multiple occasions, Mr. Hollander has happily pocketed my two cents to save his sorry ass. I also do my best to anticipate and prepare before he sends me on yet another wild goose chase. This time, I

told him about the blasted goose! A couple of months ago, I had off-handedly mentioned to Mr. Hollander that Sholem Aleichem based his Tevye on an actual dairyman. To my dismay, his eyes grew three sizes larger. He barked, “Just find them! I know you can do it, Mimi!” Mr. Hollander believed that if we consulted Tevye’s living relatives, we’d unlock his path to the coveted Tony. Did it make much sense? No. Was it the boss’s order? Yes. I brewed a fresh pot of Nespresso and braced for a long evening.

I hate to admit it, but having a chance to play investigator is one of the few redeeming parts of this second-rate job. Once upon a time, I enrolled in City College’s journalism program, but then I met Jack, became pregnant, and said bye-bye forever to those dreams. That’s 1960 for you. Still, I love the challenge of chasing the scoop. All night I scoured ancestry.com. Of course, the cemetery in Boyarka, the basis for Sholem Aleichem’s Boiberik, was desecrated during the war. Note to self – add to the list of the Nazis’ atrocities ruining my Wednesday night.

I stayed in the office past *Jeopardy* time, beyond *Law and Order*, and into the hours when the networks run infomercials to pacify insomniacs. As much as Zero Mostel dazzled the world, the real-live Tevye seemed to have clung to his humble roots. No college degree, no national service, no obituary. Was the encounter between these men just another figment of Sholem Aleichem’s imagination? I wanted nothing more than to be in my silk pajamas, but then genius struck yours truly once again. A clever search revealed a *bris* certificate for the son of Motl and Tzeitel Kamzoyl, and that blessed little babe’s grandson happened to love genealogy. With a couple of clicks, the entire family tree appeared.

I made the calls. I budgeted the consulting fees. I set a date that worked in everyone’s calendars. So yeah, I was super glad *Mr. Hollander* located Tevye’s descendants.

As imbecilic as I found the quest, I was astounded by my triumph. 8 billion people in this world, hundreds of them on the family tree, and I managed to find four of them in nearby Brooklyn! A family that had wandered from Siberia to Tel Aviv to here. Now, only a few subway stops apart, and they all answered my call. Once again, Mimi cracks the calcified case. Does that mean I was excited to enter a room with a bunch of Jews together? *Feh*.

Mr. Hollander smiled, “It’s a wonder they’ve never bumped into each other on line for Sunday bagels.” I laughed to avoid a cringe. He put on his jacket and admired his own broad shoulders. “This is how you revive a classic. You hear from the people about what speaks to them. Who better than Tevye’s own descendants to provide *the* Jewish perspective?” His emphasis on the singular *the* particularly irked me. I turned away as I felt my eyebrow raise with utter disbelief.

Bracing for impact, I peeked into the conference room. “Looks like everyone is here. Ready when you are, sir.”

Four strangers stared at the round table in sullen silence. You could hardly tell they were cousins. Tevye had seven daughters, and of course, the genetic and other variations had widened with each generation. From head to toe, their looks and style of dress differed so vastly one from the other. Mr. Hollander cleared his throat and began, “Thank you for coming everyone. As you may have read, I am reviving *Fiddler on the Roof* this season and feel so lucky that I found you.” There he goes taking credit. I averted my side-eye so no one would notice.

“We’re the lucky ones, sir! Baruch Hashem, family is our greatest blessing!” Dear God, who on earth is *that* earnest at 9am? The source of this irksome enthusiasm was a gentleman in a white button-down shirt and black pants. His *tzitzis* fringes dangled about his waist; his head was topped by a black fedora, his face blanked by a medium-length bushy beard. I was all ready to

play my favorite Brooklyn game of “Hipster or Hasid?,” but the Baruch Hashem was a dead giveaway. I had already read about how one of Beilke’s grandsons had followed the Lubavitcher *rebbe* to Crown Heights in the 1950’s.

“I can’t wait for all of you to meet my boys! They’re a hoot. Yesterday, we watched the *Muppets Movie*. They can’t get enough of Miss Piggy. Hiiiiii-ya!” The bearded man gave a rather spot-on impression of the glamorous swine. Everyone, especially Mr. Hollander, stared with perplexity.

“Your precious *Rebbe* lets you watch that?” asked an olive-skin fellow. His r’s rolled in a guttural fashion. He must be the Israeli diplomat I contacted. Based on his youthful complexion, he couldn’t be more than a decade out from military service. His chest and biceps pushed the limits of his casual tee, sending a flash of heat to my cheeks. I may be 50 years his senior, but I can still appreciate a fine man when I spot one.

Muppets man giggled from deep in his stomach. “The *Rebbe* taught us to engage with the world. Now, aren’t you excited our worlds have come back together?” he exasperated toward the neighbor on his left.

“Um, sure, I guess,” replied a guy in a plaid button down and gray slacks. His eyes were glued to his phone since we entered the room a few minutes ago. Looks like someone wanted to be here as little as I did.

“And do you have any children?” the Hasid gestured to his right toward the short woman with a butch buzzcut and a torn denim jacket.

“No, I’m 28,” she replied. Her firmness implied “and know how to use birth control. Thank you very much.” I hear you, sister, I thought.

“So is my wife Naomi! You two should meet. I’m sure you’d have a lot in common!” No one affirmed the Hasid’s zeal. As happens in most of our meetings, Mr. Hollander’s eyes begged me to do something. He can buy the trains, but Daddy didn’t teach him how to keep them on the tracks. Putting on the conductor’s hat, I piped in, “Why don’t we start? Seems like you don’t know each other already. Is that right?”

“I’ve been to the annual memorial service for Tevye a few times. Mom can’t go anymore, but there’s over a hundred relatives there. Not to mention the superfans. I try to leave before they sing ‘Tradition,’ though. Love the song. Hate the noise and being harangued,” Elliott said.

The other 3 nodded knowingly. I grimaced thinking of my own seders when every guest sang in a different key. “We should probably get things started, then. Perhaps a quick go around of names would be in order?” I prodded.

Buzzcut led off, “My name is Lily, and my pronouns are she/her. I am a bisexual, anti-racist, socialist, feminist, vegan, diasporist Jew.”

Without looking up, I said, “Lily. Got it.” It’s always the leftists who want to take 20 minutes just to say their names. Everyone else abided by a rapid roll call. The Israeli stud was Rafi, the Hasid Menachem, and my partner in disinterest, Elliott.

I looked to Mr. Hollander to pilot his own meeting, but he looked back at me helplessly. Anticipating this sort of ineptitude, I have given all of them an assignment to help get the discussion off the ground. “Thank you all for reading *Tevye the Dairyman*. To start, do any of you know how Sholem Rabinovich met your great-great-*great* grandfather?” I flaunted the famous author’s real name and my genealogical math to show them all that I had done my homework, too.

The four of them glanced knowingly at each other. Although they had never met, each of them seemed to know the family lore. They gestured to see who would tell this particular story. A common heritage hovered over their estrangement.

Having something to contribute, Elliott set aside his phone. He ventured the first answer. “Sholem vacationed in Boyarke, where Tevye used to do his rounds of all the dachas.”

Lily picked up from there, “It was in the summer of 1894. Our *alte-zeyde* was trying to sell his dairy products to all the fat cats on summer holiday.”

Rafi laughed, “Sholem used to brag on Tevye’s behalf, that he had the creamiest butter in a hundred-mile radius of Kiev. While it started with regular business, the writer made him stay longer and longer each time. He couldn’t get enough of Zeyde’s stories. Tevye insisted that Sholem keep his tales of misfortune between the two of them, but what Tevye shared with Sholem, Sholem shared with the world.”

Mr. Hollander finally mustered a sentence, “So all of this really happened?”

Elliott said, “What’s in the stories matches what my grandma told me, which is what her mother, Tzeitl, told her.”

“*The Tzeitl?*” Mr. Hollander said. Yes, Gregory, that’s why we brought them in, remember?

“Yeah, it’s mostly what we got from Beilke too. Of course, you Broadway and Hollywood types played around with some of the details,” Menachem said.

“What do you mean?” Mr. Hollander furrowed his brow.

“Re-reading this book – I was reminded that Zeyde Tevye was a very *frum* man. It’s lovely that the wedding scene features a *chuppah*, but our other important wedding rituals and legal requirements are overshadowed by that one song,” Menachem explained.

“You want to cut ‘Sunrise, Sunset’?” Elliott asked in disbelief.

“No, no, no. Not cut. Not at all,” Menachem reassured. “I just think that in addition to the song, can we see the blessings for *eirusin* and *kiddushin*? Couldn’t we have the *ketubah* read aloud? It would be a great opportunity to educate about the beauty of Jewish law and love coming together.”

“‘Sunrise, Sunset’ is iconic. Mary and I danced to it at our wedding,” Elliott said.

“And you also heard your *ketubah* read aloud, *nu?*”

“Actually, we didn’t have one,” Elliott said, avoiding eye contact.

The black hatted fellow gestured earnestly. “This, precisely, is why we need to add real texts and rituals to such a show. Our own people think that all it takes to make a Jewish wedding is ‘Sunrise, Sunset’ and breaking a glass. They’re missing the whole religious point.”

Lily added her voice, “Don’t you think you’re obscuring the forest of our Jewish values with these *halachic* trees? That wedding had spirit. More than any Jewish law code, the scene conveys the power of Jewish joy and connection.”

“Sure, don’t get me wrong. I love my wife, and a Jewish marriage is bigger than that. But what did my witnesses sign? *Havei li lintu kedat Mosheh veYisrael* – Be my wife according to the laws of Moses and Israel. Upon the moment of *kiddushin*, I took on certain responsibilities for my wife and our future family. The rabbi read it aloud, and the whole community knew I was obligated to her.

Lily crinkled her nose. “You mean your wife became your property, destined by you and God to pop out a million kids before she turns 30? A *ketubah* enslaves women. Why should Tevye’s story be tainted with heteronormative, patriarchal practices?” Oh boy...I’m with you,

kid. Woman power, burn your bra, yada, yada, yada. But jeez, you met this guy ten minutes ago. Chill.

“*Hatan denan achereyut ketubbah da kabbelit alai* – I made commitments to her. She’s no slave. We have a happy partnership. We take care of our family and do *mitzvot*. *Karnei or zomrim yachdav* – The Baal Shem Tov taught that every person receives a light from Heaven. Husband and wife are two lights, merging to shine Hashem’s goodness even brighter into the world together. A religious wedding scene would show this to the world.” Menachem was ready to return the serve. Who knew these guys came armed with chapter and verse?

Lily sat with her legs crisscrossed on the swivel chair. She made the same sour face as I did when Mr. Hollander instructed me to “greet guests with a brighter smile.” Listen little lady, I thought, life’s full of not knowing how to respond to the absurdities of men.

Menachem kept talking, “When we got married, a revered rabbi recited our *ketubah* out loud for all to hear. It held me accountable to my lifelong obligations before my community. These are the same commitments Motl made to Tzeitl and Tevye made to Golde. If we want to show the world what makes Judaism great, we should spotlight what’s kept us alive and righteous for 3,000 years. I’m not quick to dispense with our commitment to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* so that some jingle can take center stage. You think Tevye would have been happy that Elliott entered a marriage with no obligations to his wife and Hashem? Would he have said, ‘Well, at least they played ‘Sunrise, Sunset?’”

The air conditioning hummed. Everyone awaited Elliott’s response. “We didn’t have a *ketubah* because Mary’s not Jewish,” he said. With a name like Mary – mother of Jesus? Consider me not surprised at all. He continued, “And I was fine with the wedding being Jew-ish. We had a *chuppah* and the glass because that’s what mother wanted. I love Mary, and that’s

what mattered to me then and matters to me now. If you want to talk about religion here, maybe I should just go. I have a lot of work to do today. Weekly Temple and Shabbat may have been right for Tevye. As for me, I understand Jerry Seinfeld's craving for a babka, I like to brag that Leonard Cohen's a member of the tribe, and feel an affinity for Jewish baseball players. That's about it."

Mr. Hollander looked my way. His eyebrows pleaded with me to mop up this mess and salvage what was left of the meeting. Lord Almighty, could you believe his incompetence! "So, with all of that said, what does *Tevye the Dairyman* mean to you?" I interceded.

Contrary to his early indifference, Elliott now spoke, gesticulating with open arms. "Tevye's stories play well in Madrid and Tokyo not because the Spaniards and the Japanese love our niche customs. It's not Jewish joy and love that they respond to. It's just joy and love. We don't need the minutiae. Personally, I think the revival should add an epilogue. Show what happened when the Jews finally joined the cause of all the other peoples in this great promised land. When Motl and Tzeitl made the journey here, they gained safety and opportunity. Here we're free from persecution. Here we can be whoever we want to be."

Rafi leaned back, pursed his lips, and then chuckled out loud. "Free from persecution, you say? America is no different from Ukraine! Jewish safety and freedom here is completely conditional on the kindness of the *goyim*...provided you do everything they say and do. Most of you give up your Jewishness from the start of this oh so wonderful American life. You make a living, buy a house, and eventually, you marry a gentile woman named Mary and have gentile children. Hitler's mission complete behind the golden door." I forgot to put Hitler reference on my Jewish debacle bingo card. There's always one! Mr. Hollander dabbed his forehead. When he raised his arm, his sweat-stains on his shirt arm-pits came into full view.

Elliott crossed his arms. “Well, that’s rude and insulting. So what would you suggest instead of my happy life, hot shot?” he stammered.

“How about the Jewish State? Ever heard of it? We have freedom, and we have power. We work our land, and we develop our ideas without the coercion of the other nations. We can share our rich Jewishness with the rest of the world on our terms. And we are strong enough to defend ourselves against our enemies.”

“Why would I want to live in a country with these enemies to begin with?” Elliott scoffed, turning to the rest of the group. “If Mr. Macho over here wants to play Private Ryan around some ancient ruins, he can knock himself out. Not me.”

“I’d rather fight for my people’s country than face Nazis here, this time with tiki torches.”

Lily appeared ready to burst, “I’d rather out-vote the Nazis here than succumb to the ones claiming to act in my name.” Dear God, were we about to have a whole debate about the State of Israel? It was way too early in the morning for this, and Hollander was paying me way too little.

“Okay,” I said. “I can see that everyone is very excited about this topic. Let’s return to why we’re here. What can you tell us about Tevye?”

Rafi lifted his copy of the book and raised his voice. “You know he wanted to live in Israel, right? Why isn’t that in your play?”

Menachem offered his support, “He wanted to see the Kotel, Rachel’s Tomb, the River Jordan.”

“Exactly! And what did he call your precious America? The place for hard-luck cases! Why don’t we show the promise of Israel? It was Tevye’s dream, and it became his great-great-

great grandson's reality. At the end of his life, Tevye felt he was doomed to endlessly wander Europe, escaping from one pogrom to the next. He believed he had lost his dear Hodl forever to the revolutionary cause. Why couldn't we share that she escaped the Russians' grip on a boat bound for *Eretz Yisrael*? The next generations grew strong on a *kibbutz*. Now, I have a degree from Tel Aviv University, speak fluent Hebrew, and advocate on behalf of the Jewish people in front of the United Nations."

Lily raised her voice, "More like advocates on behalf of ruthless occupation!"

Mr. Hollander raised a hand, but no one paid him any mind. "Excuse me?" Rafi quipped.

Lily adjusted her bangs and declared, "Let's be clear about something: that land you grew up in isn't only *yours*. Do you know how you Zionists created a country where you have a majority? You seized the land, and you displaced thousands of Palestinians in the process."

Rafi's sat up straight and rebutted with a raised voice: "They fled! What were we supposed to do, *Lilit*? Build them a hotel and ask them to shoot us from the balcony?"

"First of all, it's *Lily*. And second, they fled because you used a war to effect ethnic cleansing. And then when the West Bank and Gaza proved too close for comfort, you started cleansing them from there too. Are we not a people who pursues justice?" Lily waved her hands more emphatically than a rabbi would preaching on Yom Kippur.

Rafi retorted sarcastically, "It's all *tzedek tzedek tirdof* with you people, but the real justice you ought to pursue would involve protecting your Israeli brothers and sisters being murdered by terrorists."

"They wouldn't have been killed if you had stopped forcing the Palestinians to live under apartheid. Israel keeps reaping what it sows," Lily sneered.

Duck and cover, I braced for Rafi's roar. Instead, he looked at his feet. A large gulp descended from his throat to his stomach. He cleared his throat, wiped his eyes, and spoke slowly and sternly. "1,200 people did not die on October 7 because they deserved it. 254 people did not go into the depths of hell because they deserved it. My brother did not give his life in Gaza because he deserved it."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Elliott interrupted.

"May his memory be a *brachah*," Menachem said.

Rafi continued, "*Todah, chevreh*. See, Lilit? That's love for your fellow Jew. We're cousins, after all, as we have just learned..."

"I told you already, it's Lily. Lil-lee."

"*Ve'ahavta lerei'acha kamocha* – You should love your neighbor as yourself. All Jews are our neighbors and that love brings all of us close to Hashem, too. In life and death, we're blessings to one another, and we have to take care of each other," Menachem chimed in.

Lily paused for a moment, squaring her shoulders. *Oy*, what's the rabble rouser have up her sleeve now? "Well, no cousin of mine who has committed genocide is a blessing."

Rafi banged his hands on the table, stood, and slammed his chair into the table. The room stayed quiet for only a moment. Why did Elliott feel a need to speak? "See, that's why I'm glad Tzeitl came to America. Israel just makes problems for us."

Lily swiveled his way, "Oh no, you don't get off that easily. You call the US the refuge where you can be free and get away from all of this. You mistake the raft for the fortress! We aren't here to get away and shed who we are. We need to dig deep into our values. From the safety of these shores, we can stand alongside the huddled masses and demand the world organize around our love, justice, and mercy! You forget all of that. You think babka and

baseball is it? Your Judaism is hollowed out. You let the spirit die. You are not Tzeitl's dream. You are not Tevye's pride. You're nothing." Well, that's not how I would talk to someone I'd just met, but I was not about to step into the line of fire while Lesbian Gloria Steinem spoke her truth.

Elliott slowly closed and then opened his eyes, then looked out toward Mr. Hollander. "Is this how you run a meeting? I have better things to do than take this shit from a spoiled hipster." He grabbed his briefcase and marched toward the elevators. Hey, at least he blamed Gregory instead of me.

Those of us left remained silent for a good 90 seconds. Mr. Hollander ran his fingers through his gelled scalp. Finally, Menachem smiled in Lily's direction and broke the tension, "Rabbi Elazar of Modin said, *'Hammalbin penei chavero varabbim, ein lo chelek la'olam habba'* – Jews don't shame each other in public."

Lily brought a damning finger inches away from his beard. "Eleanor Roosevelt of New York said, 'Remember, no one can make you feel inferior without your consent.' So, when your wife can show me her real beautiful hair and you let her divorce your misogynist, backwards ass, you and I can talk." This woman was out of control. When would this battle finally end? I was itching to see if the computer had dealt me the six of spades.

Menachem stood up and shrugged. "Very well. What's a Jew to do? Gregory and Mimi, thank you for your time, and good luck with your play. I hope you'll consider what I mentioned about the *ketubah*. Lily, I wish you luck as you search for *derech hashalom*." He slipped his pocket-sized siddur into his jacket, and made a beeline out the door.

Taking advantage of the lull, I decided to assert some authority. “Well, Lily, we’ve just about reached the end of our time, but thank you for the...colorful conversation,” I said. “We’ll let you know if we have any follow up questions.”

Lily directed an abrupt head nod toward Mr. Hollander and me, and then proceeded out of the room. I breathed a sigh of relief. A social justice warrior had flexed her muscle, but for once, I was not counted among the casualties. Last Thanksgiving, my grandson really let me have it when I told him my favorite musical was *The King and I*. This time, I escaped the carnage.

Mr. Hollander seemed more than a bit more battle worn. He muttered to himself, shaking his head and squinting as if trying to make sense of what had just happened before him.

He had set out to gain *the* Jewish perspective on his show and that’s what he got. People want to tell you Judaism is playing fiddle on the rooftops and doing a bottle dance. Nope. It’s really four people screaming at each other across a table, squabbling about how we survived in the past and how we were going to survive in the future.

Who needs more chaos in this brief life, Rabbi? God? Israel? Latkes with sour cream or applesauce? I appreciate you lending an ear, but it’s a lost cause. I think we’d all be better off if every Jew had her own island to live on her terms. Maybe then, we wouldn’t have to endure this *mishegas* anymore.

Story 2: Discovering Candlelight

The phone rang at 10pm on a January Wednesday night. My husband Elliott's firm emails him all night long, but no one calls after 9. Only one person calls us on the landline. She's the reason we haven't disconnected it.

They found a lump in Frances' liver about 2 years ago. They tried to remove it, but the thing was a stubborn bugger. Chemotherapy offered mixed results. When my mother-in-law called at night, she often complained about the side-effects: "Mary, I threw up my dinner again. These damn meds." Sometimes, a terrible migraine caused her to forget how to access "the Netflix."

Elliott answered, and I went back to scraping the lasagna pan. I hated the way the mozzarella and meat crumbles bonded together, forming a mighty alliance against my sponge. As I scrubbed the pan, I heard the plastic of our handheld phone smash against the tiled floor, and then a version of Elliott's voice I had never previously experienced. He was moaning with the force of a wail and the faintness of a whimper.

I shut the faucet. "What happened, Babe?" I said, rushing to his side.

"She's gone."

"The nurses can't find her?" I snapped into problem-solving mode. "Did they check the east wing library? Even though she lives in 40 West, she says the east wing has a better 'old book smell.'"

"She's died, Mary!" he screamed.

In seven years of marriage, he had never raised his voice to me like that. Noticing my shrunken posture, he stepped off the ledge of unfiltered shock. "I'm sorry, Babe" he said. "It's not your fault. That was Irene on the phone. Mom collapsed about an hour ago. The doctors think the

chemo drained her immune system. It was likely an infection that spread widely. It got to her heart and – "

His voice broke. His chest puttered up and down as he took short breaths. He stammered, "They told us she had time left, Mary."

Nearly 3 minutes elapsed without either of us speaking. I wanted to respond, but I lacked the means to console my husband. I just kept shaking my head in disbelief.

I finally whispered, "What, what happens now to...her body?"

"They took her to the hospital morgue. They said I need to identify that it's her and instruct them about her arrangements," Elliott answered.

"Well, what are her arrangements?" I asked.

"That's the thing. She didn't specify any. I insisted on it, but she was so superstitious. We agreed to discuss it after our trip in February. We were supposed to have more time."

"She told you nothing?" I said.

"Nothing. Nada. Zilch. She doesn't even have a burial plot. No matter how many times I reminded her that she was 73 and had cancer, she thought it was 'tempting fate' even to talk about it," he said.

I shut my eyes and tapped my foot. I wanted to help. Finally, I looked at him and asked, "What do Jews do when someone dies?"

Elliott stared at me as if I had interjected something entirely foreign into the discussion. I explained what seemed obvious to me: "Frances was Jewish. You're Jewish. Surely, Judaism has some way to deal with the end of life. Have you ever been to a Jewish funeral?"

"I mean, sure. They bury people. I think a rabbi usually does the service," he said.

“Then, why don’t we call up the rabbi where you go on Yom Kippur?” I suggested.

“They only do those sorts of things for synagogue members,” he explained. “And the rabbi that mom liked retired years ago. The new ones don’t know her.” He exhaled stress through his mouth. “We’ll figure it out in the morning. I need to sleep.” He kissed my forehead and retreated to the bedroom.

I changed into my pajamas and took my place next to him. The tears and adrenaline had knocked Elliott out, and soon enough he began snoring in deep sleep, but I tossed for a while. I hated having no plan. After about 30 minutes, I pulled out my phone and opened the Notes application. Brainstorming possible solutions and consulting Internet research, I typed:

1. Buy a plot in a New York cemetery
 - Pros: Geography
 - Cons: It’s still New York real estate. We are about to receive Flores’ remaining medical bills, and I don’t want to lose all of Elliott’s inheritance.
2. Use my family’s burial plot.
 - Pros: There is space for Frances.
 - Cons: We cannot bury her in St Louis. I’m not forcing my husband to go to Missouri anytime he wants to visit his mom.
3. Maybe there’s room in his family plot?
 - Pros: They might offer an affordable price to take an available slot. Elliott could purchase a space next to Frances.
 - Cons: Who do I call to find out? Elliott’s father left his life when he was 12, and he has no siblings. Cousins???

Suddenly, I sat up wide awake. On the brink of a possible fix, I logged into our desktop. He had had that meeting a few weeks ago with some family and that Broadway producer. I typed “Fiddler” in the search bar. Boom, there it was! The cousins were all cc’ed! I copied the addresses, and my fingers click-clacked with vigor.

Subject: Family Death - Need Help

Good morning everyone,

I hate to write in the middle of the night, but Elliott's mother died without leaving any funeral plans in place. He needs your help. Would you be able to stop by to our apartment tomorrow morning? Maybe before work? I know it's a lot to ask, but we're a mess over here. 33 Remsen Street in Brooklyn Heights. Apartment 3F.

Sincerely,
Mary

I closed the computer, lifting my chin with pride. The energy of helpfulness buzzed inside me. I washed the stuck-on remnants of lasagna off the pan, set it in the drying rack, and returned to sleep. Sometimes, I'm amazed at what you can accomplish late at night.

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Elliott finally woke up the next morning and started his morning routine, as usual. After seven years of living together, I knew exactly what that entailed. I watched from bed as he bundled himself in several layers. Despite the January temperatures, he still ran early every morning around the East River. When he returned and showered, I made his cup of black coffee. Grabbing it from my hands, he darted to his laptop for his first round of answering emails. I walked into the kitchen groggy but eagerly anticipating the revelation of my overnight handiwork.

He slammed his mug against the table. "What the hell is this?"

"Something unexpected in your inbox?" I said, swallowing an anxious giggle. Had something gone wrong? Were the cousins unavailable?

Aleha Hashalom. So sad to hear this news. I'm going to swing by the store and then, I'll stop by your place.

Rafi

“Aw, isn’t that sweet? Menachem called and said he is going to swing by as well. I can’t wait to meet them.”

“Did you do this?” Elliot asked angrily. “You invited these strangers to our house? Are you out of your mind?” Jeez, I thought, I wasn’t expecting the Wife of the Year Award, but I certainly thought I’d get more appreciation than this.

I took a step back. “They’re not strangers. They’re your cousins,” I said.

“A hummus-loving lunatic who grew up 5,000 miles away and a black hat zealot who basically grew up on a different planet. I know the guy at our bodega better than these weirdos.”

I looked down at our limestone floor to think about what to say next. The red wine stain from a few days glared back at me. Would any amount of cleaner erase such an obtrusive mistake? I saw Elliott grab the telephone. “What are you doing?” I said, snatching the phone before he could press the call button.

“I’m telling them I don’t want their funny business in my home,” he said.

“Well, you can’t do that,” I replied without thinking.

“Why not?” he asked.

“They’re already en route. Imagine taking time out of your day and going all the way across town just to have someone turn you back. It’s rude, dear.”

Elliott crossed his arms and sipped his coffee. No counterargument came to him. “Fine. We will take their flowers or what not, give them each a cup of coffee, and send them on their way.”

“I think they’re coming to help you,” I said.

“Help? How can they help? I haven’t read Hebrew since I was 13 years old! I don’t want that Hasid doing some weird Kabbalah magic in my mom’s name,” he insisted.

“It’s not magic, dear. Maybe one of them had a parent who died and therefore had to plan a funeral. Maybe they can help make sense of all this and what we need to do,” I encouraged him.

“How? By saying God is gonna make it all okay? Come on, Mary. That’s never been us. I really don’t see why you thought this was a good idea. I didn’t need this headache. Today of all days.”

I lifted my eyes off the tile and stared directly into his eyes. “You ungrateful ass,” I said, articulating each syllable with fervor. “Frances died last night, and your plan was go to sleep and hope it all works out? You have no siblings. Frances left you no directions. Do you have any clue what to do? No, that’s what I thought. So, listen up, you’re going to welcome the little family you have into our home. You’re going to tell them about your mother, and you’re going to ask what comes fucking next, because I’m not going to try to figure it out for you anymore.”

Elliott pursed his lips and nodded with conciliatory defeat. He took another sip of his lukewarm coffee, and then, the buzzer sounded. He teetered toward the door and gave me one lasting scowl. He visibly braced himself as if he were going to the dentist and anticipated being scolded about not flossing. Opening the door, two pairs of arms swung around him. Rafi and Menachem had arrived together, at the very same time. Although they had only met once before, Rafi recognized Menachem in the train car, reciting his morning prayers, and so when they both got off the train at the same stop, they walked over together.

Emerging from a tight, two-on-one hug, Elliott said, “Uh, hello. Thanks, you two, for stopping by.”

“Here. Take this. It’ll help,” Menachem said, handing me a Tupperware. “My Naomi made this *mandelbrot* as soon as we received your email. I’m not saying it’ll fix everything, but

when I lost my job, this stuff carried me through a solid two weeks. Then, the motivation – the need? – to exercise pulled me out of my funk,” Menachem winked at Elliott as he patted his stomach.

“That’s so nice. Thank you. Come in. Sit down,” I said.

The two of them each took off their coats. Although both were wearing simple black and white, Menachem had on blazer and slacks, and Rafi, a Ramones sweatshirt and skinny jeans. I couldn’t help but laugh as they sat side by side on the couch.

“How old was she?” Rafi started off.

“73,” I answered.

“Decently long life,” Menachem concluded. “But never long enough, right?”

“It was cancer. We knew she would eventually die from it. We just didn’t think it would be last night,” I explained.

“When is the funeral?” asked Rafi.

“We have no idea,” Elliott chimed in.

Rafi scrunched his face as if he heard incorrectly. “When my brother died, the funeral happened as soon as possible.”

“She didn’t make any plans. We don’t have a burial plot or a rabbi. Elliott still has to identify the body at the morgue this afternoon,” I clarified.

Menachem and Rafi looked at each other, and then back at us. Heat flushed through my cheeks. She was 73 and sick...had we been naïve or completely irresponsible?

Menachem put his hand on Elliott’s knee. “Our *chevra kadisha* will be able to help you,” he suggested.

“*Chevra ka*—what?” Elliott asked.

“*Chevra kadisha* – community volunteers who carry out the responsibility of preparing the body for burial,” Menachem said. “It’s the highest form of kindness, for the dead can never repay the favor. We’ll contact them on the way to the hospital morgue. They will wash Frances’ body. We’ll recite psalms around the clock to comfort her soul until it is finally at rest.”

Elliott turned to me privately, rolling his eyes. I knew he was shouting about “weird Kabbalah magic” in his head.

“We can use some of the money from Frances’ estate to purchase spare plots in our cemetery. And I got *smicha* back when I was in Yeshiva. If you’d like, I can serve as your rabbi,” Menachem continued.

Elliot didn’t answer, so I elbowed him as subtly as I could. Menachem’s offer was our winning ticket. We had better not waste it.

“Fine. But do we need to make it such a production? I’m really not religious,” Elliott said.

Rafi put his hand on Elliott’s other knee. “Trust me, man. I get you. The Saturday that my brother died, was I observing Shabbat? No! I was at a rave in South Tel Aviv. My mom called me 3 times, so I stepped outside the club, trying to disregard the combination of ketamine-hashish in my system. Her call snapped me into a sobering reality. He was 21 years old. Shot in the back of the head without anyone who loved him as he bled out. My world broke. Where would I go from there? How could I continue to live when his life was cut short? I was so fucking lost.”

“So, what did you do?” I asked with wide eyes and a hand over my heart.

“I had no idea how to structure the goodbye for my brother, but fortunately, I was a Jew. The script was already there for me,” Rafi explained.

“But do you even believe in God?” Elliott asked.

“I have no idea about any of that, but when it came to my brother’s death, our Jewishness was a place to start. I just had to figure out how to find some meaning in all of it,” Rafi answered.

Elliott stood up, and began shaking his arms and legs, as if trying to jerk the Jewishness out of his system. And then started pacing around the room. Rafi got up and joined him in his pacing and said softly, “If Mr. *Mandelbrot* overdoes the dogma, I’ll help you. You want to stop. You tell me. I got you.”

“Why do something I don’t even believe in?” Elliott asked.

“I don’t know if it’s about believing. You’re going through one of the most upsetting, most fucked up things in your life right now. Your heart’s broken, so what’s a Jew to do? Mourn like a Jew,” Rafi answered.

Elliott walked back toward Menachem, slowly shaking his head. “I still hardly know you,” he said to his Hassid cousin. “Why would your people give me one of your burial plots and do all this?”

Menachem took one of Naomi’s sweet treats and passed one to Elliott. He smiled, “You’re family, you’re part of *Am Yisrael*, and you’re in need. It’s what Jews do.”

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By nightfall, we were all in Crown Heights. “I can’t believe we’ve come here,” Elliott whispered to me. In the lobby of the Funeral Home, four young women in long monochrome skirts and black tights underneath walked by us. They entered the room with Frances’ body carrying sponges.

“Can you explain what’s they’re going to do?” I asked Menachem.

“Keshennoledah rochatzim osah ucheshemmesah rochatzim osah. Frances came into this world and was washed, and we make sure she leaves this world washed. She’s about to return to being one with her Creator. Body and soul are between here and there. These kind women have volunteered to wash her and prepare her body for this transition. I will be reciting psalms outside her door,” Menachem said.

“Isn’t that nice?” I asked my husband.

“I suppose,” he answered gruffly.

Rafi put a hand on Elliott’s shoulder. “Look, I don’t know about this ‘One with the Creator’ stuff, but none of us know what’s next. But it shows love. Did you love your mom?”

“Very much,” Elliott said.

“Isn’t it nice, then, that someone’s taking care of her before you say goodbye? Even if she doesn’t feel it or there isn’t such a thing as a soul, we’re showing her some respect. She deserves that,” Rafi said.

“Yeah, I guess that’s nice,” Elliott replied as he sat on one of the benches by the door.

Menachem handed him a booklet, “I brought an extra copy of the psalms we’ll be reciting. I thought you might want to know what we’re saying. I will be here until midnight. My neighbor Akiva agreed to stay until 3am, and our pal Dov will take the early morning shift. I’m going to take my post. Frances must be accompanied by words of comfort around the clock.”

Elliott flipped through the pages. He laughed to himself. Rafi and I exchanged wrinkled eyebrows wondering what he was laughing about. Elliott read, adding snarky glosses along the way,

“I lift my eyes to the mountains. From where will my help come?” There’s nothing up there but cold air. *‘My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.’* Some help God

is. Last time, I checked our world wasn't doing so hot. Hello, God, can you hear us? Or did you outsource customer service to some other realm of delusion? I don't see our help coming here."

"You're frustrated," Rafi noted.

"No shit," Elliott replied. "My mom and I were supposed to be going to go to Tampa next month. She loved the Yankees. Spring Training – she was going to meet a few of the players. Her cancer was a beast, but we had the Yanks. She was supposed to go to Tampa next month."

"And she should have," Rafi said. "But you were powerless to stop what was happening in her body. Now, it's time to shout into the void. Look, here. *'The Lord will guard your coming and going now and forever.'* Do I think God has a sword and shield to protect my brother wherever he has gone? No, of course not! But I want more than anything else for my brother to experience some safety and peace. What can I do about that? Absolutely nothing. But these people – Menachem, the ladies with the sponges, all of them – they use these words and these rituals to try and fill the void with something positive. Forget that God doesn't exist for a second. Look at the efforts they're making within their control to express respect for your mother's life. Think about what you want. Do you wish that your mom could rest easily? Do you seek to guard her from ongoing harm? There's so little you can do, but you know what, we can say these words, allow Frances to be washed with dignity, and imagine the best. When we have nothing, it's helpful to wish that something works."

For the first time in a day and a half, Elliott smiled. It was a closed mouth, Mona Lisa sort of smile, but still, it acknowledged the offering of warmth and wisdom.

"I told you I'm on your side," Rafi continued. "In Israel, the *rabbanut* wants to make all of our lives uber religious, regardless of what we think or what it means to any of us. You should feel lucky, at least, that Menachem wants you to understand what's going on. In Israel, it's a lot

of ‘you have to do this’ and a lot less ‘and here’s why we’re doing it.’ After my brother died, I told a coworker I wanted to mourn like a Jew, but I didn’t want to be shackled by the crazy fundamentalists. She recommended *Tzohar*. A bunch of rabbis got together after one of the extremists shot Rabin. They want a different kind of Judaism to define the Jewish state, feeling accessible for all Israelis. They had some useful guides on what was going to happen as we mourned. One rabbi encouraged me to let down my resistance just a little to see if *anything* would work. Even if I had to stretch it to make it work for me. The shackles turned into tools. Consider me and Menachem your *Tzohar*.”

Elliott looked at Menachem mouthing words of comfort to himself as he sat outside the room where Frances’ body was being ritually prepared. “Why don’t we go home? The funeral’s early tomorrow,” I suggested.

When we returned to Brooklyn Heights, Elliott stripped down to a plain white tee and boxers. With the nightstand light on, I noticed the stiffness in his shoulders. He sat at a rigid ninety-degree angle, probably imagining what he’d say just before we buried Frances. As I slipped into bed, he read through the booklet. As he went through the psalms, his shoulders dropped, and his body sunk further down in his chair. When his eyes softly closed, I shut the bed lamp and kissed his cheek.

//

A small group of us gathered around the graveside the next morning. Frances had outlived most of her friends, and the ones who remained could not travel for the funeral. Elliot and I held hands. To Elliott’s right were Menachem and Rafi. To his left were about five couples of Chabadniks.

“Who are they?” Elliott whispered to Menachem.

“We posted to the community listserv that you might be in need of a *minyán*. They had some spare time today,” he replied.

“But why are they here?” my husband persisted.

“*Hakadosh Baruch Hu nichem avelim* – Hashem comforted Yitzhak after Avraham’s death. *Af attah nacheim avelim* – therefore, we make sure no Jew mourns alone,” Menachem explained.

“I still have no clue how to do this,” Elliott admitted.

Rafi walked behind him and whispered, “Today, go with the flow. Lean into the fantasy.”

Elliott nodded to each of the strangers surrounding the casket. Then, he looked to Menachem, indicating his readiness to start.

“Judaism affords us the opportunity to form a container to hold this death,” Menachem announced. “Today, we can lean on our traditions to seek dignity, substance, and beauty from this tender moment.”

He proceeded to read a couple of psalms. When we reached one about God guiding us to resting waters, Rafi mouthed to Elliott, “Go with the flow.” My husband relaxed his vigilant shoulders.

Menachem sang a haunting prayer about Frances resting on the wings of a compassionate God. Elliott looked at the translation of the poem; he closed his eyes. He appeared willing to indulge the image, even if it remained imaginary.

Menachem cleared his throat. “Now, we will proceed with the burial. Per Jewish tradition, Frances’ family will shovel earth into her grave. We do this to show that we are here to accompany Frances with love and honor up until our very last moment beside her in this lifetime. It is customary to shovel the first few heaps of earth with the back of the shovel to reflect that we

are using this planting implement for something that is the opposite of cultivating life; also it takes longer to shovel this way, signifying that we are not eager to permanently part with the dead.”

The cemetery workers slipped rope around the casket. Slowly, they modulated their grip, facilitating Frances’ ultimate descent. No one else dared to move, not even to make a squeak of sound. A crow cawed in the distance. The faint January sun slightly illuminated the gray sheet of sky.

Elliott straightened his back. He took a breath with each step, as he approached the gaping hole. He looked toward the casket, then at Menachem, then at Rafi, then at the assembly of black trench coats and dresses. He met each of their eyes. Finally, he turned to me and wiped the tears streaming down my cheek. He rotated the shovel and lifted a mound of dirt. He said, “Thank you for everything, Mom.”

The dirt thudded against the plain pine box. Elliott shoveled three more times before handing the tool to me. I passed it to Rafi, and Rafi relayed it to Menachem. Soon enough, each person in attendance had taken a turn. Menachem and Rafi made sure that the entire casket was covered. Elliott clenched my hand until the final round of shoveling was complete.

“It’s okay if you want to cry,” I whispered, though seven years of marriage led me to think he was not one whose tear ducts played fast and loose.

“It’s just – now, it’s real,” he replied.

“The Jews really know how to punch you in the gut. Bury your own and get over any lingering denial.” Rafi put a hand on his shoulder.

I wanted to scold him for his bluntness, but Elliott appreciated how Rafi had made sense of the eviscerating act. “Fantasy meets reality,” Elliott said.

“Welcome to being Jewish,” Rafi replied.

Menachem now announced that the primary mourner would now recite the burial kaddish. Everyone looked in our direction. Elliott began fidgeting with his tie. “*Yitda*, I mean *yitga*. Dammit what is it,” he stammered and hid his face in his hands when he realized he had cursed over his mother’s grave. Did he not know the words? Our pamphlets only had Hebrew letters and English translation. Dear God, what kind of wife was I? Setting him up for humiliation with no way to rescue him. Just when I thought we were shit out of luck, Menachem’s voice rose above the murmuring crowd. “Excuse me, does anyone have a pen?” A stranger handed him the writing instrument, and he scribbled faster than a bullet train. Menachem stood to Elliott’s left with the prayer written out in English letters. “If my scrawl is illegible, you tell me and we’ll make sure you get the words just right.” Elliott sighed with relief.

When the last amen was done, Menachem shook Elliott’s hand and pulled him into a hug. Standing within earshot I heard him whisper, “Don’t worry, I’ll get a cleaner version to you for the daily kaddish.” Menachem’s body pivoted to our little assembly. “I invite you now to form two lines as we offer words of comfort to Elliott. As we leave this space, we take it as our sacred duty to make sure they are not alone.”

The crowd went into formation. Elliott took a gingerly step toward them, and he proceeded with confidence. He hugged each of the men and respectfully dipped his head to each of the women. He got into the passenger seat without prolonging this goodbye.

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When we returned to our apartment, we were greeted by pungent smoked fish. I had never seen our dining room table so full. I surveyed 3 dozen bagels, 3 tubs of cream cheese, 2 lox platters, 3 casserole dishes, hummus, mounds of whitefish salad, egg salad, and tuna salad, 1

plate of onion slices, and a jar of capers. I gave Menachem a spare key yesterday thinking someone would bring over some prayer books and maybe some flowers. What was all of this?

Two short-ish ladies greeted us with hard boiled eggs. Why would I want an egg at a time like this? My scrunched forehead betrayed my confusion. “You looked death square in the face, but the cycle of life keeps going,” Menachem said.

“Plus, you just dealt with some heavy shit – you gotta eat something!” Rafi added. We ate the eggs before going upstairs. Both Elliott and I needed a nap before *shiva* minyan this evening.

After a couple of hours, we went down to the living room. Rafi and Menachem were flipping through one of the albums I had left on the table the previous night. They showed me a photo they found of Elliott and Frances from 2 decades earlier. “You’re still here?” I asked.

“We wanted to make sure you had what you needed,” Rafi said.

An hour later, it seemed that half of Crown Heights flowed into our one-bedroom apartment. No less than twenty people had shown up for the afternoon service. Several years ago, Elliott told me that he always hated the “Orthodox mumble corps.” At his second cousin’s wedding, he stood there while the men swayed and murmured for over an hour. As Menachem led from the front, it was clear my husband hardly understood a word. However, he took in the ancient prayers and the voices of benevolent strangers. He closed his eyes and pursed his lips ever so slightly.

Menachem opened the space for anyone who knew Frances to share memories. Elliott told the story about their trip to Vermont together. Frances drank two pints of beer and soon led everyone around the fireplace in a rendition of “Danny Boy.” He also talked about the time his

college girlfriend broke his heart. His mother dropped everything, and drove 40 miles to bring him freshly baked brownies and a bottle of Merlot.

“She sounds like a woman who was full of generosity and love,” said Liba, one of the Chabad woman in the crowd.

Her husband chimed in, “*Eshes chayil mi yimtza verachok mippeninim michrah.*”

“What’s that mean?” Elliott asked.

“What a rare find is a woman of valor! Her worth is far beyond that of rubies.”

Menachem explained.

“That she was,” I added. I then shared a story from when Elliott and I were engaged but not yet living together, “Frances helped me make my student loan payments when I was laid off. Without her, I don’t know how I would have been able to put food on the table.”

“I had no idea she did that!” Elliott said.

“She didn’t do it for credit,” I replied.

“May we all have such open and giving hearts – like this *eshes chayil. Zichrona l’vracha* – may her memory be for a blessing,” Menachem said.

“*Zichrona l’vracha!*” the whole room exclaimed in unison. Menachem began to sing a wordless tune. Soon enough, our living room echoed with solemn yet soothing *ya-dai-dai*’s.

When the singing died down, Rafi asked, “Is it alright if I add something?” Menachem offered his hand openly. Rafi recited,

“Each of us has a name
given by God
and given by our parents

Each of us has a name
given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear

Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls

Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors

Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing

Each of us has a name
given by our enemies
and given by our love

Each of us has a name
given by our celebrations
and given by our work

Each of us has a name
given by the seasons
and given by our blindness

Each of us has a name
given by the sea
and given by
our death.”

“*Yafeh*,” Menachem said. “You wrote that?”

“No, Zelda – one of the greats in the Israeli tradition,” Rafi said.

One Hasid chimed in, “Full name Zelda Schneerson Mishkovsky – cousin of the rebbe.”

“Wow, *yiches*!” Menachem exclaimed.

“Hard to believe you’re not the only one who can find the text that meets the moment?”

Rafi said as he nudged Menachem with his elbow.

Menachem dispelled the sarcasm, “It’s not that. It’s just I’ve never heard an elegy as beautiful as this. Please get me a copy of the text, Rafi. I want to read it at every shiva!”

When the service concluded and people began to clean up, I watched one of the younger Hasids walk over to Menachem. His eyes shot around with preoccupation. “The mourner didn’t sit on the stool,” the young man whispered. Truth be told, Menachem offered Elliott the traditional shiva seats, but he insisted that he sit on the couch. “Yoreh Deah 387 – the mourner overturns his couch,” the Hasid continued.

Menachem placed a hand on the young yeshiva boy’s shoulder. “Very good,” he said. “But when one shows genuine *Ahavas Yisroel* to another Jew, it awakens their innate connection to Torah and *mitzves*. Would I sit on a couch when I mourn my mother? No. But only kindness will bring the Jew closer to his people, to his Torah, and to Hashem. The Rebbe said, ‘A little light dispels a lot of darkness.’ Tonight, we made the world a little bit brighter. Not by force but by love.”

Rafi walked by at this moment. With a peculiar combination of humor and appreciation, he said, “If only the *haredim* in my country could hear that.”

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Menachem left a copy of the prayer card with us. Elliott did not say Kaddish every day, but I caught him mouthing the words to himself on the especially hard days.

Rafi and Menachem coordinated to check in at the 30 day, 3 month, and 6 month marks, if not more often. Menachem called Elliott at 8am and Rafi called at 8pm. Throughout the year, we invited them to our home. Naomi shared her mandel bread recipe with me prior to Rosh Hashana. Rafi read a volume of Zelda’s poetry to us over Sunday tea. I wonder if Frances laughed alongside us as we showed everyone the Passover seder episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

In March, we cleaned out Frances' apartment together. Rafi pointed out the postcards she kept from her 1998 trip to Israel. In the shot of Tel Aviv, he pointed to his old apartment building, his favorite beach, and his favorite bars. Menachem squealed when he came across Elliott's Bar Mitzvah album. My husband roared, "Oh man, I forgot every single letter of Hebrew, but I will never forget how my mom making me get a special Bar Mitzvah haircut. She said it'd help me attract all the ladies. I mean, come on, look at those frosted tips. You think I should try that out again, Babe?" he said with a nudge and wink. I shot him the "You're an idiot" look, but everyone snickered. We found a photo I had mailed her just a few months back of her with her final birthday cake. Frances' absence loomed, yet we found a new fullness.

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Once more, we felt the draft of January through our bedroom window. When the day broke, Elliott assembled his layers and went for his frigid jog. About an hour later, he sipped his coffee. I scrambled to get dressed for an early morning meeting.

"Honey, Menachem and Rafi stopped by while you were out," I said from the bedroom.

Elliott smiled, "Oh yeah? What'd they want?"

"They left something for you. It's on the counter," I said.

He meandered to the kitchen where he saw a long candle and a note. It said:

Sundown marks one year. May Frances' memory bless your life today and every day.

M & R

P.S. Let us know if you need anything. We're here for you.

Per usual, I texted Elliott around lunchtime to see how things were going. A client hollered demands at him, which made him feel lousy, but he was motivating himself with the vacation he was planning for us the following month.

Elliott told me that he was working late to make sure he crossed the t's and dotted the i's. It was well after the winter sun descended on the horizon. Around 6:30, he wrote that the R train was finally making its tedious crawl under the river. I laughed, reminding him that the R stood for "really really slow."

When he arrived home, he appeared fatigued and frustrated. I stopped in our bedroom doorway. Sometimes, he needed a beat to collect himself. He went straight into the kitchen, and still, I peered across the apartment. He looked down the counter, admiring the photo of Frances with her cake. "Why not?" he said, striking a match.

The yahrzeit candle flickered. He pondered its light. The flame cast a shadow on Menachem and Rafi's note. By the warmth of the flame, he wept.

Story 3: Sharing Shabbat

“Excuse me, are you Jewish?” The familiar refrain. I was surprised that the black-hatted man was asking both of us. Usually, when Jews like this one see my roommate and me together, they bypass me, the Black woman, (despite my name being Ruth and my *hamsa* necklace) and direct all attention toward to the woman with the Streisand-esque *schnoz*.

Lily and I were approaching the Brooklyn Museum, when we saw a pair of men in white button downs, black pants, and dangling *tzitzit* – the Lubavitcher uniform – looking from side to side in search of their next spiritual prey.

Lily averted her gaze and quickly walked pass them, briskly down Eastern Parkway in the direction of the park. We were both eager to catch up with Rachel, Leslie, Shayna, and Ilana, to hear updates about the girls’ trip to Cherry Grove. What’s better than steamy lesbian gossip over a couple bottles of rosé? Lily sighed as she noted that the rush hour bustle made it impossible to cross the road.

The second man turned around and shouted after us. “Oh, hello again!” he said with surprise toward Lily. This must’ve been her Chabad cousin. What was his name again? Oh, Menachem. The one she wanted to clobber that time she met him in midtown.

Lily raised her eyebrow and pointed at herself. “What? Did you think this dyke was a short-haired yeshiva boy and now you have to walk back asking me to wrap tefillin?”

“Not at all,” he replied. “I just didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Well, you can save your breath. I don’t accept the rebbe as my lord and savior, and I prefer my Judaism with the rights of women and queer people intact. Thank you very much.”

She took a step past them when Menachem blurted, “You know, for someone who proclaims to be open-minded, you come across pretty judgmental.”

Lily crossed her arms and stared with intensity and contempt that I only saw when she came face to face with Clarence Thomas at a DC bookstore.

Menachem calmly continued, “*Kedoshim t’hiyu, v’lo t’hiyeh*. You – all of you – shall be holy. Plural you – not just you as an individual. It was the first thing my rabbi taught me when we studied Vayikra. He asked, “How is a people holy? *Tochacha v’ahava holchim yad b’yad*.”

Lily and I stared at each other befuddled. Our faces betrayed our lack of comprehension.

Menachem proceeded to explain. “Leviticus 19 prohibits us from hating our fellow Jew. But we must rebuke them when they are wrong. The next verse commands we must love them as ourselves. Rebuke and love walk together.” He directs his gaze. “Lily, I can call you out for assuming I’m part of some regressive cult. And it doesn’t mean I hate you. In fact, I love you. It’s a blessing we are in each other’s lives. Through our struggle, we can pursue Torah’s truths and *tikkun*. And only then, we exist – all of us and not the singular I – in a holy relationship with Hashem.”

Lily stood there with her mouth agape. Neither of us had expected a sermon on the sidewalk. Lily said the word *tikkun* many times at our monthly organizing sessions, but for the first time, she was hearing about repair from one of our neighbors down on Kingston Avenue. Lily stammered for a response, “Well– You see – It’s not quite –”

Menachem took a pen and piece of paper from his pocket. “Here’s my address and phone number,” he said. “My wife Naomi and I are hosting *Shabbes* dinner this Friday. I hope you’ll join us.” He signaled to his buddy, and they walked further down the parkway.

Lily stared at them for a moment, still completely and utterly flabbergasted. She slipped the note in her back pocket, and shook her head, “Come on, I don’t want to miss hearing if Leslie and Ilana finally hooked up at the beach.”

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Granted, I wasn’t there for the conversation that took place later that day between Menachem and his wife, Naomi. Months later, though, she shared with me exactly how it went down. Menachem approached her as she was preparing dinner, dicing onions with her signature precision.

“I can’t believe you invited her,” Naomi told her husband. “Did she not call you backward? And that you hated women?”

“Isn’t this the best way to show her that we’re a loving, happy family, and warm and welcoming to our neighbors?” Menachem kissed her cheek.

“But why do you want to invite someone so rude on our *yom menuchah*? It’s our time off, our space,” Naomi pleaded.

“*Zachor et Yoym haShabbos l’Kodshoy*. Remember that *Shabbes* is holy. Who do we make it holy for?” said Menachem. “*vinchao uvisecho avdecho va'amatecho uvehemtecho vegerecho asher bish'areicho* – for everyone, their pets, and their mothers.”

“And what do we do if she throws a tantrum in front of our guests? Last time, I checked we can’t put a 25-year-old in a time out.” Naomi asked.

“Naomi, my pleasure, my delight, please have faith. She’s *mishpocho*. I want to live in a world where families share *Shabbes* together. Plus, don’t you believe in the possibilities of *Shabbes*? A taste of redemption!” Menachem said.

“I believe in the power of the aspirin I’ll need to make it to dessert,” Naomi replied. Noting her husband’s slumped shoulders, she laughed, “I know, I know. Call me *Maro*, for Hashem has made me very bitter.”

Menachem shrugged off her skepticism. “There just has to be a way. You know how we remember Tevye on his *yahrzeit* each year? Do you know what they read from Tevye’s will?”

Now, Naomi took her turn with a deep sigh, “I’m sorry, love. Not all of us have a photographic memory for important texts. Even if we go to that memorial service every year, I don’t have Tevye’s will memorized.”

He closed his eyes and recited, “To my children and my children’s children, your task is not to weep for me. The main thing is to live together in peace, to bear no hatred one for another, to help one another in bad times, and to remember one another on family occasions.”

“It’s a nice dream,” she said.

“But don’t you see, my love? Lily is not perfect, but don’t you see? She is part of us and as in days of old, we need to take care of each other.” Menachem hardly noticed how the volume of his voice was increasing notch-by-notch as he rode this wave of enthusiasm.

“Do you really think every one in every *mishpocho* stays together? After six generations? Sometimes, people drift apart. Is it really so bad if Lily hosts her own Marxist *Shabbes* on Nostrand Avenue and we host a *Hasidish* one on Kingston?”

Menachem moved to the living room, and he began to pace. Naomi shook her head, grabbing the peeler.

“Aha!” her husband cried. He came running into the kitchen with his worn copy of the Tanya, the seminal Chabad text. “All Israelites are called brothers by virtue of the source of their souls in the One God; only the bodies are separated. To understand ourselves and to allow

Hashem to dwell on Earth, we strive to connect to all Israel. To find Hashem, we need Lily. It's the *lev* of Tanya! The heart of *Hasidus*!" Menachem was now jumping up and down.

His wife pressed her lips and nodded. Even when she felt skeptical of her husband's jolly zeal, she loved the goofy grin he made when he found the perfect proof-text.

"Even with regard to those who are close to him, and whom he has rebuked...there still remains the duty to love them, and both are right: hatred because of the wickedness in them, and love on account of the aspect of the hidden good in them...Compassion destroys hatred and awakens love," he once again quoted.

"So what? We make Lily a nice meal, treat her well, and this fiery girl becomes as pious as a Hasid?" Naomi asked.

"I have no idea what she will become. I don't expect her to be like us. But along with rebuke, it is our obligation to love. If she is exposed to the love of Torah, she can carry it into her life. If she's not a Hasid, she'll still be changed by the spirit and love of us Hasidism. We start with Lily. One cousin. One Jew. And in the transformation of our family, we can transform an entire world," he dreamed.

Naomi told me there was no leeway when Menachem got this fired up. As he continued preaching about the paramount wisdom of the great *alter rebbe*, she waited for her potatoes to soften.

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"I can't believe you want me to do this," I said to Lily as she told me on our way over to Naomi and Menachem's that Friday night. She had insisted that I join her as backup, enticing me with prospect of free food. She knew: no graduate student in New York City passes up a free meal.

“Come on, Ruth. We’ll show him who is judgmental,” she had cajoled. “I promise, we’ll leave right after dessert. Maybe we’ll inspire Menachem’s wife to escape this misogynist prison.” Oh great...Lily’s coming with an agenda. This meal might be coming with it’s own kind of cost.

We turned the corner onto Kingston Avenue, entering a world that appeared foreign and familiar all at once. The sidewalk hummed with the hustle of pre-Shabbat preparations. It was a sea of long skirts and black hats. An old gentleman played *Lecha Dodi* on a miniature guitar. A pair of women our age sold flowers, consulting husbands on the best arrangements to delight their wives. We walked by a wrinkled woman with a disheveled wig and a tattered blanket. She held a sign that read, “Whoever has mercy on poor people, Hashem has mercy on him. Help feed me this *Shabbes*.”

We knocked on the door. A woman about our age answered. She wore an ebony cashmere sweater over a flowing beige skirt with stiletto boots. Was that a Coach handbag hanging in the foyer? “Wow, you look stunning,” I blurted.

“Well, don’t act so surprised! Who says modest can’t be stylish? *Feh!* I call this look Hasidic chic!” The woman struck a pose. “I’m Naomi. Please, both of you, come on in.” As we walked into the dining room, two boys played with a stuffed Kermit the Frog. “And here are my greatest sources of *naches* – Aryeh and Moshe. Boys say hello.”

Menachem sat at the head of the table with a portrait of the *rebbe* looming overhead. “Good *shabbes*, my friends!” He greeted us with open arms.

Naomi introduced us to everyone. She started with a man with soft, cocoa-colored skin and – look at that – another Black woman, “Here’s Jorge Luis and Miriam.” Then, there was a presumably Ashkenazi pair. “Next to them is Jonah and Noa.” Finally, she pointed to a young

Asian man in a crocheted kippah. He recited prayers to himself at the opposite end as her husband. “And this is Gabriel.”

I couldn’t help but let out a little grin. I felt pleasantly surprised by the amount of melanin around the table. I was so used to being the only Jew of color in any given Jewish space. When Lily and I went to queer song circle a few weeks ago, at least 3 folks asked me if I was lost and offered to help locate the subway station. “Looks like an eclectic bunch,” I remarked.

“Jorge Luis met Menachem’s study partner, Yehezkel, when he was the Chabad emissary in Uruguay. Having no synagogue of their own, they went to his shul for a Rosh Hashana meal and found a new home. Chabad *shluchim* reach Jews all around the world. Sooner or later, though, many decide to make a pilgrimage to the center of it all – right here in Brooklyn, baby!” Naomi explained.

“I went to this rabbi’s class at Hunter Chabad. I had converted a few months prior, but right away, he started asking me my thoughts on the Torah *parsha*. For once, I didn’t feel like some invisible dude. This guy, he saw my Jewish soul!” Gabriel chimed in, pointing at Menachem.

“Why of course!” Menachem affirmed. “As Rambam taught. ‘Whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of Hashem, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham!’”

“You didn’t feel out of place at all?” I asked. I could hardly believe it. I thought back to my Hebrew School days. Every poster had a white mom and white dad and two adorable white children lighting a menorah or something. No room for Ruth there.

“Are you asking me if there’s racism in Chabad? Oh sure, I’ve heard terrible things in this community. There’s plenty to go around, but that’s not who we are,” Gabriel said.

“It’s like the Rebbe taught it is our holy work to bring Jewish people together beyond the barriers of age, affiliation and ethnicity,” pale Jonah piped in.

“Coming together, huh? Does that mean we do whatever we can to fit into his Ashkenazi box,” I directed my focus on my fellow Jews of color while acknowledging the previous speaker.

“Far from it! In Uruguay, Reb. Yechezkel made a point of learning all our melodies. He cited the Rebbe’s advice to *shluchim* who served in Morocco. He told them to respect their customs if they have a high level of holiness. Reb. Yechezkel said he had to embrace our community and our path to channeling Moshiach,” Jorge Luis said.

“You should come with us some time to the Merkaz Sepharad right here in the neighborhood. It’s nice to see we don’t have to live in the Ashki-bubble.” Miriam added.

“Hashem created a world full of differences when He could have created a single entity. It’s a beautiful challenge, isn’t it? To unite the holy sparks among us all,” Jonah said.

Where was I exactly, I thought. My radical feminist Jewish collective would have trouble describe our project as beautifully. Was this Yeshiva boy for real?

“Really, you can get a taste of everything in Crown Heights,” Gabriel interjected. “We have Ashkenazim, Sepharadim, Mizrachim, Black, Indian, and Chinese Jews here. I even met a Black rabbi the other day. Some people are jerks, sure, but that isn’t Chabad.”

“*Chevre*, what beautiful Torah! After kiddush, this deserves a *L’chaim*!” Menachem cheered.

Lily whispered to me, “I’m going to need *a lot* of alcohol to get through this night.” Her words rang with the sting of disdain. Had she not been listening to what had been said over the last five minutes? To me these people didn’t seem all that bad. Please God, I thought, spare me a

Lily tirade tonight. I love the girl, but sometimes, she needs to know when to shut her mouth in mixed company.

“Here, we brought some dessert,” I said following Naomi into the kitchen.

“Oh...why...thank you,” she answered. She examined the package of cookies up and down and then forced a gentle smile to convey some sense of appreciation. We stood in silence.

“It’s the wrong *hechsher*, isn’t it? Dammit! I told Lily to text you a picture while we were in the shop. I told her that you were next level Kosher and only accepted the certification of specific rabbis, but she insisted it’d be fine. Nice job, Lily.”

Lily and I stared at each other angrily for what seemed eternity. Naomi’s polite expression did not break, however. “This whole night is pretty hecking awkward, isn’t it?” she finally said. Her eyes lifted with amnesty for my dessert blunder, and the made-up non-curse endeared me toward her.

“Understatement of the year!” I said with a chuckle.

“Menachem gets these big ideas sometimes. ‘An open hand and an open heart can unite all Israel and repair the world,’” she said, imitating her husband’s grandiosity. “I tell him that’s nice, but before we do that, can we make sure our boys get to school on time and in one piece?”

“Yeah, I can relate,” I said. “When they wanted to turn part of the park into a skateboarding complex, Lily chained herself to an oak tree. She claimed that ‘those who do not act, fall victim to the tides of history.’” This time, I did the over-the-top mimicry. “I told her that’s nice, *and* I have a midterm paper due tomorrow, which my professor isn’t going to accept late because I was ‘fighting the system.’”

“Amen! What are you studying?” Naomi asked.

“Art History, specializing in early 20th century modernism,” I answered.

“Get out of here! I run the gallery on the corner of Kingston and Lincoln.”

“Do you mean the one that had that fantastic exhibit on seder plate varieties? I went because you featured the one by Judy Chicago. Her pen work was fabulous!”

“Curated by yours truly,” Naomi’s grin grew. We started to exchange opinions on Marc Chagall and Judith Kerr. Looking around the kitchen with fresh eyes, I began to admire Naomi’s taste. A bright acrylic hung above the toaster. A woman bent to thresh wheat under a swirling pink sky. I recognized the Biblical scene right away.

“Oh, is that me?” I teased.

“Leave it to a Naomi to appreciate a fine Ruth,” Naomi replied. We were like two deer at the edge of a pond, slowly inching toward one another and recognizing friend rather than foe.

“Did you hear what happened last time Lily met Menachem? Do you think she’ll make it through the night without killing him?” I wondered aloud.

“It’s a worthwhile question. One of my girlfriends just sent me this great podcast about Matisse’s *Red Studio*. The bright colors against that rich Venetian red. It’s incredible,” Naomi remarked. I smiled. Our professor lectured us about that very painting earlier this semester. “You know, Matisse’s actual studio was white. He tried out many colors before he settled on that famous red. Sometimes a first experiment isn’t always the one that’s meant to last,” she said, setting my ill-suited dessert on the counter.

“And when they inevitably disagree?” I said.

“So they disagree! Earlier, Menachem insisted *Shabbes* was incomplete without an appetizer of gefilte fish. I told him no way, no how was I serving that smelly, briny fish tonight, that we’d have poached salmon instead. We didn’t agree, but was the relationship over then and there? Our relationship is must bigger and more resilient than that.” she replied.

“I hate gefilte fish,” I said with a chuckle of mutual understanding. “But what about those bigger things?” I took a deep breath and continued, “You know, speaking about relationships, you know when this *Shabbes* thing is over I have a date with my *girlfriend*, right?”

Naomi looked at me squarely. “What can I say? My husband’s passions do rub off on me. *Ahavas Yisrael* - that’s the most important thing! The love is bigger than one thing!” She said resuming her impression. “Menachem told me about your...um...friend. To me, that’s one thing. I talk to people who don’t keep Kosher and don’t observe *Shabbes*. I can ignore your one thing.”

I have to be honest, hearing that she was willing to ignore the fact that I was dating a woman did not quite land right. My inner Lily urged me to go on Instagram live, exposing the homophobia of Hasidic Crown Heights to the world. Still, Naomi’s gentle smile moderated my flaring temper. It was clear that she really didn’t want to hurt me; she understood and lived Torah differently than I did. She was as uncomfortable as I was and was trying her best to get along with me.

Naomi took the tray of poached salmon into the dining room. When she came back for the challah, I put my hand on her shoulder. “Are you ready to go in there?” she asked. I took another look toward the painting over the toast.

“Wherever you go, I’ll go too. Let’s do this.”

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“That is the most backward thing I have ever heard!” I heard Lily say with a huff. Goodness gracious, what was it this time? While Naomi and I had been busy discussing discussing gefilte fish and Matisse, Lily had apparently been inquiring about the run of ritual-show. Learning it began with “Shalom Alecheim,” she had expressed relief at knowing the words

and had started to join along. Gabriel had stopped her, though, insisting that the women were not allowed to sing along with the men, claiming it was immodest – equivalent to nakedness, according to the rabbis of the Talmud.

“Cite all the rabbis you want. But I will not be silenced!” Lily had started to holler. I shook my head at Naomi. So much for getting along. And then there was more: “Should I fasten my corset too? You people live in the past! Want to join us in 2025?”

“Come on, Lil. You don’t have to yell. Maybe there’s a way to strike a compromise, here. What do you think, Menachem?” I suggested. This time, I shined an encouraging expression toward our hosts.

“Well, there is an opinion by the Chasam Sofer. A man can hear *kol isha* as long as the women and men sing together in a group. So long as the individual voice cannot be distinguished. It’s not common Chabad practice. But there is a way to do this within the bounds of halacha.”

“So, can we do that tonight?” I asked eagerly.

“I think we could make this work,” Menachem said. “Follow Naomi’s lead for the *b’rachos* and *z’miros* sung collectively. Gabriel, if you want to wait in my study while we sing, I can make sure you have a cup to make your own *kiddush*.”

Lily grabbed my shoulder to angle me toward her. “Why are you appeasing them? They’re religious fanatics!” she scream-whispered. Everyone at the table was staring at us. Naomi’s eyebrows angled upward, flashing concern in the direction of her husband.

“Enough already, Lily!” I said. “You don’t always have to be such a pain in the ass.” This company might not have appreciated my choice of language, especially with two kids still in the room, but it had to be said, and so I continued. “Are these people exactly like us? No, but they’re

trying their best. You can go home if you want. I'm going to ride this one out. Maybe it's not how you or I host Shabbat. Yes, it's awkward, even forced a little, but isn't that beautiful? Aren't you always saying we shine brightest with all the colors of the rainbow? Do you really believe that or do you mean the oh so wide spectrum of Brandi Carlile loving Marxists?"

Lily raised a finger ready to rebut, but stumped, she lowered her weapon. Naomi gave a nod to Menachem. Gabriel ventured to the study, and afterward, our host started humming a wordless melody. Lily and I didn't know the tune per say, but we picked it up after the first round. Pretty soon, we were yai-dai-dai-ying along with everyone else. When Menachem began with Shalom Aleichem, the familiar melody sprung from each of us in unison. By the time we reached the second half of kiddush, everyone around the table joined in joyous unison.

After we made *motzi*, Lily asked, "So you're sure this challah's vegan right?"

"Of course," Naomi replied. "I didn't put meat in it, and there's nothing *milchig* at this table."

"Any eggs?" Naomi made the same face as when my seminar instructor calls on me to discuss reading I skimmed.

"Um, um, I'm so sorry. I didn't think about that."

Lily crossed her arms and prepared to speak when I leapt into the exchange. "It's okay. Lily can find other things to eat. Thank you so much." I widened my eyes, signally firmly for Lily to stand down.

I had snuck into many free meals during my graduate student career, but in quality and quantity, this dinner surpassed them all. It began with fresh baked challah and homemade dips – hummus, smokey baba ghanoush, and nutty muhammara. Onto the fish course – salmon, not gefilte. The mains featured roasted chicken (sweet and sour tofu for Lily), roasted potatoes, beet

salad, corn and bean salad, and carrot tzimmes. Naomi said that *Shabbes* should embody the sensation of *shefa*. She laughed, “If your guests aren’t overwhelmed by the abundant feast you put before them, have you really created a taste of the world to come?”

The dinner conversation started in a grounded place. Everyone could easily rave about Naomi’s cooking. We waded into other subjects. Naomi and I talked at length about an exhibition she was opening, “The Hora in All Its Colors.” Assembling depictions of the folkdance in various styles, she told me about a mid-century modern print that was going to be up my alley. Composed of basic shapes and colored in a full spectrum of hues of blue, the artist showed clear influences of Matisse’s figurative abstraction. I couldn’t wait for the opening. Rising from his seat, Jonah demonstrated his favorite wedding moves. Miriam and I met eyes and softly chuckled, telegraphing “pretty fly for a white guy.” I told the story of my mother’s debacle under the *chuppah*. Red wine, white dress, klutzy bride – you get the picture. The room hummed with conversation and laughter and nourishment.

Lily, Menachem, and Jonah then started an entirely different kind of debate. “I’m telling you, Jar Jar Binks was an undercover Sith lord,” Lily insisted. She believed to her core that he was elected to the Galactic Senate to give Emperor Palpatine power. In response, Jonah cited Jar Jar’s heroic role in the Battle of Naboo. It was a great change of pace from her usual moral grandstanding.

After a few more *l’chaims*, we digested (and enjoyed a decent buzz). When Gabriel called it a night, Jorge Luis taught everyone a Sephardic melody to “*Dror Yikra*,” and Jonah taught us a klezmer ditty called “An’im Zmirot.” Although we consumed most of the challah, I looked over and saw the ways its remaining strands intertwined.

Naomi and I fetched the desserts from the kitchen – an enormous platter of 10+ varieties of pareve pastries and a bowl of berries – fresh and of every variety. When Naomi went to put the kids to bed, Jonah poured everyone a shot, and we toasted another *l'chaim*. Clearing the whiskey from her throat, Lily said, “Now, I have a question, but I’m not quite sure how to ask it.” Ut oh, where this was going?

“Shoot,” said Menachem.

“So, do you really believe that guy on the wall behind you was the Messiah? If the Messiah came and went in the 20th century, why is the world still so messed up?” she asked. It was not her usual prosecutorial tone. No, this was raw curiosity.

“You ask a good question. A good, good question. Lubavitchers run the gamut when it comes to this issue. Some say no way. Some say he inspires Moshiach. A small but loud group proclaims ‘*Yechi hamelech!*,’ speaking of his future resurrection.”

“So what do you think about all that?” Lily scooted to the edge of her seat.

“The Rebbe was a great teacher of Torah,” Menachem said. “There is much we can learn from his instruction. He taught us that the dawning of *Moshiach* is imminent. Now, it’s on us. Can the Jewish people live by the commandments? Can one good deed change our whole world?”

“And which commandments are we talking about here? Are we asking boys to wrap tefillin on the subway or making sure the most vulnerable among us have what they need?” I chimed in.

“Ideally, both,” Naomi answered. “It will take each of us to live by what the Rebbe taught and then he will meet us in a Messianic age.”

“I’m not so sure I see the Rebbe as Messiah,” Lily said. “But I agree. – it will take all of us to complete the work of repair.”

“Now, if only we could agree about what needs to get done to get there,” I noted with some skepticism. “It’s not exactly like you all have the same agenda.”

Menachem glanced around the table. “On Kingston, did you see that woman with the sign and the blanket, begging for a *Shabbes* meal? Do you think she deserves to have food in her belly tonight?” Lily and I looked at each other and nodded. Menachem laughed. “Great! Me too. Hunger is bad. Maybe we can do something about it.”

Menachem and Lily locked eyes as if they had the same idea. He nodded at her, and she grabbed the remaining challah, rushing out the door. They ran to the corner with all of us trying to follow close behind him. Locating the begging woman, Lily presented the bread, wishing the woman a great *Shabbes*. Sauntering back our way, he smiled. “Maybe, we can figure out where to go together from here.”

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Late Friday night, Lily had a dream. She showed me her journal afterward. She wrote in huge letters, “New Goal: Eliminate hunger in Crown Heights.” On Sunday morning, she called Menachem and asked if they could meet for coffee. He was on board for the mission. Spending an afternoon with their laptops lodged together, they poured through community board notes, nonprofit social media, and local listservs. They mapped out the existing pantries and community fridges, and they identified where gaps existed. Lily said they needed to raise funds to establish new distribution spots and ramp up communications. Menachem told her they could probably find donors at his shul. After the next *maariv*, he would galvanize the crowd around the sacred duty to meet these needs.

That's when Lily and Menachem began studying for two hours every Wednesday. For the first hour, Menachem shared sections of the *Shulchan Aruch* and the Talmud. During the second hour, Lily shared poetry, legal rulings, and excerpts of memoirs from a queer Jewish anthology. To keep tackling hunger with him, she insisted that they explore how queers like us have been a part of this Jewish endeavor since the beginning. One day, she ran into the apartment, catching her breath and holding her phone in her arms.

"For weeks, I've been trying to tell Menachem we can't just help the Jews. He said find the source. Boom! Gittin 61a! 'For the sake of peace, Jews should not protest against gentiles seeking food...One sustains poor gentiles along with poor Jews.' It's right there on the *daf*. Jews take care of their own kind and their non-Jewish neighbors. We can make the case that everyone in Crown Heights deserves our support." I had never seen Lily bounce up and down about Talmud before she met Menachem, but it was nice to see her fervor channeled for the good.

Meanwhile, Naomi and I began meeting once a month for tea at the Kingston gallery. We talked about up-and-coming creators. One day, she even met me at MoMA (provided we promised to steer clear of the immodest exhibits.) Her analysis of Seurat's use of color led to a real breakthrough with my thesis.

After a couple of months, all of Crown Heights was covered in two kinds of posters. Each lamppost featured the familiar "Moshiach is Here" sticker (Menachem said these were mostly hung by those fringe folks.) Underneath them, our own messianic brigade painted the town. In bold Arial type, it read, "FEED YOUR NEIGHBOR!" Lily set up a QR code for people to locate the nearest fridge or pantry. It included data about how well each location was stocked and a list of the most needed items. At least 50 people that Menachem knew helped them locate people

pleading for food every morning. Within 2 hours, they had reached all of Crown Heights, East Flatbush, and Brownsville.

“It’s amazing. They’re like the footsoldiers of righteousness,” Lily told me one day over coffee. “With the Chabadniks, there’s no ‘I would love to, but I have work’ or ‘Not right now, thanks.’ Ending hunger is an obligation to them. We’re really going to do it, Ruth!”

The two of them collaborated to win a \$20,000 grant from the city to expand outreach to the hungry. When the mayor undermined this effort with cuts to regular funding, Lily and Menachem led the weirdest rally down at City Hall. Never had I ever seen so many *tallis* fringes and Indigo Girls tour shirts in one setting.

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About a year after that day in front of the Brooklyn Museum, Lily and I assiduously cleaned the house. “Come on, Ruth,” she said. “I want to make sure we present our best for our guests.”

As I polished our Kiddush cup, I felt my phone buzz. Lily was pinging our group chat with Menachem and Naomi.

Lily: I’m ordering a Kosher meal for both of you. Please let me know what you’d like. I can borrow someone’s hot plate before *Shabbes* to keep the food separate and warm.

Menachem: Thank you, Lily. Why don’t we keep things simple and enjoy something served cold? I’ll have a chicken salad from Yitzy’s on Kingston. Naomi will have seared tuna and rice.”

Lily: Are you sure? I want to make sure you’re fully able to be in the *Shabbes* spirit while being in our home.

Over our five years living together, Lily and I had hosted at least 50 times, but we had never welcomed Hasidim into our queer fortress. It was she who insisted on the celebration, buying a special bottle of Champagne for the occasion (she pre-checked the certification with

Naomi this time). According to the city's annual survey, food insecurity had dropped 5% across Crown Heights because of their efforts. I felt my pocket vibrate again.

Lily: Is it okay if we light candles at 7:00? I know it's after sunset. You can come late or take space in my room.

Menachem: That's fine. The only prohibition is if we derive benefit from them. I assume they won't be the only source of light at your table.

Lily sent back the light bulb, thumbs up, and smile emojis.

By quarter after 7, our guests had arrived. Just Naomi, Menachem, and their kids this time. We figured that we'd keep it low key before integrating the whole cadre of queers. After Kiddush and motzi, we raved about the challah Naomi baked in her oven at home. "What is your secret?" I pleaded.

"Thickening my egg wash has been a gamechanger. Maple syrup for the vegan loaf," she winked in Lily's direction.

We exchanged stories through the night. "I'm serious, Menny, I was hiking in Peru and boom, there I was in the middle of an alpaca migration!" Recreating how I squirmed around the herd, I caused our guest to snort.

Naomi recounted the trip to Disneyland with the kids. They made sure to spot the mezuzah on Main Street, USA. A friend informed her that the former head of the House of Mouse, Paul Pressler, put it there in the 1990's. It's the only religious symbol in the whole park. "Now, that's what I call a Jewish Easter Egg! Aryeh asked if Mickey was a Chanukah mouse!" Was that not the sweetest thing you ever heard?

We compared notes about our childhood seders. Lily's afikomen ransom was the most lucrative for a crisp \$20, but Menachem bragged about making the most of the plush plague set

he won. He pranked his sister with a frog under her pillow for years. “Don’t get any ideas now,” Naomi cautioned the kids.

Leave it to Lily and Menachem to reignite the *Star Wars* talk. This time, they debated whether *The Last Jedi* was Lucas Film’s greatest gambit or direst disaster. “Canto Bight perfectly illustrated capitalism in overdrive. I knew the Jedis were socialists!” Lily asserted.

“Are you forgetting their whole council of elders plot in the prequels? Kind of gatekeepy don’t you think? They gaslit Anakin for years.” Menachem replied, using the lefty lingo he picked up from us. We could have gone on and on.

When everyone was chewing on dessert (gooey brownies baked by Aryeh and Moshe), we finally gained a quiet moment. Naomi mentioned that supervising her kids in the kitchen shined as the brightest spot of her week. “It’s not often you’re aware you’re living a memory you’ll cherish all your life. It’s those times that I feel a spark of holiness. Has that ever happened to you?”

Lily chimed in, “Right here. Right now.”

The hours melted away, and the wine bottles piled in the recycling bin. As Lily cleared the dessert plates, Menachem led the *bentching*, as he called the *Birkat*. When he was done, I suggested we sing “*Dror Yikra*.” Ever since Menachem and Naomi had hosted us that Friday night, Lily and I had been incorporating that Shabbes song into our regular ritual. After 4 or 5 repetitions, it petered out, which was when Naomi mentioned that her boys were due for bedtime. Menachem cleared his throat and began with a familiar set of *yai dai dai*’s. Lily ran from the kitchen, and we joined him. He had Hasidified “Solidarity Forever.” When the chorus came, the whole room erupted in boisterous merriment. With the grand finale, we punctuated every syllable – “*Yai dai dai dai dai dai* – And the union makes us strong!”

Story 4: Knafeh with a Side of Diplomacy

Can a Zionist and an anti-Zionist be friends? I never expected to ask that question when Omar and I opened our hole in the wall. But I guess that was what happens when two brothers from Palestine whip up the best Middle Eastern lunch in Midtown East. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Druze - if they were in New York, they came to us. Especially since we were both Halal *and* Kosher certified!

Omar had bought the space two years before. It was tinier than our customers' studio apartments, but he figured out how to make it profitable. He cooked our people's favorite dishes in the back, and I served our 6 tables while running the counter. Despite the modest size, Omar made the place homey. On the gray walls, he hung photos of our country – the bustle of Al-Manara Square, children playing on the beach in Gaza, and the sunset over Mahmood Mosque. Sometimes, I caught a few *kippah* clad customers distracted by this last photo. They stopped mid-order and they recognized Haifa, a city within the Green Line. They must have wondered if we were featuring it as *our* home. They squinted, turned their heads askew, and then resumed their order. No one passed up our hummus.

The day in question had started like any other Wednesday. I slept in a little too long and therefore, had to rush out the door. The L train stalled between Bedford Avenue and First Avenue, stranding me without cell service below the East River. After a delayed transfer to the 6, I arrived to Omar's yelling.

"Musaleh – where the hell have you been? 5 minutes 'til open!" I scrambled the paper tablecloths and ceramic dishes. We were ready for business.

Around noon, my buddy Rafi came into the shop. He dined with us about once a week. Yes, he was Israeli...but he tipped well and knew how to talk football. We got along well

enough. He told the best jokes – often in terrific Arabic. I swear, Bassem Youssef should have hired him as a writer. Rafi ordered his usual maftoul and took the center table facing the door.

“Seriously *achi*, you have the juiciest roast chicken in town,” he said with a chef’s kiss. “I’m telling you, this drumstick is how we solve the water crisis. There’s more moisture here than in all of the *Kinneret*. Who knew a bird could be so well hydrated? Do you give her Gatorade to boost her electrolytes?”

Rafi seemed poised to run with this bit, but he stopped mid-riff. A woman in a denim coat with a bulletin board’s worth of protest buttons had just walked in the door. She did not strike me as his expected company.

“Lilit?” he said. His voice and right eyebrow lifted.

“For the last time, it’s Lily!” she snapped.

“Sorry, how could I forget, my dear cousin Lil-lee? You were just soooo kind last time we met,” he said, laying the sarcasm and hostility on thick. I’d hate to sit around their Thanksgiving table, I thought.

“What are you doing here?” she said with an accusatory emphasis on the word, *you*.

“Can’t I enjoy Omar’s pita like everyone else? Or are you here to arrest me and ship me off to the Hague?” *Ya Allah!* How did we go from chicken jokes to charges of war crimes? Wanting to avoid the crossfire, I retreated to the counter, but from a distance, kept my eyes and ears on the sparring duo.

“I just thought the U.N. banned staff from eating the cuisine of people against whom you commit genocide,” she said with a glare. Okay, Lily was coming in hot. Had Israel carried out horrors in Gaza? Of course. But that’s not how I generally open a lunch conversation.

Before long, the cousins had a captive audience. “Go get him, honey! *Saħa!*” shouted a middle-aged, moustached man at table 3. His buddies cheered, clinking their Coke bottles.

“Ah, yes, the U.N. – that fine institution of peace and security for all. So fine that I’ve been working all week to stop the Security Council from censuring us. How dare Israel prevent UNRWA from handing over millions of dollars and hundreds of kilos of food for Hamas to ransom,” Rafi replied.

“The people of Palestine wouldn’t need all that aid if Israel hadn’t bombed and starved them to begin with. Or maybe they wouldn’t need it if the Israeli Occupation Forces didn’t treat Gaza like an open-air prison,” Lily seethed.

Another toast from Table 3. Table 1 dropped some cash and walked out the door. A young woman at Table 4 started filming with her phone. The wrong kind of publicity could ruin us. Don’t get me wrong - Little Miss Firecracker was dropping truth after truth about my people’s suffering, but there was a reason why Rafi and I never discussed his work during lunch hour. Talking Manchester United made it much easier for all the customers.

“Maybe, you’ve forgotten that Hamas wants to destroy the Jewish state. Maybe, you’ve forgotten that they invaded our country – slaughtered more than a thousand people and kidnapped hundreds. Is the only way for Israel to be the good guy to empower terrorists that want to kill every last one of us?” I was pretty sure that was not the only way, but what he was saying about Hamas was also true. How, I wondered, would Lily fire back?

“What are you talking about? I’m not one of you. I’m with the Palestinians. They deserve as many October 7ths to happen as possible until they are liberated.” Woah, girl, chill! Hello there? I’m one of the Palestinian people you’re speaking for. I’m also for disobedience and resistance, but don’t endorse mass murder in my name!

“Keep going! Put him in his place!” Table 3 clinked again. A woman at Table 5 scoffed.

Rafi ignored them, piercing Lily with raging eyes. “Wake up call - Hamas would want to kill you too! We need to crush the Palestinians before they crush us,” Really, Rafi? Who will make your moist chicken after you crushed me?

At this point, Rafi and Lily were raising their respective voices with exponential ferocity. Both of them talked a big game about people feeling free and safe, yet all they seemed to do was recriminate the other. I hate the injustice of the *Nakba* as much as the next guy, but I didn’t want to see Rafi’s blood running through the street any more than I wanted to see my cousin Ayat’s.

“After a third of our family was marched to the gas chambers, I was taught the principle of Never again. Why, then, is the so-called Jewish State willing to embark on ethnic cleansing in my name?” Lily said.

“And what’s your answer? *Arise and go to the city of slaughter?* Let our enemies kill the other two-thirds in a second Shoah? That would really help, you self-hating traitor.”

“At least I don’t wake up every day to defend a Neo-Nazism behind a Star of David,” Lily raised her chin and pivoted to storm off. Table 5 woman gasped. The iPhone recorder kept rolling. Nervous sweat moistened my back. If I didn’t do something, we’d be ruined.

“Stop!” I shouted, leaping over the counter. I looked toward the kitchen, and Omar gestured to keep going. “Is this all you two are going to do? Call each other names, trade jibes, and separately boast about your witty victories on Twitter? Do you think this will do anything to drive down the rage that threatens millions of our brothers and sisters? I have listened to you for 15 minutes, and your hearts keep growing harder. You have shouted about what to do with my people on our land for over 100 years. What’s the result? My people and your people push each other deeper into the pit.”

I had never spoken to a customer in this way. In agonizing silence, I braced for everyone to rush out without paying or start an all-out brawl. Either way, they'd drag us on Yelp on their way back to the office. Finally, Rafi spoke.

“So, what do you suggest? We hug and sing Kumbaya, and all our concerns will melt away?”

I regained my composure. “No, it's not like that. But what's gained from what you're doing? Lily – You want my people to be free, and for that, I'm forever grateful. However, Rafi speaks in defense of millions. Jews who are scared and mourning. Like you and me, they have dreams. They love, and they make beauty in this world. Listen to him – feel their humanity.” Rafi nodded with a satisfied smirk.

“And Rafi – Lily speaks to you about Israel's crushing power. It hurts your neighbors. It hurts me and my family. We are here on earth to offer you more than a tasty lunch. We too have dreams, and we're living a nightmare. Listen to her – feel our humanity.”

I looked up from the center table. Table 5 woman gave me an affirming nod. Table 3 looked displeased that I gave Rafi any credit whatsoever, but they resumed their lunchtime chatter, anyway. Was the PR crisis averted? I rotated toward Table 4. Shit, the camera! I just needed to show we can keep handling this maturely. I bent down and leaned my elbows on the table. “Look, the conversation you're having is important. I don't deny that, but you can't scream at each other while Omar and I are trying to make a living here. I tell you what – come back here after we close. It'll be late, but no worries – I'll make fresh knafeh. Each of us can make the case about what's happening over there. Deal?”

I extended my hands. “Will this knafeh use real rose water?” Rafi asked.

“Straight from Jerusalem,” I reassured him.

“And you can make it vegan?” Lily wondered.

“I’ll make a vegan portion special just for you,” I told her. They both shook my hands. Table 4 woman set her phone aside. If she posted, I hoped my proposal to hear all sides would buy us some good grace with the mad dogs of the Internet.

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Ten minutes before close, I gave it a 30% chance either of them showed and even slimmer for both of them to humor the offer. At 9pm sharp, Lily and Rafi stood in the door. The plan had worked so far, but wait, I had no plan from here. Oh no, how do I actually do this?

Pulling out my phone, I conducted a quick search, “Talking to someone you can’t stand?” I erased our menu board, jotting what I read on the first link.

Rules of the Road

1. **Accept discomfort. Channel it toward curiosity.**
2. **Criticize ideas. Do not hate a person for what they think. No blanket statements. No name-calling.**
3. **Listen openly enough to be changed by what someone else has to offer.**

Once Lily and Rafi accepted these terms (Both muttered a begrudging “fine”), I went to the kitchen. When I returned, I placed down the plates. “3 orders of knafeh – all with genuine rose water, one with vegan cheese.”

Omar may make the best falafel this side of Fez, but I’m the knafeh gourmet. Letting the dough rest just the right amount of time and not overhandling it resulted in a soft and flaky delight, toasted amber and gold. The dispersed pistachios shined their signature green. When I lifted the regular portions from the pan, the cheese dangled just right, begging you to savor the treat. I even crafted a vegan delicacy, subbing soaked cashews as filling. Trying it myself, it

remained creamy and decadent as ever. I also set down a pot of pungent Arab coffee. Pure black and strong – it may be a long night.

The fluorescents above us hummed and flickered. Other than that, we heard nothing but the tinkling of silverware against ceramic. Real great dialogue we have going here. Rafi broke the silence.

“Is that from Rough Trade?” he said, pointing to Lily’s bag.

“Uh, yeah. I figured I’d stop by if I’m going to deal with midtown tourists” she replied.

“I love that place. I buy all my vinyl from there. What’d you get?”

“A little old, a little new. Charli, Chappell, and my favorite Linkin’ Park record.”

“No way! I saw them in Tel Aviv back in 2010! *I tried so hard, and got so far. But in the end it doesn’t even matter.*”

I don’t know if it was the mention of Israel’s largest city or Rafi’s arrhythmic, off-key singing, but we were back to quiet. In the end, does this conversation even matter? I’m no diplomat. Come on, Mousaleh, what would Mama do? She raised two boys and seemed to keep the peace. Wracking my mind for any answer, I went back decades. Omar and I couldn’t share single box of crayons. Mama had each of us tell our story about why we needed them. She said once we hear the stories separately, we could better bring them together. It was silly, but it was more than anything else I could come up with.

Once we agreed to each share a story, they dug into dessert without a word. No one wanted to step into the breach. I told them how Mama met Shira in the marketplace. It was 1996. Shira lived in Netiv Ha’asara, the kibbutz next to Gaza City, but she loved the oranges on our side. Mama was experiencing blood clots, and although her doctor said they could go away with Warfarin, the medicine was only available in Israel. Between raising me and Omar and a full

work schedule, Mama had no time to request a personal exit permit. Shira happened to work as a pharmacist. The two of them struck up a deal to meet every other Tuesday on the border. Shira brought Mama two weeks-worth of pills, and Mama supplied fresh oranges from the family grove.

For about a decade, they exchanged much more than drugs and produce. They shared fresh flowers, insights about books and movies, parenting advice, and comfort during the heaviest times. When Shira lost her uncle in a Jerusalem bus bombing, she looked to Mama for the warmest hug. When settlers threw rocks at Mama's brother, she asked Shira where they should go from there. Every other Tuesday for 11 years.

In 2007, the blockade began. Luckily, Mama's clots had dissipated, but she missed her weekly visits with her Jewish friend. Still, they texted. Omar even taught them how to use FaceTime, but they were no longer able to see each other – hadn't been able to share a tender hug – for 18 years now.

Rafi and Lily each swallowed a bite with a solemn gulp. Lily spoke first, "Isn't your mom worried about normalizing conditions with the oppressor?" Rafi opened his mouth, but I raised my hand.

"We read in Torah and Quran about Yousef and his brothers. What happens when the brothers adopt the path of hate? Joseph ends up in the pit, and the family's grief only increases. When famine strikes, the brothers make amends and survive together. Mama needed the medicine to survive. Throwing Shira into the pit would not have helped anyone."

For a while, no one spoke, letting my story marinate in our separate psyches. My mind veered to some fries spilt under Table 3. I better sweep those up. The last thing we need are any

critters. A health code violation might as well be the kiss of death. I began to scan the rest of the room for scraps when Rafi interjected.

“Well, don’t you think with Hamas running Gaza, Israelis deserve to have a blockade? Look what happened on the 7th.”

“Well...you see...it’s not quite –” I fumbled my words. How could he think such an obtuse solution was the right call? Did he not hear that we can barely get medicine? I massaged my temples, counted down from three, and tried again. “On October 7, Mama texted Shira to see if she had been caught up in the massacre. We hated what Hamas had done. Shira had been visiting family in Jerusalem at the time and lives with them now. Now, Shira is in a group chat with me and Omar. She reassures us of her safety whenever the rockets land near her. *Inshallah*. Mama tells us every day at noon that she is safe and alive. Not among the thousands dead. *Inshallah*. It seems to me that with a blockade, neither of them is fully safe. With more Mamas and Shiras out there, maybe there’s a better way.”

Rafi stroked his chin. Was he preparing his attack? Had this all been a waste of time? He looked down toward his half-eaten dessert. He glanced at the menu board, rereading the rules of the road. He shrugged. “Okay, Lily, your turn.”

Lily told us about how she grew up hearing how Hitler tried to annihilate the Jews. Despite near success, they survived. The Jews responded to their greatest trauma by advocating for equality and dignity for all. They rejected the bigotry of Nazism, and fought for civil rights. Heschel marched with King. Best of all, from the ashes of the Holocaust, the Jewish people came together and summoned their strength to establish their own country, a thriving democratic state in their ancestral land. Huh, my grandparents had a slightly different recollection of the Nakba. I wanted to raise some doubts, but I remembered this was Lily’s turn.

Until age 19, Lily took equal pride in Jewish survival, Jewish justice, and Israel. Like many young adults, she took up a free trip to the Holy Land. She loved the golden stones of Jerusalem, the bountiful stars in the Negev sky, and of course, the hot, tattooed lesbians on the beaches of Tel Aviv.

But Lily's whole view shifted when a friend convinced her to extend her trip in the West Bank. They went to Umm al-Khair – a village of tents and one-room homes made of recycled tin. An older woman, Nadia, explained that she had come there after years of wandering. She had run away from her childhood village in '48, fearing an attack by Israeli soldiers. Though the village had been there since before the 1967 war, the entire place had one water pipe and no electricity. The Israeli government did not recognize them and blocked their access to the utilities grid. Multiple villagers told Lily how they worried constantly about dying of thirst or hunger.

Nadia pointed to a collection of nearby multi-story homes. Each had a lush lawn and air conditioning units in the windows. That was Carmel – an Israeli settlement with government approval. The army protected the Israelis while multiple times that year, the villagers of Umm al-Khair scattered to block the demolition of their homes. Lily told us how she watched Nadia weep. There was no equality, no dignity.

Lily cried, "There was survival and Israel, but there was no justice. Jews – a people who have suffered oppression for thousands of years. We finally have power, and we are no better. It's despicable. This state, its politicians, its awful military. Power has morally bankrupted our people."

"But Lily, you must understand, there are many good people who simply want to live safely and happily in our people's ancient land," Rafi said. "Do not hate them."

“Good people like the ones who want to ‘crush the Palestinians?’” Lily said, staring at Rafi and gesturing in my vicinity. “The racists like you who do whatever they want?”

I jumped into the fray, “Okay, okay. No name calling, remember?” Lily crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. I was losing them. Think, Mousaleh. What would Mama do? “Rafi, what values do you think are most important to Lily’s story?”

“She thinks Palestinian safety is more important than the flourishing of her fellow Jew.”

“Lily, is that what you think?” I asked.

“I just don’t think Jewish safety should come at the expense of Palestinian lives. I was taught that all people have dignity. Rafi, don’t you think people like Mousaleh’s mother deserve to live? Do you have it in you to open your heart to their pain? Are we any better than Pharaoh or the Czar?”

Rafi crossed his arms and cleared his throat. Something struck a nerve. I put my hand on his shoulder. “Is there something you’d like to add?” I said.

“Don’t lecture me on Stalin’s Russia. After Perchik and Hodl were imprisoned, our family almost died. How many Jews could have lived if they were not forced to live in the Czar’s Russia? This is the miracle of the Jewish State. Israel makes us strong. Israel allows us to explore our culture and when necessary, fight for it. I will not let anyone take that away from me. I’m not letting the world turn my homeland into Jew-hating Russia, and I will fight if they try.”

This was impossible! They’re not hearing each other. I looked to a photo by our cash register. Me, Omar, and Mama in the grove. She’s holding both of our hands. I took a deep breath. “Okay, so what I’m hearing is that Lily is concerned about the dignity of all people, and Rafi is anxious about Jewish strength and freedom. Is that right? Can we see how each of these things is important to the other person?” Rafi and Lily nodded like two resistant kindergarteners.

Rafi tapped his foot vigorously, and Lily squinted her eyes and pursed her lips. They felt heard, but they weren't happy about it.

“Good. Now, Rafi, I’ve heard concerns like yours before. Shira used to bring each of the holiday foods to Mama, Omar, and me – apples and honey on Rosh Hashana, etrog jam after Sukkot, *sufganyot* on Hanukah. Mmmm, I loved the *sufganyot* best of all. I gotta text her for the recipe. Anyways, she’d always tell us how her grandmother had to hide in Poland. If the smell of latkes or their holiday songs overflowed onto the street, she feared an attack. She wanted her children and grandchildren to never feel this timidity. When I think about the future, I know there are good Jews like Shira. I also know that they need to feel safe in our land. Lily, isn’t this part of the free future you dream of?

I also know that the horrors Lily describes are too common. My people do not feel safe or free at all. Our villages have been destroyed for over 77 years. Our people starve and die of polio! And when I see Israelis enjoying their lives. Dammit!” I punched the table in a moment of raw frustration. Close my eyes, count to three, continue. “If they knew our pain, maybe they could understand our rage. Rafi – please, can you share our pain?”

The three of us looked around at the others. We took bites of knafeh, and said nothing for a full minute. Rafi’s slurp of coffee echoed off the walls. Avoiding eye contact with either of us, his eyes darted around the restaurant. He especially fixated on the picture of Jaffa. Shanty fishing boats bobbed in the harbor, and behind them, the beige buildings stacked on the hill. The clock tower and lighthouse mounted the modest skyline. As a kid, I heard how my grandparents furnished most of their first apartment with wares from the Jaffa flea market. Had Rafi ever been?

At last, Rafi pointed to the Jaffa picture and said that he hadn't live too far from there with his roommate Oded. They met in university and shared a flat for many years. Oded adored live music, including Linkin Park. Rafi pointed to Lily's new record. On Saturday nights, he would take an edible and bop from club to club until the sunrise. He went to the Nova festival on October 7. The location of his body has not been identified. Oded was 35 when Hamas took all the joy and all the life from him. Rafi continued to tell us about the dozen people he knew who have died because of Palestinian terrorism. Most of them were under 40 years old. Some died during the Second Intifada, some during October 7, and some – like his own brother – during the war since. Rafi knows that some Palestinians would kill him, all his friends, and his family if they had the chance. He will not let them take that chance. He and his fellow Israelis must defend themselves. "We will be mighty. We will live. No one will stop us. No Palestinian. No American. No one."

Oh Israelis, always the sympathetic underdogs. Bad Mousaleh! Rule 3: Listen openly enough to be changed by what someone else has to offer. This is Rafi's story. But before my temper simmered, Lily stepped in, speaking with an uncharacteristically soft cadence. "In college, my pal Dan died. He slept three rooms down the hall. Stomach cancer – it was awful. I still think about everything he missed. No graduation. No chance to climb the career ladder. No achieving his goal of hiking the Seven Summits. No falling in love and growing old with someone. None of that. Just one young person was devastating, but you have lost so many. Rafi, my heart aches for you."

Rafi slowly nodded his head as tears streamed down his cheeks. Lily took his hand, but he shook it off. Rafi began to sob. "And then you accuse us of genocide? Call yourselves anti-

Zionist? Anti-us! It's like you want all of us to meet the same fate. What else can we do but put on a brave face and fight?"

Lily inhaled and exhaled methodically. "You want all the loss to stop. I also want it to stop. For you. For Mousaleh's family. For Oded's family. For Shira. For the people of Umm-al-Khair. Even for the people of Carmel. The strength you talked about? I want that for the Jews. I also want it for the Palestinians. I want it for everyone. One State, Two States, Zionism, Anti-Zionism – they're just words. What's real is that a human life is sacred, irreplaceable. You and I both know that. So, let's start there and keep on talking."

I wouldn't describe the mood in the room as friendly, but it had moved from frozen to tepid. I glanced at my watch. *Ya Allah*, 2:30am! I told everyone it was best that we pick up next week. I hugged Lily, then Rafi. Then, to I think everyone's surprise, they embraced each other. We agreed to meet next week. Same time, same place, same knafeh.

By the time everyone left, it was already early Thursday morning, that time in the middle of the night, when even Midtown Manhattan grows quiet. I walked all the way east. It had been a frigid February – cold enough that a layer of ice cast over the edges of the East River the previous evening. Tonight, though, it had been milder. I meandered. Beyond the UN, I watched as the ice began to thaw.

Story 5: The People's Trial

Go back to Poland, kike! I stared at the red scrawl behind the police line. When I bought one of the few storefront locations in the Financial District, I admit it was unconventional. I thought the visibility would drive up attention toward the firm. But not this kind of visibility. I put my hand on Elliott's shoulder. Whoever graffiti-ed these nasty words certainly meant them for the Steinberg of Murphy & Steinberg LLC.

As the officers handed me a report and contact number, Elliott stood as still as stone. He made the same face as he did when he pondered the perfect maneuver to lift a client out of some deep dogshit. He's been a clever jurist ever since I hired him out of school. When I made him a partner 3 years ago, I remained committed to mentoring the kid, providing counsel and protection any way I could. Jesus, what could I do now?

Once they let us inside, I grabbed a sponge, rubber gloves, and every chemical solution in the custodial closet. Without a word between us, we spent an hour scrubbing, and we resumed our regular schedule. Elliott met clients through 2:00 like any other day. Burrowed in manilla folders, I never saw the whites of his eyes. When we finally gathered for lunch in the breakroom, the muteness persisted. As the gnawing, steady rhythm of chewing started to grind my nerves. I needed to break the silence.

"What can I tell you, Elliott, I'm at a loss for words. That was shocking. That was messed up," I said.

"Great counsel, Patrick," he said. Was this the usual sarcastic wit or was he pissed at me?

"You know I'll always look out for you. Do you need the day off? Anything you need right now, just ask."

"Don't worry about it. I got this."

Around 5:30, the front buzzer rang. Elliott motioned me to join him. I glanced over at my desktop – no appointment on the calendar. “Patrick, you remember Rafi? From my mother’s funeral?” Oh right, him! The cousin with the killer scarf. Walk into court with a nice silk scarf and you look both scholarly and serious. We chatted extensively about a textiles dealer he knew not far from the Barclays Center. “Rafi works for the UN. I figured he could tell us how to coordinate with the authorities in response to this morning’s incident.”

“I work for Israel’s Permanent Mission to the UN,” Rafi emphasized the distinction.

“And what are you talking about with the authorities? They’re not going to do anything, I can promise you that.”

Elliott and I exchanged confused glances. “The police came this morning. Took photos. Collected evidence. They’re conducting a thorough investigation,” I explained.

“That’s a good one. You think some Italian cop from Staten Island is going to give a crap about us?” he said, pointing to himself and Elliott. “The only way you’ll get an arrest is if the scoundrel trips and falls into the officer’s lap. More likely you’ll get a stack of papers reporting what you already told them.”

“I called the bodega across the street,” Elliott said. “They promised to keep an eye out.”

“The Dominicans who made my bagel this morning? Good to know that next time someone attacks you there will be an attentive audience,” Rafi said, throwing up his hands. “Uf— When are you going to realize? No one in America is going to keep you safe. You need to keep yourself safe.”

Rafi started rambling about security improvements. Bullet-proof glass, extra cameras, Internet firewalls. Honestly, my mind started to drift. Was it a mistake to draft four Mets pitchers for my fantasy team? In true Mets fashion, they could start off strong only to spoil my chances in

September. My train of thought came to a screeching halt when a shiny metal object thudded onto Elliott's desk.

"What the hell?" Elliott screamed.

"It's a Glock 19. Gen 5," Rafi said with nonchalance. "Best beginner handgun around. You point this at the next sucker who tries to mess with you, and pow! They'll run all the way to Long Island."

"What the hell, Rafi?" Elliott repeated.

"With all due respect, your way is weak. How do you expect to survive in the stew of American hate? Use your mind, make some money, make some friends, and you'll live happily ever after? Do you really think that's going to work? What happens when the tide shifts? You think the cops will help when it gets even a little inconvenient to defend the Jew? We are surrounded by wolves and you make yourself into a lamb. No – worse than that. You're the old mutton, grazing away like you won't meet the same fate as last season's lot. Condemned to die in delusion."

Woah, that was an outrageous allegation to hurl at my partner! I jumped into attorney mode. No one called my prodigy a feeble farm animal and got away with it. "And you suggest that we all become vigilantes instead?" I said, rising from my chair.

"I'm just trying to give my cousin a fighting chance." He pivoted to Elliott. "You've worked hard. You've made a name for yourself here, but you've accepted a limit by being here. In America, you gotta think 'how long will I still be safe?'"

I shot Elliott a nervous look. Certainly, the prosecution hadn't met the burden of proof. Elliot avoided eye contact. The shine of the glock reflected onto his eyes. "Everyone go home,"

he concluded. "It's been a long day." Good move. Call a recess. "And Rafi – take that thing with you," he added.

Once we adjourned, I walked with Elliott to the Wall Street Station. The adjacent blocks hummed their usual rhythms. A vendor screamed about his boiled wiener water, and a line of tourists jockeyed to rub the charging bull's big metallic balls. The usual New York weirdness but no sign of this morning's incident. "Your cousin's pretty crazy," I said plainly.

Elliott checked out his surroundings before crossing the street. "Maybe he is and maybe he isn't. Rafi looks around and assumes we're unwanted here. Maybe he's right."

"Come on, Elliott. Ever since I brought you on as a partner, we've made a killing. You're young, talented, smart, handsome."

"And Jewish," Elliott interrupted.

"And so was your father who presided on the State Bench and your grandfather who clerked for Goldberg. They were also proud and prosperous Americans. And so are you. You're not just surviving. You're thriving!"

"That was when times were good in the mighty empire. But what happens when Rome begins to fall?"

"They wrote some mean words. We washed it off. You gotta keep moving." I tried to pat him on the back, but Elliott shook it off. We descended to the platform. Elliott brought me into a tight huddle. Whether he was scared or ashamed, he spoke softly, refusing to release his tears.

"Look, Patrick, I know you mean well, but you have to understand. My family always got along well with the people around them. Tevye worked hard and played nice, and they still ran him out of town in a pitchforked pogrom. First they said get out, and a few decades later, they

said drop dead. Vandalism, abuse, expulsion, annihilation. That's what happens when Rome starts to fall."

"But you're not even a Jewy Jew. Didn't you file the Pendleton case the night of Passover? I told you I'd give you the night off," I said.

"You just don't get it, Patrick. You can't guide me on this one. You can't fix it. Today, I was targeted as a Jew."

The train arrived. We rode for 20 minutes, resuming the morning's silence.

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Elliott cc'ed me on all his correspondence with Rafi. Apparently, the Jewish Federation offered grants to protect "conspicuous business owners." They covered all sorts of gadgets and armor – multiview surveillance, ID-scan access control, Level 5 polycarbonate windows, bollards on the sidewalk. I thought the whole thing was overkill, but Rafi offered to complete the paperwork. Knock yourself out. Turn our office into a fortress.

After a few weeks, the supplies arrived. Rafi took the day off to properly install everything. I watched as he adjusted the camera angles.

"Damn, I saw that RFP. Those applications must have taken hours. Now the handiwork. My cousins and I have a good time on St. Patty's Day, but we never get into trouble like this," I said.

"Elliott's part of the family. We gotta look out for each other."

"So, you make sure his office is equipped with the latest defense systems out of Quantico?"

"Safety is the top priority. If Elliott's in trouble, I show up. And if I were in trouble, I'd expect he would do the same."

"What about if I was in trouble?"

“Look, you seem great, but you’re not one of my own. He’s my responsibility. If he wants to stay in this dangerous country, I will help him through his bad decisions.”

All this talk of helping seemed to come with a heaping dose of judgment. My amused chuckle was enough to drop the point for now. Sure, I want to support my family. I just didn’t know it had to feel like a season of *Survivor*, preparing the clan for tribal war.

Meanwhile, I heard hammering from Elliott’s office. Jeez, what was happening now? I peeked my head inside as Elliott was hanging a new frame. It was a black and white photo of Sandy Koufax. He was young. His luminous smile produced no wrinkles, and he still wore the cap with the bright Brooklyn B on it. I thought back to my pops lecturing me how Walter O’Malley screwed an entire borough by moving the team out west. Elliott adjusted until the bubble in his leveler stood at direct center. He admired the southpaw with a goofy grin.

“They don’t make them like him anymore. Or at least the Mets don’t sign them,” I said.

“I heard Senga hit the IL last night. Tough break. Looking to make a trade?” Elliott replied.

“Are you kidding? 15-days off and I get your B-lister. No way. I gotta trust my boys from Queens will come through,” I said.

“Whatever you say, Big Pat. Go ahead. Make it easy for me to take your money.”

“Very funny. So, what’s he doing here? Are you hoping Dandy Sandy will jump out and help you remember torts?” I teased.

“I just got to thinking about what you said a few weeks ago. About my dad and my grandfather. This isn’t Rome. This is America.”

“Hell yeah, man! Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. You’re not a Jew by chance but by right.” I felt like the

biggest nerd citing Con Law, but I hadn't seen this kind of spirit in the kid for weeks. Hey, maybe we hadn't conceded the case after all!

"And what do we do if America fails us? We don't give up on her. We fight for her preservation. The deepening of her democracy!" Elliott stood like Captain Morgan with a foot on his chair and his finger pointing to the sky. "We the people fight until every boy who is bored in Hebrew School can grow up, go to temple on Yom Kippur, *and* win the World Series in the same week."

I stumbled as I tried to sing "America the Beautiful." You'd think we were drunk from all our bursting patriotism. As I crooned about brotherhood from sea to shining sea, the prosecution entered. Rafi offered a sarcastic slow clap.

"Yes, rah rah. Go America! But wouldn't it be nice if they didn't schedule the big game on our holiest day in the first place? Or to not have to live our lives according to their time."

"I don't know, my friend. Have you ever tried having Chinese food and going to the movies on their time? It's pretty great," Elliott countered.

"What about when they put out matzah for Hanukah because all our holidays are the same to them? And let's not forget that the little girl in the store might not even realize the mistake because she has no Jewish friends and soccer practice overlaps with her 2 hours of Jewish education a week. Her parents couldn't fit 2000 years of tradition in the schedule, so out they go with the excess junk. And what if the Dodgers lost that series? Do you think Mr. Koufax would have been America's darling? Give me a break."

"And you have the magic solution?" I asked snidely.

“I don’t mean any offense. I just think it’s nice to live in a place where we don’t have to let the world tell us what, when, and how Jewishness can be. Where we determine our culture for ourselves.”

I raised an eyebrow toward the defendant, wondering if he needed a sidebar to regroup. He knew the next move.

“Both of you come with me to the JCC tonight. You’ll see,” Elliott said.

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Since the alternative was to return home and watch the Mets flounder, I decided to stand by my client. Elliott took us uptown. The graffiti incident had evidently caused him to join a book club. “It’s the strangest thing,” he informed us. “When I realized the world might want to get rid of this whole Jewish thing, it made me want to find our people and say ‘hell no!’” Rafi narrowed his eyes and scrunched his lips with skepticism.

Elliott brought us to the 8th floor. There were eight other people there. Most of them were women at least over 65. An older gentleman sat next to a gay couple that seemed to be in their late twenties. There was one woman who was Elliott’s age and friendly looking. If he wasn’t married to Mary, I’d play yenta and make a match. Elliott took out a slim paperback with a bright magenta cover. *Portnoy’s Complaint* – a strange name. I certainly had never heard of it.

The next 90 minutes were some of the most awkward of my life. A woman so old she had a chain around her neck to keep track of her glasses asked, “Do you think Roth had a point about liberating the nice Jewish boy’s libido?” Thanks, Elliott. I could have died happily without hearing a woman my mother’s age utter those words. As I shook off my cringe, I did listen to a thoughtful give-and-take. The *bubbes* tried to define the neuroses of the American Jewish family.

When we reached the section of the book called “In Exile,” they wondered aloud about American and Israeli differences.

Jumping into the mix, Elliott flipped to a flagged page. “We read, ‘And in Israel! Where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary and peace, Portnoy now perishes!’ It made me think, would we have to give up part of our Jewishness to be part of theirs?” He slung his head in Rafi’s direction. The women nodded approvingly at the depth of Elliott’s insight. The only one who was 30-something projected a smile his way. They had no idea about the war of words being waged on this turf. That is, until Rafi erupted.

“And what Jewishness is this? You think you read a book, relate to some pervert in therapy, and you have a civilization?”

“What gives you the right to talk to them like that?” I said.

“Look, I want what’s best for my family. I just don’t get why you live somewhere where the forecast is always so shitty. Always a chance of a wintry mix – 50% assimilation, 50% antisemitism. Do you think Koufax and Roth nostalgia is going to keep Judaism alive forever under those conditions?”

“Like you’re much better. When was the last time you stepped foot in a temple in Israel?” Elliott challenged back.

“*Achi*, when you are in Israel, you don’t need a temple. Every Shabbat when I’m in Israel I have lunch on the kibbutz with my mom and dad. Without fail. That’s the beauty of our Jewish civilization. It’s not something to contort around. I don’t turn it on and off. The language, the calendar, the values, the arts – the society is built by and for us. It’s designed to keep Judaism alive, and I don’t need someone to deface my storefront to remind me of it.”

I noticed Elliott shrink. Rafi didn't mince his words. That's when one of the women – a surprise witness – cleared her throat, “Well, you speak Hebrew, celebrate Shabbat and holidays with your family, and learn about the tradition in school. Great. *Bubbe* is proud of you. So glad that you've found your way. Our way may look different, but that doesn't mean you're allowed to take a massive shit all over the Upper West Side.” Okay, go off, Grandma!

The woman, Eileen, proceeded to tell us how she found her path. She spent decades within walking distance of at least 5 synagogues, but her family belonged to none of them. At that point, she thought of herself Jewish about once a month when she devoured a tongue sandwich at Barney Greengrass. When she turned 50, she began thinking about her purpose, and happiness. Did she have any real community? A classic mid-life crisis. These thoughts submerged Eileen into a sunken place.

Eileen's melancholy mounted until she broke down crying at Barney Greengrass and didn't give a crap. A kind stranger, Helen, (she pointed to one of the other *bubbes* in the room) invited her to a 60+ group at the JCC, and she decided “to opt into this *mishagas*.” She didn't think that anything could help her at that point, but maybe some other middle-aged Jews couldn't make things worse.

The group studied Joseph's ordeal in prison and gems of the Zohar. They went to the Cloisters to check out medieval art, and swung their bodies to Israeli dances. As much as the content gave her a reason to wake up in the morning, the people who joined her proved thoughtful partners for the journey. For the first time, people remembered to call her on her birthday, and she rang them when she had an existential dilemma. Sometimes, they cited Maimonides, and more often, they laughed about a relevant thing that Colbert said. All the time, they were part of something together. She had never felt that her life was so rich.

“So you see, Buster Brown, it’s not Israel, but don’t count us out. Are we all as knowledgeable as the rabbis? No. Are we all fluent in Hebrew or observing every law? No, but don’t count us out. We find each other.” She gestured around the room first at the old man, then at the forty-something, and finally toward the gays. “When Lenny was feeling unsure how to save his marriage, Harriet talked it through with him. She even went to the library and borrowed some book on the heart and soul of the Jewish couple. When Jen had the flu real bad last spring, I delivered her the best matzo ball soup – my personal recipe of course – and read my favorite prayers at her bedside. When Michael and Yaakov got married, we hosted dinner here and sang to the ceiling with joy. It was in about 12 different keys, but we offered our good wishes and our unsolicited advice, nonetheless. These people – the ups and downs of their lives are my responsibility. I definitely don’t know everything, but I don’t have to. The whole village keeps it alive. So yeah, there’s still people that want to make something of it here.”

Hearing Eileen, I thought back to my fraternity days. Between the keg stands and the anything but clothes parties, those guys and I shared some wild times and some real heart. We helped each other get through. Is that what it means to be a Jew? I pictured these golden girls streaking down Broadway so they could “rush JCC.” I shuttered. Could there be a more disturbing image?

Eileen went on to explain that she started the book club because she wanted to find more ways for the community to explore identity. “What you call a relatable pervert, I call a jumping off point for a deep discussion. Sometimes, we read Roth. Sometimes, it’s Sephardic poetry, Yiddish folktales, or the New Wave of Israelis. It’s all part of us – our people’s response to ‘What the hell are we doing here and what does it mean to be alive?’ We inherit it all and try to make sense of it for this time and place.”

Rafi crossed his arms, unable to formulate a rebuttal. Eileen winked at Elliott. As far as I was concerned, she had locked down the case. As the defense rested, the club deliberated about next month's selection. Helen made the case for *Dropped from Heaven*. "I think it'd be good for us to learn from the Indian Jewish experience. We could explore what these Jews did as a community dwindles, evolves, and bridges generational gaps." Wow, I didn't even know there were Jews in India! Perhaps, Elliott will let me tag along again. That is, as long as he promises no more lengthy discussions about Portnoy's penis and the id of Yid.

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Rafi refused to be bested by a septuagenarian. A week later, he emailed me and Elliott out of the blue.

Shalom chevreh,

Meet me at NYPL Main Branch tomorrow at 3. I gotta show you guys something. - R

Elliott and I went more out of curiosity than for anything else. Maybe Rafi wanted to copy an aspect of their security apparatus. Once we reached the library's grand marble lobby, he took us upstairs into the research chambers. Our crevice fit no more than 4 people. Under an early twentieth century brass chandelier, there was a wooden table and chairs and plenty of dust to aggravate my sinuses. Rafi explained that this room was the study space for the Dorot Collection. For over 125 years, archivists have collected thousands of pieces of Jewish history. The table shuddered as Rafi plopped a hefty box. The new evidence was labeled "S. Koufax files" Rafi smirked.

"Here's everything you'd want to know about your Brooklyn boy. Correspondence, telegrams, contracts, interview notes, newspaper clippings, fan mail. Here's a postcard he sent to his parents from summer camp in the Catskills. And the scouting report from the Jew the

Yankees trucked out to recruit Koufax. And a thank you note from Rebbe Moshe Feller – the Hasid who convinced Old Sandy to put on tefillin the day after the Yom Kippur game. If you really want, I can get the box with the basketball he held at the Bensonhurst Jewish Center. Did you know he was 6-feet-2-inches and could dunk? Not bad, not bad at all.”

“Uh...sounds like you’ve really been doing your research, cous...but why?” Elliott asked.

“I just think it’s amazing that the city uses its resources to preserve *our* history and culture. Don’t you think that’s amazing? Wouldn’t you agree with that?” Careful, Elliott. He’s leading the witness.

“I mean, sure. I guess it’s helpful for the rabbis and the historians and what not.”

“It’s good for all of us that the Jewish people’s culture stays alive. You and your old lady friends said as much.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.”

Rafi snapped and pointed his finger, thinking he had us. He began to lecture us that as much as the Dorot Collection tries to keep the Jewish story alive, it’s but a fraction of a percent of what New York City really cares about. “All you need is one mayor who hates the Jews or a shortage in city funds, the whole thing goes kaput. Poof!” he said, opening his fists. He began to grandstand about the National Library of Israel. The staff of the UN Mission attended the opening of the new building. “Picture a Dorot Collection on steroids. Illustrated Esther scrolls from 1617 Italia and a prayer book from 12th century Afghanistan. And then, oh, then, they played a 1959 radio recording of Moshe Willensky’s *Uri Tziyon*. Think about that – an Israeli choir singing a setting by a Polish refugee about a prophet’s ancient charge. ‘Awake, Zion...Shake yourself from the dust!’ And there we were in the fulfillment of that dream. All of

our people's history maintained under one roof. Protected, funded, and revived by our people to keep the story going. The Jewish people able to live in our homeland with strength and courage once again."

What a weird stunt. The Library sounds fascinating – don't get me wrong, and I was dying to dive into the box in front of us. Why can't you appreciate Koufax *and* Willensky?

Elliott started to laugh uncontrollably. This time, Rafi and I were the ones who exchanged a confused twist of the head. "Home? Everyone seems to want to tell me where home is. You say it's Israel – a homeland I've never visited. Last time I checked, I don't feel super safe living somewhere with a history of bus bombings. And how's your government going to feel about my non-Jewish wife? Are they gonna treat her like they'd treat our Arab neighbor? I sure hope not. Because if they drag him long enough, then we'd need to send our future kids to die in another one of my 'safe' homeland's deadly wars. Last time I checked, not super safe."

Elliott paced from one side of the room to the other. No one dared interrupt him. "The Neo-Nazis write 'Go back to Poland' – a place I've also never been to. My parents were New Yorkers. My grandparents were New Yorkers. Home is going to Showtime at the Apollo, singing Sinatra with the bleacher creatures after a Yankees' win, and burning the roof of my mouth on a greasy slice. It's getting a bunch of different people together and sharing what makes us great. My neighbors are the Upper West Side *bubbes* and the Dominicans at the bodega. I like living with all of them. In this beautiful mess that could end up being the greatest democratic experiment in the history of humanity. This is my home! Let me be part of this mess! Stop telling me otherwise!"

If I were preparing Elliott for the LSAT, I'd point out he had just walked right into a classic straw man trap. Son, think about the millions of Israelis who aren't blown up every day.

It's not *always* bad over there. And then the classic confirmation bias – you're only thinking of the good in America. We got 400+ years of fucked up history. This wasn't the LSAT, though. Elliott was speaking his truth.

My phone rang. It was the cops. After three months there had been no movement on our case. An investigator was going to work on it for up to a year, but the best chance of finding a perp like this one was to wait and see if he struck somewhere else. When I delivered the news to the cousins, they immediately bickered. Rafi started with an "I told you so," but the conversation devolved so quickly that I barely remember it. I thought about Rafi atop the ladder. "Elliott's part of the family. We gotta look out for each other." Crosstalk of living in perpetual hell, fear, and delusion went back and forth for more than 45 minutes.

Finally, the prosecution and the defense took their seats. Sometimes, you wrack up all the hours and tear each other down. After it all, you wished that you reached a compromise settlement outside of court.

Story 6: Testing Mimi's Law

Thank you for meeting me again, Rabbi Adam. After what happened last week, I need to talk to you. I just don't understand this world anymore.

As you know, last Monday was sunny and 85 degrees. 77% humidity – in May! Perfect conditions for Mr. Hollander to ruin with one of his futile tasks. It was supposed to be a 20-minute ride on the D, but of course, my transfer was delayed at Herald Square, leaving me to *schvitz* on the platform. My hair puffed to full frizz. Poor Mimi, always forced to *shlep* around town while Mr. Hollander twiddled his thumbs.

"Mimi, would you be a dear. Go to Gramercy and check out that memorial ceremony?" No, Mr. Hollander. Why don't you get off your *tuches* and do it yourself? I took a deep breath. 10 more days until retirement, Mimi. Picture Poker night with the gals. Hear the hum of the crickets over the lake. Almost there, Mimi.

You may remember our disaster of a meeting with Tevye's relatives – the one that yielded *bupkes*. The only kernel of wisdom they offered was that once a year dozens of people flock to synagogue and pretend that Yiddish culture didn't die along with the famous dairyman.

"Take thorough notes, Mimi. You never know what's going to be the Tony-winning secret sauce!" Whatever you say, boss. I'd keep a detailed log of all the people butchering "If I Were A Rich Man" ...not like you'd ever read my notes anyways. Bottom line: if Hollander was going to send me out on a useless errand, I was going to find a way to make it worth my while, and there was one given upon which I could rely. Any time you gathered enough Jews together there was sure to be some amusing chaos. I usually avoided that kind of noise, but sometimes, it was entertaining in that trashy way you can't help but revel in it. Like one of those reality shows on Bravo where they poured the martinis in each other's faces. The trick was knowing where to

light the spark and ignite the whole powder keg. Fortunately, I happened to know four petty cousins full of fuel.

I stepped into the sanctuary. The sun gleamed against the hand-carved wood. The brown shined like cocoa butter and the yellow like soft wheat. The Hebrew letters hanging above the *bima* shimmered in the light. Wow, these Jews had made something quite beautiful here.

My second of bliss disappeared, however, when the *Fiddler* fans flooded into the room. Filling every seat in the balcony, they began belting out the tunes. A blend of English and Yiddish versions of “Matchmaker, Matchmaker” rang from the heavens. Their crooning and chit-chat bombarded my ears.

The scene downstairs seemed more orderly. Every branch of the family tree had claimed a section. To my left, long-bearded men occupied several rows. Behind them laid a rod with curtains – a makeshift *mechitza* drawn for now – with their wig-clad wives. Dozens of children played freeze tag nearby. To my right, most of the ladies were wearing jeans or sundresses that didn’t even reach the knee (a *shonda* to some in the room, I’m sure). In one far corner, I saw a freckled woman with purple hair and a rainbow kippah, and in the other, a dark-skinned, bald gentleman with a thick mustache and a knit skullcap. The whole thing reminded me of when my grandson Danny eats Starbursts. All the varied flavors laid out and visible...and yet dutifully set apart.

Only one foursome broke the mold. Wait a minute, I thought, I recognized those rugged shoulders and deep dimples. That was the hot and hot-tempered Israeli one. Oh, and there was Miss Attitude with her unchanged buzzcut. There was the Hasid in his black gabardine suit, sweltering heat, be damned; he seemed as dry as a bone. The notably *kippah*-less guy to his side wore a much more expensive blazer, sweating up a storm. I could hardly believe it. All four of

them sat together in the third row, and greeted each other tenderly. How were they not at each other's throats?

I sauntered into the pew behind them. "Oh, fancy meeting you four in one place *and* in one piece."

"Hello, Mimi! Great to see you!" Menachem grinned from ear to ear.

"Thanks again for bringing us together. It was a rough start, but we really owe you one," Rafi continued. "It's like Menachem's always saying...family's our greatest blessing."

"*Baruch Hashem!*" the other three chimed in unison.

"Speaking of, Ruth told me that Naomi is pregnant again! Hopefully, Hashem will give you a powerful baby girl this time," the one named Lily said.

"She'll be powerful if Uncle Rafi has anything to do with it," the handsome Israeli added.

"I had no idea, Menny. That's wonderful news. Mary and I'll have to send over a gift when we're back at the house."

"That's very sweet, Elliott. But if you don't mind, us Hasidim, we try not to tempt fate until Hashem actually delivers His precious gift into our arms," Menachem said warily.

"Right, right. I'll wait until the baby is born. Then, brace yourself for the tsunami of presents coming your way," Elliott replied.

"As you wish. So generous," Menachem patted him on the back.

Laughter? Pleasantries? Who were these people? Whatever superdrug they had taken, I wanted a double-dose.

The ceremony began with two of Tevye's oldest surviving relatives. You knew they were old if someone who has more doctors than fingers was saying as much. The 90-something hobbled to the microphone and said in a gravelly voice, "Good afternoon, everyone. As we have

for 110 years, we set our purpose today by following the instructions of our dear *alta-zeyde*. As Tevye wrote himself, ‘Every year on my *yahrzeit*, my remaining sons and sons-in-law, if they are so minded, should say Kaddish... And if they do not wish to do this, or if they have no time for it, or if it be against their religious convictions, they can be absolved only if they all come together with my daughters and my grandchildren and with good friends, and read this will and retell my stories, the really joyous ones, say them aloud in whatever language they understand best...My children and children's children can have whatever religious convictions they will. But I beg of them to guard their Jewish descent.’” The four cousins smiled at each other, offering nods of agreement.

The humid air condensed on my cheeks. I wondered: was there going to be any drama to make this afternoon less unbearable? This atmosphere of thick sticky togetherness and kindness simply wouldn’t do. No worries, leave it to Mimi to stir the pot. What can go wrong, will go wrong! The emcee finished her speech, and announced that the retelling four of Tevye’s stories as preserved by the family over the years – the first in Yiddish and the subsequent three in in English. Okay, here was an opening. I just needed to play my cards right.

“*Es iz geven arum Shavuos...*” they began.

I tapped Rafi’s meaty deltoid and then whispered. “Actually, Rafi, I could use your opinion on something. This sounds kind of like a garbled mess, don’t you think?” I felt Mama turn over in her grave, as I recalled how my uncles would argue for hours at our summer barbecues about whether Yiddish was the poetry of the proletariat or the language of languish. Hebrew, one uncle remarked, bound Jewish memory throughout the lands, and its revival was the key to future unity and strength. I figured stoking the Israeli stud’s linguistic pride might get him going.

I poured more fuel on the fire. “When will they realize that Yiddish is for the Old Country? Washed up! Done! Hebrew is our past, present, and future all in one. Wouldn’t it be nice to listen to the true tongue of the Jewish people? Why should we retell the story of the family hero in the language of the weak?”

“Sure, Hebrew is timeless, strong, unifying...But the Jews speak Yiddish too. And whatever else they speak in *hutz l’arretz*—Ladino. French, Arabic, English, Marathi, you name it,” Rafi replied, taking me aback. Why was he being so ecumenical?

“But Hebrew is the language of the hope of 2000 years fulfilled in our ancient land!” I tried to paraphrase the Hadassah postcards I was constantly receiving in the mail. Problem is, I don’t usually study them much, tossing them into the recycling bin.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Rafi says. “I love Hebrew. I love Israel. But not every Jew is a Hebrew-speaking Israeli. Take Elliott here. He’s a proud *New Yorker*.”

“But what if he were to stop surrounding himself with the *goyim*?” I countered. “What if he were to shake off the dust and joined the ‘greatest startup nation the world has ever seen?’” I swallowed my hypocrisy, trying to crack Rafi’s defenses, trying to stir up some real drama along the way.

“We had all that out a few months ago. No matter what I say, the dude likes who he is where he is.”

“But why give up? Why not convince him that you’re right,” I insisted.

“No point to that kind of pissing contest,” he said. “Last time around, didn’t talk to him for two months. Plus, he can be really helpful, you know. My neighbor’s dog was pooping on my stoop. Every morning - ridiculous! I wanted to bring the dog to the pound. I was all ready to show ’em who’s boss, but here’s the strangest thing – I started hearing Elliott’s voice in my

head. He's telling me I'm being too rough around the edges. It's not all about me. He says, 'Talk to the neighbor, work out your concerns, even enjoy the little furball.' And that was just with the imaginary Elliott. Don't tell him this, but I even laugh at his jokes sometimes. If the choice is take him or leave him, I take him. I'd miss the guy if he got sick of me and somehow wanted out."

"Fine," I said.

I blew away a drop of sweat in the nick of time, right before it splashed into my eye. As the million-year-old emcee introduced the next act, 8 yeshiva men stepped forward. One of them started wailing on the clarinet, and the others burst into a spirited romp. The whole room rose to their feet, dancing to the klezmer rhythms. I immediately rummaged through my bag. Of course, today of all days, I was out of aspirin. I stared ahead desperately, waiting for the raucous revelry to end.

Each member of the troupe seemed to me like carbon copies of one another. They were all wearing the same wrinkled blazer, ill-fitting slacks, and – oh, wait what is this? – red *kippot*. I squinted to read what was sewn on the edge. Oh boy, my suspicions were confirmed. A dose of Trumpism surely must have ruffled our resident radical's feathers. With the start of the next story, I began my prodding, tapping Lily.

"Those boys had pretty interesting headwear, don't you think? It must have taken their wives hours to hand embroider Make America Great Again," I said.

"It's certainly not something I could do," she replied, surprisingly demure.

"Doesn't it make you mad? Aren't you going to do anything about it? Get on up there! Take a stand for justice!" I nudged my elbow.

“Trust me, I’m livid as all hell, and...*Lakol zman va’eit. Eit likroa’ ve’eit litpor eit lachashot ve’eit ledabber.* – for everything, you have to find the right time, place, and manner. Sometimes, you speak and sometimes, you listen. Menachem taught me that. Opposing my *alte-zeyde*’s will isn’t going to change their hearts and minds.”

“So, you’re just going to let business carry on as usual?” I couldn’t believe my ears. Was this the same live wire who threw a hissy fit in my conference room?

“Let’s say I get up there and call them fascist, racist, misogynist pigs. Tell them I can’t believe they can sit in the shadow of the Holocaust and elect an American Hitler. It’s just not how we get to a repaired world.”

“Come on, they’re evil people.”

“Whether I want it or not, they’re still part of the family. Maybe there’s something we share and can start to work out. You should have been at *Pesach* this year. Naomi thought we were never going to eat. Oh God, the way Menachem and I went back and forth trying to define the legacy of the exodus.”

“So, you screamed at each other around the seder table instead of in my conference room?”

“Screaming, no. Passionate, yes? Oh definitely. I had my HIAS Haggadah and my rabbinic commentary in hand ready to make the case. History and religion and culture and philosophy thrown into the beaker, and from these elements, we catalyzed a new reaction. Even when we disagreed, we were still lab partners. A couple Jews trying to figure out together what this festival of freedom means in our messed-up world.”

“Great, Menachem’s menschy and gives you the time of day. Do you think these tap-dancing MAGA men are going to offer you the same? Think again, sister.” I continued to press.

Hearing his name, Menachem turned around and joined the conversation. “Actually, we decided to prepare a *shiur* together. I’m going to teach it at 770 on Shavuot. Are the men at Chabad headquarters willing to hear the message from Lily? No. It’s too bad. No one explains Rashi’s take on *Shemos* 23 better than she does.

Now, Lily chimed, “But can Menachem get the message in there and move some folks? Maybe. We won’t know until we try. It’s some kickass Torah, so I’m excited to see what happens.”

“Oh...isn’t that terrific,” I said with feigned enthusiasm.

Come on, Mimi, think. What was the loose thread that made them unravel last time around? And then it happened, as if God decided to answer my prayers for the first time. A message literally fell from above. One of the *Fiddler* fans in the balcony whistled and waved. He wore one of those black and white scarves I see all the kids with on the subway, and one long dangling earring. Raising his fist, he unfurled a long canvas banner. “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!”

What did this have to do with anything? The speakers looked as dumbstruck as I was. The emcee wiped her lenses, and the middle-aged fellow stopped mid-story with his mouth agape. People rustled in their seats, and indistinct, concerned murmur rose from each pocket of the room. Lily whispered something to Rafi, and each of them stood. Was there something too fiery for indoor voices?

Rafi pointed to the staircase, and they climbed upward. With my weak knees, I opted to stay put and watched from down below. For about five minutes, I couldn’t hear a thing. There was no yelling, no eye rolls. Dangly earring shook both their hands and rolled up the banner. Upon their descent, the cousins exchanged pleasant chit-chat.

“What happened up there?” I asked earnestly.

“I thought you’d be happy, Mimi. Israel found her way into the room,” Rafi laughed.

“And as too often happens, we could tell things weren’t going to be pretty,” Lily said.

“We decided to tag team this one. I explained that I know the Palestinians are suffering badly, and it’s hard when the room seems ignorant or indifferent toward this hardship. I thanked him for seeing their pain. Tag in Lily.” Rafi said.

“I told him I was 100% on board for the cause of liberation, and I love a disruptive action. You know what else I love? Strategy. Did he have any follow up plan for his action? Nope! Did he think about how targeting a multi-generationally traumatized room with the most charged symbols of the struggle isn’t going to change the fact? How it might even make it harder for this family to have a real conversation about it,” Lily explained.

“He’s joining us for dessert next Wednesday. We’ll get out all the feelings. Maybe, we can figure out a smarter way to approach the mess.”

“You’re kidding. You two see eye to eye on this now?”

“Far from it, but what good was sticking to our own blinding truth? Were we any closer to security and peace for the Jews? I know she wants that too.”

“Ahem, she also wants security and peace for the Palestinians,” Lily interjected. “He’s come a long way, though. He gets what I mean by genocide.”

“*Ichs* – a disgusting and insulting word,” Rafi took a prolonged breath. “But, I now recognize Lily has a good heart...in her own feisty way. She tries to hold my pain, panic, and pride alongside her, ehm, passion. Still, if it gets too spicy, we find a way to agree to disagree, for now. Put on some vinyl and take a chill pill.”

“Last time we couldn’t agree about the status of Jerusalem, I introduced him to the Indigo Girls.”

“And they aren’t that bad! And Mimi, I’m telling you neither is she. Be a little thoughtful, a little kind, and a little...maybe a lot...challenging of each other, and we figure out what Lily-Rafi blend brings us closer to where we want to be.”

“He’s even looking into how to support the reconstruction of Gaza at the UN.”

“I’m moving it through committee this week. That is, if Lily keeps her promise to visit my kibbutz. See the beautiful place and beautiful people. Hold their concerns in her heart,” Rafi explained.

“Sure, sure. Listen to them, hear their stories, and convince them to also consider Palestinian lives in their vision for the future.”

“Just don’t forget steps one and two,” Rafi lightly elbowed Lily, moving into a hug. Were they kidding? We were sitting on the third rail with barely a spark.

As I returned to my seat, Elliott and Menachem approached the lectern. Apparently, they had contacted the organizers in advance and had volunteered to craft this year’s Kaddish moment. Oh goody. Ladies and gentlemen, now introducing toothpaste and orange juice – hope everyone enjoys the minty, tangy mess. Without missing a beat, Elliott slipped off his pressed jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and grabbed the cantor’s acoustic guitar. A folksy diddly began to echo across the room. Enter his gentle tenor voice:

*Saying kaddish in the shul
Fumbling words like a fool
What is right?
Where’s the light?*

*Yitgadal, v’yitkadash
To me, God’s all a wash*

*When I'm bright
And when I'm blue
In these words, I'll find you*

*Increase, be holy, guess I'll try
Live out your blessings 'til I die
You are my light*

*Ignite me day by day
With you, I'll work and play
Searching, even pray...
We are your light
We are your light*

He went into a swinging riff, and the crowd swayed and clapped to the rhythm. By the end of it, I was even bopping my head. Dear God, was this Gramercy Park or a Catskills bungalow? After the last refrain, Elliott attempted to explain this madness:

“I was pretty lost without my mother. One night after minyan, I sat around Menny’s kitchen table. I told him even when I read the translation of the Kaddish, the words didn’t mean anything to me. All he said was give it some time. Keep going. Dig deep. Then, he asked me if I wanted to tuck his kids into bed. My wife and I have been trying for our own little one. I figured it was good Dad practice. I’m up there, and I’m reading from their collection of folktales. It says that God’s candle is the soul of man. Every person is a light, and through what we do every day, we make the world a bit brighter. Like passing one candle to the next, we can keep this flame going, even when the wick burns all the way out. A kid’s book! Can you believe it? The God thing wasn’t going to work for me, but I saw now that energy could be in my mom and in me. I put it in my own words, and it all came together. It really helped then, and it still helps now. I hope you can take time, keep going, dig deeper, and maybe do the same. May these words keep the flame of my mom and of Tevye alight in our souls.”

Elliott smiled, and Menachem began the recitation. When they took their seats, I tapped the wannabe Woody Guthrie. “What’s happened to you? We both know that this is nonsense.”

“You can go your whole life thinking Judaism is this one thing, and it’s not for me,” he said, looking directly at me. “You can choose to walk alone. You can cast aside your culture. But what tools does that give you to face our big, scary world?”

“Sure, culture is great. But what about all the religious BS?”

“What’s a zebra without its stripes? It’s hard to throw away the religious stuff and be left with much else. I decided not to be such a hater. I still don’t talk to God. I don’t do anything because God, some rabbi, or anyone but me says so. I’m just soft enough to consider if the religious stuff has any value. I’ll explore what we got and see if it makes all this chaos of life and death make a little more sense. And if I want to take it on, I’ll do it my way,” he pointed to the guitar.

“But, but, but you hated this stuff. You said it was backwards.”

“What can I say? Maybe it’s not all bad,” he winked.

I buzzed my lips in a huff. I massaged my temples, too. I hadn’t felt this perplexed since remedial algebra at Madison High. The closing song faded into boisterous farewells. Finally, it’s over. Around me people braced to re-enter the late spring heat. My wrinkles weighed down my forehead. It just made no sense. It felt so *staged*. Wait a minute! I chased the foursome onto the sidewalk.

“No, no, no, no!” I snapped. “I’m on to you. This is a farce! You’re just pretending to get along. You got together. Yes, that’s it. Embarrassed that you acted like a bunch of children.

Well, the jig is up. I know this family is dead.”

“Sorry, ma’am, but we had no idea you were going to be here,” Rafi added. Does he really have to call me *ma’am*? Even if this family might not be dead, rest assured, my chances of appealing to a young stud certainly are.

“And what if I don’t believe you?” I quickly replied.

“Sometimes, I don’t believe it either. Guess we just didn’t give up on each other,” Elliott said.

“Family are the friends you don’t like,” Lily smiled. “You’re stuck with them, and every once in a while, they’re good for something.”

You were four boulders rolling down the hill. Picking up speed and crashing. Now, everything’s fine? It’s not how it works,” I refused to acquiesce.

“*Barzel bevarzel yachad ve’ish yachad penei-re’ehu* – iron strikes iron and so too, we sharpen each other’s face,” Menachem said. “Certainly, we crash all the time. Sometimes, we end up rolling stronger together. Sometimes, we roll apart. We just try not to crumble altogether.”

“Call it antagonistic co-operation,” Lily added.

“No, that’s not how this works.” My investigative instinct kicked into gear. “Witnesses! I need witnesses!” They looked at each other with bewilderment, but I hounded for the truth. I demanded a list of people who can report to me the facts. The gang of liars huddled together and came up with a list of names and numbers – a roommate, a wife, a restaurant owner, and a lawyer. Varied sources to interrogate and break this conspiracy.

“Don’t tell them anything. I want to hear their stories straight up. Then, we’ll see what’s up with this ruse,” I demanded.

“Good luck with that,” Lily said, giving me the Gen-Z side eye, which I know meant she thought I was being ridiculous. She was the ridiculous one! They hugged and mentioned the night after Shavuot. Menachem boasted about his backyard fire pit, and Elliott shared that he already cleared the Hechsher with Naomi for the best cheesecake in town. Rafi even extended me an invitation. They were thrilled about the prospect of everyone getting together again.

On the platform, I peeled back the blouse that was sticking all over to my skin. The air conditioning on the A train provided only slight relief. I hung my head low. Muddling through Times Square station, I stopped for a moment as people streamed by me in every direction. Finally, I made it up to the 8th floor suite. “Let’s hear all about it. Did you find the secret sauce? What’s the good word?” Mr. Hollander said in a chipper voice. I shook my head and told him I’d have my notes prepared in case he wanted to sift through them on his own. Like I said, he probably wouldn’t. I looked out at the sunset over the Hudson, and, sighing, back to my monitor. I began typing away.

A week went by, during which I took each of the four witnesses out to lunch. I couldn’t believe it, at first. Each of them shared a story, which I taped on my recorder. I then transcribed every word, and sent them to you. Did you have a chance to peruse them? Mary told me about how she saw her husband cry for the first time observing *yahrzeit*. Great, anyone could buy a candle! Patrick said that Elliott and Rafi litigated the case, but they eventually accepted what the other could offer. I figured that within 2 months they’d return to the silent treatment. Ruth described her Shabbatot with Menachem and Naomi as “life-changing.” Well, everything felt like that if enough whiskey was involved. Mousaleh mentioned he looks forward to Wednesday evenings, always certain he’ll learn something new. Did he think he deserved the Nobel Prize? I certainly didn’t think so.

But ever since we left that restaurant, I've been wracking my brain. I always look for the fresh take, and here's a funny thing, Rabbi. Is it okay if I share with you?

You might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. Except, no, the melody isn't so simple. And it's not always pleasant. And it's not every *one* of us. And no *one* good word – not even tradition! – is going to bring the perfect balance. We all take the music and play, and it's harmony and it's dissonance. Practice, time, diligence, craft. The ensemble comes together, and maybe, in a fleeting moment, the music rings out creative unity. An eternal, evolving symphony.

I beg of you. Tell me. Does old Mimi pick up her bow?

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