“The Identity of Commemorative Music”
Kirsten Paige

“Textual Intercourse”
Hannah Spiro

“The Reconstructed American Jew”
Jeremy Rozansky

“Toward a Constructive Tisha B’Av”
Michael Lipkowitz

Symposium: Jewish Chosenness in the Contemporary World
Doni Bloomfield
Chana Messinger
Ethan Schwartz
Zev Hurwich
Dory Fox
Jonathan Nathan

“The Tourist Police”
Dory Fox

“Something Like Home”
Zachary Conn

Translation of “Gods Come and Go, the Prayers Remain Forever” by Yehuda Amichai
Etan Heller
**Mission Statement**

*Makom* aims to provide undergraduates from the University of Chicago and elsewhere with a forum for serious intellectual engagement with Jewish topics. Targeted specifically at undergraduates and drawing upon the Chicago Center for Jewish Studies, *Makom* seeks to create a space that is serious enough to stimulate genuine and fulfilling discourse while comfortable enough to encourage undergraduates to take risks in their thinking and writing about Jewish issues. Of particular relevance are Jewish students who want to engage with their Jewishness in a more intellectual way, and students of all backgrounds who are interested in Jewish studies but whose primary academic focus is in a different area. For the former, *Makom* offers a space in which the intellectual life that is characteristic of the University can be applied specifically to exploring Jewish identity, and for the latter, a space in which they can safely investigate their academic interests in Jewish studies. Ultimately, *Makom* strives to cultivate a rich undergraduate discourse on Jewish topics, to connect undergraduates with the Center for Jewish Studies, and to contribute to both the academic and Jewish communities of the University of Chicago.

**Editorial Policy**

*Makom* encourages submissions from undergraduate students interested in Jewish studies in the form of essays, articles, reviews, works of art, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor. Submissions will be accepted and published on the basis of their relevance to *Makom*’s mission statement, space available, and on their intellectual and creative merit. However, *Makom* reserves the right to decline to publish submissions based on the discretion of the editors, and to edit any material submitted for publication for spelling, grammar, length, and both legal and professional standards of journalistic integrity. No anonymous submissions will be published.

**Commitment to Intellectual Diversity**

*Makom* is dedicated to appropriately representing undergraduates’ diversity of views on Jewish issues. Our commitment is to serious intellectual engagement with Judaism and Jewishness, not to any specific stances that such engagement may take. As such, the opinions articulated herein are to be understood as solely those of the authors, and not necessarily reflective of the *Makom* editorial board.
# Table of Contents

The University of Chicago’s Undergraduate Journal of Jewish Thought  
January 2012 / Tevet 5772, Issue No. 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Letter from the Editor-in-Chief</td>
<td>Ethan Schwartz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Identity of Commemorative Music: Holocaust Repertoire within the Western Canon</td>
<td>Kirsten Paige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Textual Intercourse: Exploring the Sexual Laws of the Torah</td>
<td>Hannah Spiro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The Reconstructed American Jew: Mordecai Kaplan’s Enduring Influence</td>
<td>Jeremy Rozansky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Toward a Constructive Tisha B’Av: Rethinking the Saddest Day of the Jewish Year</td>
<td>Michael Lipkowitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Symposium: Jewish Chosenness and the Contemporary World</td>
<td>Doni Bloomfield, Chana Messinger, Ethan Schwartz, Zev Hurwich, Dory Fox, Jonathan Nathan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>The Tourist Police</td>
<td>Dory Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Something Like Home</td>
<td>Zachary Conn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Yehuda Amichai’s “Gods Come and Go, the Prayers Remain Forever”</td>
<td>An original translation from the Hebrew</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Ethan Schwartz

It has only been a few months since one University of Chicago undergraduate posted on Facebook regarding his desire to write an article concerning a Jewish issue with which he had been wrestling. “Do you know if there’s a place where I could write something like that?” he asked. The answer, as you might imagine, is the very publication you are reading now.

Indeed, it seems rather fitting that *Makom* should trace its origins to the Internet—and not just because of the centrality of electronic social media in all young-adult interaction, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. One of the fascinating (some might say frightening) things about the Internet is the way in which it has become a veritable *place* without really “existing” at all. Of course, the Internet *exists*, but when we say that something happens “on” the Internet, it is surprisingly difficult to explain precisely what we mean. *Where* is the Internet? The technical explanation simply does suffice. As a Millennial, some of the most important moments of my social life have occurred “on” the Internet, and I am decidedly unwilling to say that those moments ultimately resolve into zeros and ones. No, the Internet has become an actual *place*—one to which we all travel, and one, thanks to smartphones, that we increasingly take with us wherever we go in the “real world,” whatever that means anymore.

In this place, the idea for *Makom* was born—and “*makom*,” as it turns out, means “place” or “space.” As we went about shaping this publication and eventually reached the point of having to name it, we reviewed everything we had written—every drafted proposal and mission statement and outreach email—and realized that the concept of creating a “place” or “space” for serious intellectual engagement with Jewish issues was very much at the core of what we were trying to accomplish; thus, the word “*makom*” (we were committed to having a Hebrew title) seemed fitting. Yet a reflection on the bewilderingly non-spatial character of the place in which the idea for *Makom* originated highlights what appears to be an irony in the appellation: like the Internet, *Makom* is properly no place or space at all. Sure, there are physical pages that have some volume in the three-dimensional world, but saying specifically “what” *Makom* is or “where” the ideas presented herein are actually located is not much easier than talking about the Internet. There was no need for any of the individuals involved in this production ever to be in the same space; indeed, a large amount of the preparation was done—you guessed it—online.

A tension regarding the notion of space might seem a ridiculous concern for a college student starting a magazine (though you would completely understand it if you knew the first thing about U of C students), but I think that this tension is very
much a preoccupation of the tradition with which Makom seeks to engage. Judaism, I would contend, shares this concern. The sanctity of space in Judaism is tied to the activities that occur therein, not to any inherent quality of the space itself. Our very word “makom” is often utilized to express the way in which a space can be transformed through action: makom tefilah (space of prayer), for instance, or makom torah (space of Torah learning). Any space—any classroom, apartment, or campground—can become a makom tefilah or makom torah by virtue of the sacred activity that it hosts. But the moment that this activity ceases, the space reverts to its original profanity, for it is the act, not the space, that sanctifies. This ability or willingness to make almost any space a holy one is one of the geniuses of exilic Judaism; finding themselves in every which corner of the world, Jews were able to continue their sacred enterprise by a profound disregard for the inherent profanity of the place in which they practiced it.

Of course, there is a certain degree of irony or even incoherency in speaking of an exilic community that sees no inherent value in any given place, as exile is, by definition, a spatial orientation. Is there any people in history that has more clung to its acute, heartrending sense of spatial dislocation than the people Israel? Any analysis of the Jewish value of space surely must take into account the importance that the Jewish people places on its land—and next to this, the willingness to create a makom tefilah out of any old place surely pales. Indeed, one might well say that Jews are thus willing simply because every other place on earth has been leveled in comparison to the Eretz Yisrael for which they yearn. Suddenly, it seems as though Judaism’s characteristic disinterest in space is merely the superficial result of an unthinkably deep-seated obsession with one space in particular.

To sit here and argue that Judaism does not place very much importance on space would figure to be especially chutzpahdik right now, for as I write these words, we are in the midst of reading Sefer Devarim (Deuteronomy) in the weekly recitation of the Torah. Devarim is utterly concerned with Eretz Yisrael—with space. The book’s very opening provides a spatial orientation, situating the action “b’ever ha-Yarden—on the other side of the Jordan.”1 Everything is presented “so that you may live to enter and take possession [verishtem] of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving to you.”2 I challenge you to count the number of times that this verb, “yarash”—generally rendered as “possess”—appears in Devarim. It is staggeringly frequent. This emphasis on taking possession is indicative of Devarim’s focus on the land, which Israel is finally about to enter as they wait eagerly just across the Jordan. The buildup has lasted for the forty long years in the wilderness—nay, if Rashi is to be believed, it has lasted for the thousands of years since Creation.3

And then, something remarkable happens—or rather, doesn’t happen: Israel does not “take possession” of the land. Torah is given, Joshua is appointed the new leader,
Moses dies—and that’s it! The Torah just ends! Israel is left b’ever ha-Yarden in a narrative twist so bizarre, so unthinkable, that scholars of biblical criticism have suggested the possibility of a “Hexateuch” that includes the subsequent book of Joshua, in which, indeed, the logical conclusion of conquest and settlement is finally achieved. It is an interesting theory, but it does not address the fact that, for thousands of years, Judaism has continued to hold the Torah as a cohesive, complete literary unit, regardless of how illogical its ending might be.

Before Moses proclaims his famous poem in Deut. 32, Ha’azinu (“give ear”), he says of Israel, “This poem shall answer them as a witness, for it will never be forgotten from the mouths of their offspring.”4 Fittingly, then, one answer to the dilemma posed by Devarim’s seemingly premature conclusion comes in a Deuteronomic verse that is one of the first learned by the Jewish child: “Torah tzivah lanu Moshe; morashah kehilat Ya’akov—T orah was commanded to us by Moses; the possession of the congregation of Jacob.”5 Even if you do not know Hebrew, you might have noticed in the translation why I find this verse to be nothing short of radical. “Morashah” (“possession”) comes from the verb “yarash”—the selfsame verb that Devarim uses repeatedly to refer to Israel’s possession of the land. Suddenly, the “possession” in question has changed from Eretz Yisrael to T orah—just in time for Devarim to end without the land actually being possessed. After an entire book of using “yarash” with respect to land, Devarim ends with the morashah of T orah, which, indeed, is the final time the word is addressed to all of Israel.

What, then, is the morashah to which we are heirs by responding to the covenantal call of Devarim? It would seem that it is Torah. We, like the Israel of old, are left b’ever ha-Yarden; concluding the annual reading of Sefer Devarim, we do not get the satisfaction of moving on to Joshua’s triumphant conquests but start all over again with Sefer Bereishit (Genesis)—building once again toward a land that, like Moses, we will never enter. The morashah with which we are left is the final morashah of the text—but this does not mean that every previous use of “yarash” was in vain. Devarim is telling us something about the nature of T orah by describing it in terms of landed inheritance: that it is not only something that we possess but somewhere that, like a land, we inhabit. Every time we undertake to live by Torah, we step into a supramundane plane of existence even though we are still very much of the mundane world. Torah, while obviously non-spatial, alters the world and becomes a space—a makom—that we inhabit. And it is by carrying this makom with us that we are able to transform the mundane mekomot of day-to-day life into veritable spaces of holiness. After all, “Ha-makom”—literally, “The Place”—is one of the names of God.

The life of Torah demonstrates that there is a powerful precedent in our tradition for the attempt to create a kind of space that is not spatially bound. Such a space is what we are hoping for in Makom. Of course, we don’t believe that all of the words herein are words of Torah—perhaps none of them are. What we do believe, at the
very least, is that this is a community of serious intellectual engagement with Judaism and Jewishness, and that it can subsist even if its members never actually assemble in one space. By bringing together the thoughts of these different individuals, Makom simultaneously creates the space that they will inhabit: the minds of those who will encounter them and respond to them in their thinking. Makom is not an attempt to create an undergraduate discourse on Judaism ex nihilo. This publication exists because we firmly believe that such a discourse is already there and has demanded to be taken seriously; we are, to answer the Facebook post that prompted this venture, merely providing a space for it. For even Torah, which for thousands of years has proven its vitality independent of a specific spatial location, had to be given with the promise thereof. We hope that by promising a makom for this discourse, we will encourage it to deepen and grow.

Notes

1 Deut. 1:1
2 Ibid., 4:1
3 In response to Gen. 1:1, Rashi famously comments that the Torah begins with Creation to legitimize Israel’s possession of the land, as it was given by the Creator of all.
4 Deut. 31:21
5 Ibid., 33:4
“Though we sang as loudly as two small children can sing, who could hear us?”

The children’s chorus of Hans Krása’s 1938 opera Brundibár, originally comprised of small boys living in an orphanage in Prague, posed this question to an audience of their fellow orphans during a set of performances of the opera there in 1942. Silenced by the stunningly systematic nature of the Nazis’ destruction of the Czech Jewish population, who could hear them? The orphans had no answer, and Hans Krása provided them with no solution. Approximately one year after these early performances took place, the opera’s conductor, Rudolf Schächter, was sent to Terezín (or Theresienstadt), the concentration camp in Bohemia where the opera was performed fifty-five times. These words must have resonated with an audience that was silenced, marginalized, and persecuted by the Nazis’ hatred of their heritage and ancestry.

In an effort to make sense of a period in history that defies attempts at sense-making, this essay poses several questions about music that was produced and performed by Jews during the Holocaust: What happens to the repertoire of a people who have been marginalized, like the Czech Jews for whom Brundibár was written? Is the repertoire marginalized from the Western canon, music written by the “masters” of tonal music? Should it constitute its own canon on the basis of the circumstances surrounding the repertoire’s creation? Brundibár and other works composed under similar conditions are very often “ritualized” in performance. That is, they are very often performed in association with organized remembrances of the Holocaust and its victims, thus ritualizing the performance of these works and inextricably enmeshing the music and its historical context. This distinct presentation forces these works to form a canon of their own, a canon separate from the Western canon by the volatile nature of the works’ history and our desire to commemorate this history and memorialize the people it affected.

The larger question that invariably arises, therefore, is whether repertoire written during the Holocaust truly constitutes its own canon, whether this repertoire is part of the Western canon, or whether the two canons are separate in some ways but overlap or intersect. The canon of Holocaust repertoire consists of a set of works that are very often over-ritualized in performance, as many performances of these works are framed as commemorations of the Holocaust and are not performed alongside standard repertoire from the Western canon.

Framing these works in this way inspires the audience to focus heavily on the historical background of these works, not on the musical influences of the composers and the position of these pieces within music in general.
Instead of framing this music exclusively as commemorative repertoire due to the circumstances surrounding its composition, it might be instructive to consider the history of these works in direct dialogue with the music itself and to contextualize the music within the Western canon. Recognizing the place of the Holocaust canon within the Western canon illuminates the ways in which this repertoire represents a unique period of musical and dramatic expression. The point in history during which this repertoire was composed was a time in which Jews were banned from German cultural life, yet Jewish composers still produced works that contributed to the Western canon in meaningful, provocative, and innovative ways. Perhaps the way to best understand this repertoire would be to recognize the inevitable intersections of the canon of Holocaust repertoire and the Western canon.

One of the principal reasons why the repertoire of the Holocaust canon was meaningful to prisoners who listened to it in the camps was because of the music’s inherent connections to the prisoners’ national and cultural identities, identities that inherently had roots in the repertoire of the Western canon with which the prisoners were familiar. Isolating this canon from the broader Western one only serves to diminish the many musical intersections between the two. Understanding those intersections will help us to better understand the music itself as well as the compositional influences that engendered its genesis.

The music of Hans Krása was influenced by his friend and colleague Alexander Zemlinsky, as well as by his teacher, Albert Roussel, with whom Krása worked in Berlin in the late 1920s. Krása gained tremendous fame in the 1920s when his works were performed in Prague, Zurich, Paris, and even Boston. His opera *Verlobung im Traum* was performed at the Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague in 1933 under the baton of George Szell and won the Czechoslovak State Prize that very same year. *Verlobung im Traum* has received few performances since the 1930s, and has fallen into relative obscurity, unlike his final surviving work, *Brundibár*, which had been viewed by modern critics as an important commemorative work when considering music written during the Holocaust, thereby limiting the work to existing within the Holocaust canon.

Despite the limitations placed upon *Brundibár* by the circumstances of its creation, Hans Krása’s music is demonstrative of his ties to the Second Viennese School as well as to Roussel and other French composers. Many of the compositional choices Krása made when composing *Brundibár* helps us to recognize the reasons why this work was so meaningful to its original performers and audience members in communicating to them a sense of cultural and national identity. For example, Krása’s use of Yiddish folk melodies can be compared to Mahler’s use of folk melodies in his works. *Brundibár’s* music demonstrates the influence that Richard Wagner’s music must have had on Krása, for Krása wrote separate, joyous motifs for each character and animal, with the protagonists’ motifs effectively overpowering the motifs of the
antagonists. This music represents the composer’s use of Wagner’s leitmotif method, as well as how that method of composition was used in the context of Krása’s opera. The music was so popular in the Theresienstadt camp that the motifs literally accompanied the innocent children as they sang them during their daily lives, just as the motifs accompanied the innocent protagonists of Krása’s opera.

Furthermore, the way in which Krása constructed leitmotifs and the (perhaps intentional) way in which those motifs translated into reality places the concept of leitmotif into a new light. A surviving member of the original Brundibár cast characterized the leitmotifs contained within the music as representing, “…things that didn’t exist in our daily lives except in this children’s opera.” Krása’s characters and the situations in which they existed translated easily into the performers’ lives and the performers identified with the music and Krása’s characters, so it is almost as if the opera’s story, characters, and music were directly reflected in reality. This literal realization of Krása’s leitmotifs is a totally novel and rather melancholy means of understanding the meaning of leitmotif and the life of the people performing Brundibár in Theresienstadt.

Krása’s intertwining of Yiddish folksong into his opera is particularly provocative and meaningful. Krása likely utilized folksong in his Brundibár in order to make the music easier for the original performers to sing, for each of the children performing Brundibár would likely have known these folksongs. Krása’s use of Yiddish folksong is akin to the way in which Gustav Mahler utilized folksong in his own work, for both Krása and Mahler did so in order to acknowledge their homelands and the music of their childhood, as well as to shape their melodies. Furthermore, through an analysis of Brundibár’s melodies, we can become acquainted with the Yiddish songs Czechs were singing in the late 1930s. Krása’s interweaving of folksong with his own work almost makes the two seem artistically homogenous, thereby extending standard twentieth-century Czech repertory to folksong itself.

The canon of Holocaust repertoire can only be completely understood when the intersections between the history of this repertoire and the Western canon are considered and the implications of both canons of repertoire are placed in dialogue with each other. It is, of course, unequivocally evident that a canon of Holocaust repertoire exists and that the ritualization of this music in performance is emotionally important for modern audiences in order that audiences feel that they are respecting Holocaust victims and survivors. Nonetheless, the canon of Holocaust repertoire is inherently situated within the Western canon, for the history of the Holocaust is, naturally, part of the broader history of the West.

A useful case study in understanding the intersection of these two canons is the modern treatment of Brundibár. While Brundibár was originally intended to provide Jewish children living in a Prague orphanage with entertainment as well as with a palpable connection to their cultural identity which many of them witnessed fading
as the Nazis took hold of their country, the work was later performed extensively at
the Theresienstadt camp near Prague after the Nazis had sent most of those involved
with the original production there. The music of Brundibár represented a bond to
the quickly fading cultural identity of its original performers and audiences when
they witnessed performances of this work at Theresienstadt. Brundibár is not only a
constituent of the Holocaust canon by virtue of the circumstances of its composition,
but it is also encompassed within the Western canon because the original audience
and performers valued it based upon the ties it had to their collective musical heri-
tage.

We must understand the ritualization of Brundibár in modern performances in
order to ascertain the position of this work within the Western canon. Today, one
of the most important functions of the Holocaust canon is to transmit the memory
of the Holocaust to generations that did not experience it and help those genera-
tions come to terms with this tragic history. In Germany, works like Brundibár have
gained tremendous importance as conduits of the country’s sensitive and onerous
past and are often ritualized in the process of stimulating discussion about the Ho-
locaust. An apposite case study for helping us to understand the modern conception
of Brundibár is the production of Brundibár that toured Germany in the 1990s. This
touring production opened up discussion among teachers and school-age children
across Germany regarding the Holocaust, Auschwitz, and its meaning in German
history. The organizing body behind the tour, Jeunesse Musicales Deutschland, sug-
gested that it might help quell issues of xenophobia plaguing Germany and act as a
“pedagogical strategy” in fostering understanding among international youth.

In Germany, over one hundred performances of Brundibár took place in 2000,
often with the expressed intention of uniting young people through music and “con-
tributing to understanding among countries.” It is interesting to note that, while
Jewish children sang in the early performances of Brundibár in the 1930s and 40s,
young German children of approximately the same age sing in the modern perform-
ances in Germany. Music and theater are a palpable means for young German
children to try and understand a difficult and explosive part of their country’s history,
as well as for them to try to identify and connect with children of the Holocaust, with
whom they have a shared history. However, important as these non-musical goals
are, the touring production could be faulted for not also seeking to contextualize the
opera within the Western canon.

In a 2003 discussion of an American performance of Brundibár, New York
Times critic Allan Kozinn writes, “Were it not for the circumstances of its earliest
performances, Hans Kráša’s chamber opera Brundibár might have become a pleas-
antly innocuous staple of the children’s repertory.” Kozinn is undoubtedly correct,
for many performances of Brundibár focus on the circumstances of its composition
instead of on its musical merits, influences, the composer’s compositional innova-
tssions, and the intrinsic position the repertoire holds within the Western canon. Of course, there is absolutely nothing wrong with using music as a catalyst for fostering understanding and peace. Nonetheless, the position of Brundibár within the Western canon should not be forgotten or overlooked, for understanding Brundibár’s music and the degree to which it is in dialogue with the Western canon helps us to better understand the circumstances in which it was composed.

As powerful as this repertoire is in memorializing the Holocaust and fostering understanding, this repertoire also holds an often-overlooked position within music in general. One case study that illustrates the potential for a piece from the Holocaust canon to gain recognition as a constituent of the Western canon is Victor Ullman’s 1943 chamber opera, Der Kaiser von Atlantis. Der Kaiser was composed in the Theresienstadt camp, yet it has been performed around the world and lauded for its expressive power and Ullman’s music has gained a place of relative prominence within the Western canon.

Ullman, a student of Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna in the early 1940s, composed in the Theresienstadt camp, just as Brundibár’s Hans Krása did. Like Brundibár, Ullman’s Der Kaiser was performed in Theresienstadt as propaganda to illustrate the livability of the camps to the Red Cross. Furthermore, the subject matter of Der Kaiser demonstrates the triumph of good over evil, just as Krása’s Brundibár does. However, Der Kaiser has risen to fame after the Holocaust’s end as a work of great musical and theatrical value in addition to retaining its position as a commemorative work, while many other works composed under the same circumstances, such as Brundibár, have not. When the Los Angeles Opera programmed Der Kaiser von Atlantis for its 2008-2009 season, critics remarked at conductor James Conlon’s daring choice of repertoire—how, they asked, might an opera like Der Kaiser, a work written during the Holocaust, fit in among the “standard repertory” performed at the Los Angeles Opera? In response to these reactions to his programming choice, Conlon remarked to the New York Times, “I am not a specialty conductor, nor do I want this to be viewed as specialty repertory. This is an integral part of German music. These are not people from outer space. They have the same roots and came out of the same environment as everyone else in their time.”

Notes

3 Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (eds.), Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 191.
5 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Textual Intercourse:
Exploring the Sexual Laws of the Torah

Hannah Spiro

Introduction

Attitudes toward sexual behavior and sexual purity have major impacts on the way we view both people and bodies in our society. One source of these attitudes is classical religious texts. Within Judaism, legal structures and narratives designate appropriate behavior with regards to sexuality and our bodies. The baseline of these legal structures and narratives is in the Torah. As these legal traditions frame traditional practices, traditional practices frame social mores. While these social mores may have begun as traditional Jewish norms, they are now mainstream Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic ethics, and they affect us all. The primary goal of this project is to interpret the Torah’s sexual material with integrity and careful attention to the environment in which it was created, and to determine how it can be useful for our purposes today—if, indeed, it can be.

In order to determine what laws truly mean to say and what narratives were truly meant to convey, one must take into account their author. The three-hundred-year-old thesis called the Documentary Hypothesis holds that the Torah was composed from four distinct sources. We refer to these as J (who referred to God using the Tetragramatton), E (who called God by the name “Elohim”), P (or the Priestly Source), and D (or the Deuteronomist). Their writings were carefully cut-and-pasted into one mostly coherent collection—a common practice in the ancient world, when there was no concept of plagiarism. Today, we know this fascinating literary and legal quilt as the Torah of Moses. In my discussion of the sexual material in the Torah, I have kept these authors closely in mind. J’s concern with women and the intricacies of family life, E’s early priestly concerns, P’s concern with religion as entirely mediated through priests and the Israelites’ separation and distinction from other peoples, and D’s desire to keep these practices organized and centralized were all at the forefront of my mind throughout these pursuits. With these tools under our belts, I invite you to look with me at the Torah’s material on what is sexually appropriate and inappropriate.

Sex with a Menstruating Woman

In traditional Judaism, as prescribed by the rabbis, a man and a woman are not permitted to touch when the woman is menstruating—or for a full week after she has finished. Many Jews who practice this form of “family purity” find it romantic; the couple’s mutual desire increases as the time at which they are permitted to touch approaches, and the night the woman returns from the mikveh (the purifying bath),
she and her husband experience their wedding night all over again. Other Jews who take part in this practice find it tedious, lonely, and demeaning. Many people, Jews and gentiles alike, who do not engage in this behavior see it as strange and degrading—and yet, in our world, menstrual blood is regarded by most men and women as a disgusting substance to be avoided and hidden at all costs.

This attitude has roots in the Torah. Lev. 15:19-24 states that a menstruating woman is impure for seven days, as is anyone or anything that touches her, including the places where she sits. If someone touches an object that she has touched, this person will remain unclean until they bathe and until evening. If a man has sex with her, however, he will also be impure in the sense of the menstruating woman (i.e. he can communicate that impurity to those objects and people he touches), and he must wait seven days before he is pure.

The word *niddah* comes from an Akkadian word for “putting aside, driving out of the community’s sphere.” There is no moral connotation to this word—only in one instance does it apply to someone who has done something wrong—but there certainly is a connotation of recommended avoidance. Also, interestingly enough, the term *niddah*, unlike *tum'ah*, applies only to women in contexts of bodily purity. *Tum'ah*, on the other hand, is a concept used by P to describe two different states: ritual impurity and moral impurity. Moral impurity is the result of acts that P deems to be wrong. By definition, these acts are voluntary. Those who commit these acts defile themselves and their environment, but they are still permitted to engage in ritual activities such as making sacrifices (unless they are put to death or permanently shunned first). In contrast, ritual impurity, which is caused by genital discharge, menstruation, childbirth, sex, scale disease (possibly leprosy), and the dead bodies of humans and non-kosher animals, is largely involuntary and temporary. As long as a ritually impure individual does not try to make sacrifices or engage in other ritual behavior, there is no evidence that these individuals are stigmatized at all in society.

There is, however, a significant exception to this rule: menstruation. Lev. 18:19 says, “Do not come near a woman during her period of *niddah* to uncover her nakedness,” and Lev. 20:18 says, “If a man lies with a woman in her infirmity and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has exposed her blood flow: both of them shall be cut off from among their people.” Her “infirmity” (*davah*), of course, refers to her period. While men are not prohibited from touching a menstruating woman (unlike traditional Orthodox Jews today), they are morally prohibited from having sex with menstruating women or women with abnormal discharge at risk of being expelled from their community. Why is it that menstruation and female discharge get this “special” treatment?

A look at what makes something ritually impure may help us to answer that question. Jacob Milgrom’s popular opinion regarding the common denominator of ritually impure substances is that these materials’ common theme is death. In other
words, scale disease represents the precariousness of life, corpses clearly are pictures of death, and semen and menstrual blood—because of their life-giving properties—symbolize “loss of life” when they leave the body. According to this argument, maybe menstrual blood gets the “special treatment” because, when it appears, it is a direct (as opposed to symbolic) indication that a potential life was not created.

I do not find the “manifestations of death” argument particularly compelling. The act of procreation itself makes participants ritually impure, and what could symbolize life more than procreation and childbirth, which makes the creator of life herself impure? Clearly, those substances that cause ritual impurity are not always “manifestations of death.” It is also not so simple as to say, as some scholars do, that those bodily fluids that cause ritual impurity are those that emanate from the fertility organs or from the nether regions. After all, waste comes from the lower part of our body and was considered impure by some communities around that time—for example, according to the Dead Sea Scrolls Community. But waste does not render one ritually impure in the Torah, and breast milk has the connotation of fertility and sex but does not render one ritually impure either.

I would like to propose that there are two motivations for declaring these bodily emissions ritually impure. First, ejaculation renders a man impure for the day and sex renders participants impure for the day so that sex and religion will remain in two separate domains. One of P’s foremost concerns was distinguishing the Israelites as a people and as a religion from the Canaanites and Egyptians, who had been in control of their environment at one time or another and from whom P and other biblical authors felt a strong need to distance themselves. One major theme in P’s writing regarding the problematic elements of Canaanite and other religions was their alleged ritual sexuality. P constantly references people “whoring” after foreign Gods, and there is evidence that Israelites believed that Canaanite and pagan religious rituals incorporated orgies. P wanted to make sure that the Israelites kept sex and worship separate. If people could have sex or masturbate and then show up at the sanctuary immediately afterwards, what would keep Israelites from inviting prostitutes to their sacrificial banquets? Separation of church and sex, so to speak, is the reasoning behind half of emissions-induced ritual impurity.

The other emissions that cause ritual impurity are those emitted after childbirth, abnormal discharge coming from both male and female genitals, and menstrual blood. I propose that the reasoning behind considering people with these emissions ritually impure is that they were considered to be temporarily unwell. P makes it clear in Lev. 21:18-19 that those with physical “defects” cannot approach the sanctuary. A woman’s situation immediately after childbirth and during her period may have been similar in terms of not feeling one’s best. Childbirth was extremely difficult in this period of history, and even when women survived, one can only imagine the trauma they and their body were likely to have experienced during childbirth and re-
covery. Regarding menstruation, one needs merely to consider the trauma women go through during their periods in non-industrialized areas today. In that light, it is not difficult to imagine the situation of menstruating women during ancient times. Sure enough, P uses the term “infirmity,” or *davah*, to describe menstruating women, the same term used to describe someone who is sick to the point of not wanting to eat, the plagues of Egypt, and someone who is heartsick. Therefore, in the context of P’s other decisions regarding who is eligible to perform ritual activities, it is not surprising that P would also disqualify menstruating women.

The idea of menstruating women, women who have just given birth, and men and women with abnormal discharge as physically unwell is helpful when answering the question of why there is a moral prohibition against having sex with a menstruating woman, but not against contracting any other sort of ritual impurity. I posit that P prohibits men from having sex with menstruating women and women who are to be treated as if they are menstruating (i.e. women with abnormal discharges and women who have recently given birth) so that women would not be made to have sex when they were physically infirm. In this culture, sex was not framed as something that a man and a woman decided to do together but something that a man did to a woman. That is not to say that women were not expected to enjoy sex; it is merely that men were considered the actors and women, the passive receivers of sex.

This idea is evident in the language of sex throughout the Bible. The phrases “[Man] *shachav* im [woman],” “[Man] *shachav* [woman],” “[Man] yad’a [woman],” and “[Man] *lakach* [woman]” (that is, “[Man] lies with [woman],” “[Man] lays [woman],” “[Man] has carnal knowledge of [woman],” and “[Man] takes [woman]”) occur all over the Bible. We only see the phrase “[Woman] lies with [man]” once, in the context of Lot’s daughters having sex with him when he was too drunk to realize what was happening, and we only see the phrase “[Woman] has carnal knowledge of [man]” in Num. 31:17 regarding foreign women who have been captured in battle. The stories of Tamar and of the pharaoh’s wife in Genesis are also examples of women taking sexual initiative. However, the Bible never articulates an example of Israelite women acting as sexual aggressors. Therefore, it would not be outlandish for P to legislate that men could not initiate sex with his sexually passive Israelite woman when she is unwell in her sexual area, whether it be during her menstrual “infirmity,” her post-childbirth physical trauma, or actual genital disease. On the other hand, there would have been no need to prohibit a woman from having sex with a man who had abnormal discharge because, as far as P was concerned, Israelite women did not initiate sex. P believed that it was important to protect women from sex when their bodies could, ostensibly, not healthily handle it. As is characteristic of P, these laws endeavor to assure that everything is perfect: the perfect sanctuary, the perfect priests, the perfect sacrifices, and the perfect sex.

One strange aspect of this legal material is that Lev. 20:18 says that if a man lies
with a woman during her time of davah, or infirmity, and uncovers her blood flow, that both of them “shall be cut off from among their people.” One might understand-ably ask why the author would suggest that a woman be cut off for being acted upon in a hurtful manner. The legal material on bestiality, also used or written by P, sheds some light on this concern. Lev. 20:15-16 states, “If a man has carnal relations with a beast, he shall be put to death, and you shall kill the beast. If a woman approaches any beast to mate with it, you shall kill the woman and the beast; they shall be put to death – their bloodguilt is upon them.” Biblical commentators throughout the ages have asked themselves why the beast should be killed. After all, we do not hold animals up to a moral code as we do other humans; furthermore, in the case of a man having sex with a female animal, the animal cannot consent to sex, so why should it be punished? The case of the menstruating woman is similar. Both decisions are perplexing. Regardless, the fact that P thinks it best to punish a beast when a man has sex with it demonstrates that P’s prescription of punishment for a woman who has been the object of sex at a time when she was unwell does not imply that she was not seen as a “victim” of sorts of the sex itself.

Sex that Takes Advantage of a Vulnerable Person

Many people in the Western world are familiar with the term “onanism”—that is, a polite but derogatory term for masturbation. The story taught to adolescents and adults since the time of Victorian England goes that God killed Onan because Onan masturbated, demonstrating that masturbation is a sin in the eyes of God. Those Victorian preachers simply misread the Bible. In Gen. 38, Onan, Judah’s second of three sons, is faced with the duty of levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was a custom practiced at the time to ensure that a man would have an heir, even if he died without children. If the childless man leaves a widow and a brother, the law of levirate marriage, found in Deut. 25:5-6, tells the brother to marry the widow so that their first child can take the name and inheritance of the deceased brother. When Onan’s older brother Er displeased and was promptly put to death by God, it was Onan’s duty to marry Er’s widow, Tamar; have a baby with her; and allow that baby to be raised with Er’s name and as Er’s heir. Onan decided not to fulfill his levirate duty to Er. Most likely, greed played a part in the decision; not only would Onan need to use his own financial resources to support a child who would not even carry his name, but the child would take Onan’s new place as Judah’s primary heir.

While Onan decided not to fulfill his levirate duty by procreating with Tamar, he did take her to bed with him—but every time they had sex, he would withdraw before his orgasm. Onan used Tamar for sex but refused to provide her with the child that could have potentially supported her in her old age. Furthermore, the text makes it clear that he engaged in such behavior multiple times, and possibly even on a regular basis: “he let [his seed] go to waste whenever he joined with his brother’s wife.”
This observation makes it clear that Onan was not only wronging his deceased brother; he was also wronging Tamar by misleading her into having sex with him over and over again without ever intending to provide her with a child. In case it was not clear that such behavior is wrong, Onan’s wickedness is made explicit by the statement that “what he did was evil in the eyes of the LORD, and He put him to death.”

Judaism has traditionally interpreted the sin of Onan as spilling seed, or ejaculating anywhere other than inside of a vagina. This rabbinic interpretation of Onan’s crime—“threshing within, winnowing without,” according to Rashi—means that, while people can have sexual relations that do not lead to procreation, men cannot ejaculate except in order to procreate. This interpretation is quite fitting with the rabbis’ discomfort with non-procreative sex. Since Onan does actually spill his seed, scholars are more reticent to criticize the rabbinic reading of the text than they are to criticize the Victorian coiners of the term “onanism.” However, the rabbis were just as incorrect. Onan’s sin was not spilling seed that could have been used to procreate. Onan’s sin was taking sexual advantage of a vulnerable person.

Exod. 22:21-23 reads, “You shall not degrade (ta’anah) any widow or orphan. If you do degrade them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to me, and my anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans.” The word ta’anah, sometimes translated “ill-treat” or “abuse,” is similar to the English word “degrade” in that it can refer to generic humbling by abuse and bad treatment, but also has a connotation of “humbling a woman by cohabitation.” While Exod. 22:21-23 clearly frowns upon any sort of mistreatment of widows and orphans, ta’anah has an extra or emphasized connotation of sexual mistreatment, much like the English term “degrade.” Other ancient Near Eastern law codes do not contain any laws against the ill treatment or degradation of widows and orphans. The Code of Hammurabi briefly mentions their protection in its introduction but does not include any legislation providing enforcement, and while the Middle Assyrian laws include significant legislation regarding widows, they do not include any laws regarding the ill treatment of widows. The Hittite Laws come the closest to legislation against the mistreatment or degradation of widows; they include a law that gives a widow the right to disinherit her sons if they do not take proper care of her. This Hittite Law, however, is preventative rather than prohibitive, and it pertains to a widow’s offspring, not to all people who encounter the widow.

The law of Exod. 22:21-23, which prohibits anyone from degrading those who were most vulnerable in Israelite society—widows and orphans—is unique and was put in E’s Covenant Code for a reason. Even if an explicit connection was not the case, Onan’s sexual usage and betrayal of the widow Tamar is certainly the sort of behavior that Exod. 22:21-23 warns against. Thus, I would like to argue that if any legal evidence exists in the Bible to suggest that the sin of Onan should set a legal
precedent, that legal precedent would not involve the spilling of seed, but rather the sexual degradation of those who are vulnerable.

Tamar, a Canaanite woman among a foreign tribe who has just lost a husband and has no children to take care of her when she becomes old, is a perfect example of a person whom one could easily take advantage of sexually. After all, sex and subsequent conception would be the only ostensible thing that could save her from a future of loneliness and poverty. I doubt that the story of Onan is merely or even mostly about procreation and lineage. Er, the man whose death spurred the whole issue, is not exactly a sympathetic character, so the author could not have cared too much, if at all, about Er having an heir. While Judah and his future offspring were central to the J source that authored this text, Judah had a third son (Shela), so Onan’s spilling of his seed would not have been not particularly dooming for Judah’s line.

The issue at stake in the story of Onan is that he takes sexual advantage of Tamar when she is vulnerable. Gen. 38 does not teach us not to masturbate or ejaculate outside of fertile receptacles. Rather, it teaches us not to have selfish sex with people who are in positions of weakness, whether they are in need of social or financial stability (like Tamar and the widows and orphans of Exod. 22:21), are young, or are in a state of emotional vulnerability.

**Conclusion**

These texts were written thousands of years ago, in a monarchic and theocratic environment. Living in times of intricate religious ritual necessary to keep priests in business and a level of self-sufficiency that required complex family law, ancient Israelite lawmakers had to negotiate intuitive sexual values with the realities of their lives. As a result, it is unsurprising that many of their attitudes and assumptions, such as the subjugation of women, do not fit with contemporary knowledge. In many ways, though, the Torah’s authors were ahead of many people of our time who claim to desire to live by it. Instead of prohibiting such actions as purely recreational, non-procreative sex, these lawmakers concerned themselves with actual issues, such as protecting the physical and economic health of the weaker members of society. Some of the Torah’s concerns are simply no longer valid in our society today. Yet, the underlying values of respecting others and the religious realm, and maintaining a healthy and functional family still ring true. Such values are what we can take away from the Torah’s sexual material.

**Notes**


Textual Intercourse

3 Cf. Lev. 20:21
5 Ibid. 22-3, 26
6 Cf. Lev. 22:3-7
7 Lev. 15:33
12 Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 78.
13 Lev. 20:18
14 Cf. Job 6:7; Deut. 28:60; Isaiah 1:5; Jer. 8:18; Lam. 1:13, 1:22, 5:17
15 Cf. Lev. 18:19, 20:18
16 Cf. Lev. 12:2, 18:25
17 Gen. 19:33, 19:35
21 Gen. 38:9
22 Ibid., 38:10

Notes continue on 27
In the greatest investigation of the American character yet written, Alexis de Tocqueville found much admirable on the democratic continent. But among that which was most admirable was the peculiar cohabitation of two spirits that had been at war in Europe: the spirit of freedom and the spirit of religion. “Far from harming each other, these two tendencies, apparently so opposed, advance in accord and seem to lend each other mutual support.” The spirit of religion, the stamp of the Puritan’s New Jerusalem, “sees in civil freedom a noble exercise of the faculties of man,” while the spirit of freedom sees religion as a companion, “the safeguard of mores; and mores the guarantee of laws.”

Recognizing the mutual advantage of religion and freedom, the United States has avoided the extremes of clerical tyranny or moral anarchy, allowing for the best kind of liberty: an ordered one. While being the world’s strongest protector of civil liberties and natural rights, America still scores among the highest worldwide in religiosity, edging out even Iran in worship attendance. The spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom are alive and well, with one unfortunate exception: Jews.

Among religious groups in the United States, only those who claim “no religion at all” score lower on religiosity metrics than do Jews. About one in six-hundred Americans self-report as atheists or agnostics, but roughly 50% of Jews admit to doubts about the existence of God. Meanwhile, 55% of those with Jewish parents qualify as “lapsed.”

These trends are no thinker’s conscious product, and few current Jewish thinkers seem wholly pleased with the present state of things. But those of us who take it as axiomatic that ideas have consequences will reflect on which ideas set in motion this cultural arc. Whose arguments, at least, lent credibility to various contemporary phenomena: the substitution of modern and secular creeds for traditional Jewish belief, the increasing ambivalence toward law and distaste for obligation, and the rise of the “Cultural Jew” who loves Woody Allen and corned beef, but believes in Karma?

The answer, it seems to me, is Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who is best known as the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. Though the Reconstructionist movement is a marginal entity on the American-Jewish scene, larger Jewish movements—Conservative and especially Reform—along with the many unaffiliated or secular Jews, are deeply influenced by Kaplan’s teaching. Though I hope to show how Kaplan’s thought has led to the present circumstance, I also hope to show how correcting the deficits in Kaplan’s thought can improve the life of American Judaism. I do not wish to claim that Kaplan would be content with contemporary Judaism or that he is some
sort of diabolical religious anarchist. He made innovations toward his new vision of American Jewish life—a vision I do not regard as particularly praiseworthy, but not despicable, either. These innovations caught on, and, as innovations are prone to do, have yielded unintended (and a few intended) consequences.

**Reconstructionism**

Kaplan was born in Lithuania in 1881 but immigrated to the United States at a young age. In his one hundred and two years of life, he belonged to three Jewish movements: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. These breaks with established institutions followed the steady development of a new philosophy of Judaism based on the desire to “reconstruct” American Jewish life—hence the name of the movement he founded. This project was based in what Kaplan called the “functional method of interpretation,” which begins from the assertion that the many elements of a civilization—laws, ideas, institutions, and customs—all exist to serve a set of unchanging human needs. These needs are threefold: engendering “the most significant human attitudes—faith, hope, and courage,” leading to “social control” through law, and developing individual personality. Civilization should cultivate a certain kind of human—one who is optimistic, cooperating, and fulfilled. This idea is pronounced in Kaplan’s most well known book: *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934). Against those who would make Judaism a religion—a subordinate of civilization which has become confined to the private sphere in the modern world—Kaplan sought a fuller definition of what Judaism has always been: an encompassing, soul-crafting civilization.

Because Judaism is a civilization, it is only worth its salt if it is accomplishing its threefold responsibility. Judaism holds highest not God, not Torah, but a specific effect on the humans it is responsible for. Laws, ideas, institutions, customs, and the rest of what makes a civilization are only worthwhile insofar as they have this result.

If needs are universal, why is there not one great cosmopolitan civilization, a monoculture that fulfills the universal needs uniformly? Though I have not discovered a direct answer in Kaplan’s work, there appears a sense that discrete civilizations are necessary because belonging to a group is an element of fulfillment. At the same time, Kaplan certainly denounces religious rivalry, as all should acknowledge that no religion has a monopoly on the truth; rather, each serves universal needs of different peoples in different ways. Reconstructionist Judaism should thus eschew chooseness, for if we recognize that all religions regard themselves as exceptional, we come to learn that no religion is exceptional.

Kaplan dispels the notion both of a uniquely Jewish creed and of any special claim to truth that creed may have. The creed is only worthwhile insofar as it brings about optimistic, cooperating, fulfilled people. All people desire creeds that do this, so therefore all creeds do this. Judaism in the modern age must be the modern creed—ethical humanism—differentiated from others only by its folkways.
This includes a new view of God wherein God is not supernatural but is “trans-natural,” a goodliness inhering in all of us or a “God-idea” that has a social function. The traditional notions of the divine cannot be accepted in the modern age and are thus not “significant for our day.” Biblical criticism has removed the belief that the Torah was written by Moses and contains God’s word. Modern science precludes any belief in miracles. These two beliefs combine to rule out both supernatural theophany and the narrative of historical revelation. God is neither the Lawgiver nor the Miracle-Worker. Instead, God deserves vague titles like “life of the universe” and “meaning of reality.” Kaplan believes he has no need to explain these titles because his role is not theological; he is only interested in the functional result of Jewish belief in God. Hence Kaplan cares more about the “God-idea” than God Himself. In short, Spinoza has won. Jews should just move along and accept it.

But not only has Spinoza won—Kaplan has, too. In taking the usual tripartite schema of Jewish thought—God-Torah-Israel—and making both God and Torah subordinate to the changes in Israel, Kaplan has effected a theoretical upheaval. Perhaps these trends began long before Kaplan, but he is their most stirring rationalizer. There is always a question in history of what sort of true impact intellectuals had, and it cannot be sufficiently answered here. Kaplan’s upheaval may well have taken place had he not articulated it, but in attempting to understand what this upheaval has meant for American Jewry, we may associate it with him nonetheless.

The Reconstructed Jew

Kaplan’s upheaval has given rise to many perversions of American-Jewish life. The first and most glaring is the rise of the Cultural Jew. The Cultural Jew has little if any contact with what we may call the “belief institutions”—synagogues, sacred texts, etc.—and to the extent that he has a connection to the tradition, it is not a genuine one. He sees the synagogue as a community center for those with similar family histories, tolerating the services (usually only on the High Holidays) because he needs to get something out of his membership dues. More often, he is completely unaffiliated, though he may have several friends and acquaintances who also grew up Jewish. They may eat kishke together, they may recite lines of Groucho Marx (or Jerry Seinfeld), they may read Philip Roth, they may consciously evoke other stereotypes, they may fundraise for the State of Israel (or, alternatively, they may cynically lambast the project of Jewish self-determination as the ambitions of too many holy fools). For them, this—whatever it is—is Judaism. If Judaism is a civilization, a culture, then all that makes up that culture, from food to entertainment, has just as much cultural value as anything else. The nerve center of Judaism is thus not God but the individual Jew on a rootless jaunt through the mass of Jewish material. Mastering the joke about the Jew on the desert island becomes just as worthy a practice as an aliyah to the Torah.

The second perversion is the new creed of the Jews. Because we find nothing
particularly redeeming about the body of Jewish teaching and instead posit universal needs to be met by a universal ethic (with variations only in the attached folkways), Jewish belief becomes a belief in the modern universalist ethic—that is, contemporary liberalism. Growing up in a Reform synagogue, my Confirmation trip was to the Reform Movement’s lobbying wing in Washington, DC. That was Judaism—social justice. The rest is just commentary. We could recite the story of Lilly Ledbetter as a parable for Fair Pay Act, but we could not tell you anything about the prophet Jonah, beyond that there was a whale (or was it a big fish?) involved. The modern creed has supplanted the ancient creed—as it is supposed to do in Kaplan’s formulation.

The third perversion is the newfound license of the Jew. Those who are Jews of belief, and who think the Torah and Talmud are more than a litany of anachronisms (with a few justifications of the platform of the Democratic Party), are not immune to Kaplan’s reconstruction, according to which the individual assumes permission to make a Judaism for himself. Engaged Jews pick and choose elements of Jewish law and custom. If there is a guiding principle to this picking and choosing, it is often “what feels good.” This is to be expected. Without the intuition that the body of tradition has a claim upon us, we can either build a new system from scratch or take a principle unrooted in reason to make our way through the vast inheritance. Most are incapable of the former and so find solace in the latter, yielding the strange image of the tattooed man in tzitzit because both feel good to him.

Kaplan would not have applauded this atomization. His emphasis on a civilization, on synagogues as community centers, was meant to save Jewish cohesion from what he saw as the irrelevance of orthodox categories in our age. Unfortunately, ours is an atomized age, and in defining the heart of Judaism as the Jew rather than God or Torah, Kaplan yielded all sovereignty, when it comes to adjusting Judaism, to the zeitgeist of the individual Jew.

**Rethinking Tradition**

It is important to emphasize that I do not skewer Kaplan from the vantage point of orthodoxy. Remember, I began with Tocqueville, who is not yet considered among the great rabbis. Tocqueville rightly distinguishes a role for religion in a democracy that does not subvert itself under the spirit of freedom. Rather, by challenging the spirit of freedom through a teaching of higher obligations than self-interest, religion elevates freedom and preserves democracy from the possibility of its excesses. Truly salutary religion, therefore, cannot originate in the people. The nerve center of Judaism must always be God and the content of His covenant.

This is not to etch it all in tablets of stone. Change happens; manners shift. We are enamored with new ideas. We tire of old ways or are awakened to the errors in them. Yet this does not mean we should be able to reconstruct Judaism *ex nihilo*.

Kaplan, it is true, does not claim that we are wholly divorced from tradition.
“Why not begin with utterly new standards and values?” Rabbi Kaplan answers: “The tendency to reinterpret derives from the basic human need of feeling that there is some objective truth to the course which human history has taken.” We could start from scratch, but we need the noble lie that an objective truth stands behind the seeming whims of History. Therefore, we use our heritage as the bricks and mortar of our occasional reconstruction, for humans have a psychological aversion to discontinuity. But the truth for Kaplan is that discontinuity is the way of the world. “The only ones to decide whether the continuity of a culture is maintained are those who are actually confronted with the problem. The past or its proxies can no more pass judgment upon the present than the child can sit in judgment upon the man.” Judaism and all civilizations fail to be cross-generational entities.

But is this truly the way of the world? Are we not born to Jews, reared into Judaism through the telling of ancient parables, the invocation of ancient prayers, the celebration of ancient lifecycle events? And if we are Jews-by-choice, aren’t we pledging ourselves to a tradition external to us, brought to this moment in time by families passing teachings and sacraments down the line? “Honor thy father and mother” should not translate as, “Decide whether the continuity should be maintained.” It is decided for us.

This is Kaplan’s grave mistake. He correctly called Judaism more than a religion, but in calling it a civilization, he missed the crucible of civilization: the parent teaching the child. Had he recognized this, he would have pursued the project of functional interpretation with much more modesty. The child is given something by the parent neither can fully understand, for it has been the work of each generation since Moses stood on Sinai—and it now possesses the wisdom of a thousand-fold. We should not think ourselves of such merit to master the combined wisdom of our forefathers and thereby sever the chain. We should not assume the right to give our children only our own construction and not the accumulated work of their many ancestors. We are each but one part of this procession and it is to this past that we owe our very existence. It is not simply that we have a claim upon our tradition and can reconstruct it at pleasure. By the very nature of civilization, it has a claim upon us—one that originates in God and in Torah.

Notes
2 Ibid., 43
3 Ibid., 44
5 Mordecai M. Kaplan, Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish
7 Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 393.
8 *Ibid.*, 386
9 *Ibid.*, 404

Notes continued from “Textual Intercourse”

It shouldn’t be surprising that, somewhere amidst the chaos of hormones, maternal nagging, and strange Yiddish phrases that was my Jewish upbringing, any knowledge of Tisha B’Av went in one ear and out the other. After all, when you’re dealing with thousands of years of religion, culture, and history, what can a single fast day actually mean in the grand scheme of things? And yet, to many Jews, Tisha B’Av means so much. How could I—and so many of my Jewish peers—have missed such an important day?

Tisha B’Av is a fast day meant to help us commemorate and mourn the fact that on this day (the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av) in Jewish history:

1. Moses was told that his people would not enter the Promised Land.
2. The two Temples were destroyed (on the same day, five centuries apart).
3. Jerusalem was razed.
4. Bar Kokhba’s revolt against the Romans failed (...miserably).
5. Spain’s Jewish community was expelled.
6. The Jews were deported from the Warsaw ghetto.

The darkest day, the saddest day, the lowest day in the Jewish calendar. It is a punishment we deserve, the divine reward for our flouted efforts. This is our true lot. As such, we are supposed to fast for twenty-five hours. We are not supposed to shower, engage in sexual relations, wear leather shoes, or even study Torah; we spend the day reading Lamentations, perhaps the most somber book of the Bible, as well as other distressing texts. By enacting this sadness and suffering, we put ourselves into the mindset of our ancestors who were also punished on this day. We come together as a community across space and time, and we suffer together.

I acknowledge the arguments for the beauty and resonance of the central notion of this day. Its sobering spirit functions as a panacea of sorts for our proud, self-obsessed egos. It serves as a spiritual “trough” to counter all the emotional “crests” of days like Rosh Hashanah, Channukah, Passover, and Sukkot. It is the darkest day, the heaviest day, which we must observe in order to counter our sins and bring back the Temple—that holy site without which we cannot be happy, fulfilled Jews. But for all of this, how can so many Jews have no idea what Tisha B’Av even is?

This year, in the week surrounding Tisha B’Av, I casually asked all of the Jews with whom I happened to interact if they knew anything about the day. I didn’t mention that it was around the corner. Here were some of their responses:
“I’ve never heard of it before. I only do the holidays with good food.”

“What? (I repeat the name of the holiday.) What? (I repeat, again.) I can’t hear what you’re saying, you’ll have to speak louder.”

“Oh, yeah, of course I know Tisha B’Av. It’s...um...it’s the Festival of Fruits, right?”

“It’s the day before Rosh Hashanah.”

“Is that today? I don’t know the Jewish months.”

Most people I asked merely shrugged. They just didn’t care—even after I had explained to them the significance of the day.

How come? Looking for answers to this question has led me to examine my own inability to connect with Tisha B’Av. Frankly, I can’t stomach (no pun intended) its obsession with what strikes me as masochistic self-pity. Why must we continually, as a people, return ourselves to the same suffering and victimized identity of the past? Yes, we suffered, but now we live in safety; or, at least, in far more safety than before. Sure, we do not have the Temple, but we have found alternatives for Temple sacrifices—we have translated those laws into just-as-good-if-not-better replacements. Must we continue to mourn a loss that is no longer relevant to what seems to be a large portion of our people?

It is helpful to consider the tone of Tisha B’Av in contrast to that of Yom Kippur. We fast on both days, but for different reasons, and each fast is meant to have a different effect on our souls:

The pious Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heshel of Apt [18-19th cent.] used to say: If it was in my power, I would do away with all the afflictions, except for the afflictions on the bitter day, which is the Ninth of Av—for who could eat on that day?—and the afflictions on the holy and awesome day, Yom Kippur; who needsto eat on that day? [Sifran shel Zaddikim]¹

On Yom Kippur, we fast effortlessly—it is not an action of ascetic or spiritual affliction but of practicality. We are too busy attending to (and being nourished by) our spiritual needs to pay any attention to our bodily ones! The fast of Tisha B’Av, meanwhile, is also effortless: we are physically incapable of eating. “Who could eat on that day?” asks the Apter Rebbe. We are too emotionally busy (disgusted, depressed) to pay attention to our hunger.

The key difference here is that the Yom Kippur fast is prompted by actions—since we have something to do, we cannot eat. The Tisha B’Av fast, on the other hand, is prompted by emotions. The ritual actions of Yom Kippur will always be there, because we will always be able to produce them within our respective communities. We don’t need to be emotionally connected to Yom Kippur to fast—our actions help do it for us. However, on Tisha B’Av, our emotions must prompt the fast.
Otherwise, it is not effortless, not natural—it is forced. We must have the emotional connection, the empathetic understanding of why the day is important. Otherwise, the purpose of the fast is lost.

In Chassidut, a difference is drawn between two kinds of sadness: atzvut and merirut. The former “leads to depression and inertia,” while the latter is a “constructive bitterness [that] leads to soul searching and corrective action.” Agnon finds that the sadness of Yom Kippur is a form of merirut: “Yom Kippur is the embodiment of all the days of the year, and it gives life to all the days. It humbles man’s heart ... and peace is made. Hence joy and gladness remain. [Likkute Etzot]” Yom Kippur’s merirut nourishes us—our souls, our hearts, our communities. Unexpectedly, we conclude with joy and happiness. Tisha B’Av, however, forces us to stagnate in atzvut as we make ourselves appear fractured, weak, and crippled. Why must we constantly make ourselves play the part of the victim? When I studied in Israel, a constant stop on any tiyul was yet another memorial or cemetery. This is where the IDF helicopter crashed and two people were injured, one died. This is where the soldiers were carrying equipment to get to Lebanon and their bomb accidentally exploded. This is where Rabin was shot. This is where a child died. The list goes on—the memorials becoming more and more frequent the closer you get to any border. We are fixated on our own suffering. Might this actually perpetuate our suffering by sending the message that this is our natural state of being? Might we appear as if we are trying to earn the world’s pity, making our genuine need for a safe homeland appear as a calculated grasp for land and power? Might our focus on our own historical suffering, rather than attention to the contemporary suffering of others, be inappropriate in a pluralistic world?

There might indeed be arguments that Tisha B’Av strengthens our moral and spiritual character, but this doesn’t change the fact that it just doesn’t work for most Jews. Even many of the Jews who build up the nerve to pray and fast on Yom Kippur either have no idea what Tisha B’Av is, or have no desire to follow it. Why? Perhaps many people don’t feel the need to mourn something that never felt like a loss to begin with! Can I really say that I am troubled—or that most Jews around me are troubled—by the loss of the Temple? I am so lucky, so blessed—we all are. The Jewish people has contributed immensely to the world over the past two thousand years, and has grown so much in the process. Can I honestly say that things are terrible? Millions upon millions have lived successful Jewish lives since the Temple was destroyed. Do we really want it back?

So, what kind of alternative to this victimized mentality am I proposing? Should we get rid of Tisha B’Av and replace it with something more uplifting? The opposite extreme of artificial happiness doesn’t seem to be that much more appealing.

What we need is a new Tisha B’Av; what we should aim for is merirut rather than atzvut. We can build the day around a genuine pity rather than a historically
constructed one. We can cultivate an empathy based on pain and suffering in the present, massacres and punishments actually happening, rather than on obstacles we have already surmounted, limitations we have already overcome. Think of all the places where religious freedom is threatened in the world we live in! We can harness the fixation on entropy that is so characteristic of Tisha B’Av and utilize it to make us aware of the immense suffering that is occurring right now—the darkest moments, the saddest moments, the lowest moments of the present.

The beauty of our religion is not that it is a select insular system from which only a chosen few can benefit. Our traditions, our sentiments, and our wisdom can be mobilized toward all the suffering, to all the damned. We can help others simply by showing them that we know they are there, and that we are with them. We are present with them psychologically in the world, and we are working to repair it. For me, this idea of not being alone is what Tisha B’Av is really about; it means coming together as a community and acknowledging that no one suffers alone. Before we can engage in tikkun olam, we must first learn what it is that we must repair. As Robert Donne wrote, “No man is an island entire.” We can create change in the present at the same time that we mourn our fixed ancestral past. We can come together and acknowledge that no one suffers alone. By doing this, we transform our self-punishment into self-actualization—our atzvut into merirut—and interpret our solipsistic history as a history that we all share. A fixed history becomes one that we can all take part in shaping together. What more could contemporary Jews want?

Notes

3 Agnon, Days of Awe, 208.
In the afterword to *Jewish Theology in Our Time*, a 2010 anthology of new Jewish-theological essays, Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove (who received his PhD from The University of Chicago Divinity School) writes:

“In a pluralistic and multicultural world, it seems that chosenness is dead. In fact, it appears to be an a priori assumption of these thinkers that Judaism is but one of many, equally valid, options."¹

*Makom* asked students to respond to this bold declaration by considering the place of Jewish chosenness in the contemporary world.

Doni Bloomfield  Chosenness and the Value of a Life

At a normal Shabbat lunch this summer, with the conversation (and wine) flowing freely, the topic turned to the question of how Jews should relate to other Jews. For example, if one were in the ridiculous situation of having to choose to save the life of one of two people based only on religion, should a Jew save his fellow Jew over a gentile? The staunch conservative at the table responded immediately, “Of course you do. The Jewish people are like a family. Family always comes first.” The table erupted into disgusted harrumphs and hasty apologetics, dispersed with uncomfortable glances at the non-Jews at the table. However, we should think very closely about this question. What does the halakha (Jewish law) have to say, and what does that teach us about Judaism’s conception of chosenness?

The traditional halakha seems very clear that, all else equal, a Jew’s life should be saved over a non-Jew’s. In fact, a mishnah in Horayot clearly lays out in what order different strata of society should be saved: “A Priest takes precedence over a Levite, a Levite over an Israelite, an Israelite over a [mamzer, i.e. a child of an illegitimate marriage], a [mamzer] over a Nathin [i.e. a descendant of an ancient group of converts], a Nathin over a proselyte, and a proselyte over an emancipated slave.”¹ Non-Jews don’t even make the list. At first glance, the hierarchy involved (and the non-Jew’s placement at the unmentioned foot of it) can be explained using a simple rule: the more commandments one can perform, the more worthy one is to live (all else equal).² Priests can do more mitzvot than Levites, Levites more than Israelites, and so on. In this understanding, then, non-Jews have less capability to perform mitzvot and so have less worthiness than those who can. Mitzvah-doing is good in and of itself, and those who can perform them are superior to those who cannot.

There are several problems with this position, however. The Gemara states, “Even a heathen who studies Torah is as a High Priest”—which it learns from the verse, “Keep my statutes . . . which, if man do, he shall live in them”³—for, “Priests, Levites and Israelites are not mentioned, but men.”⁴ Indeed, Maimonides posits that not only do non-Jews merit reward for the mitzvot they perform, but that they—and all people—have the ability to attain the greatness of Moses.⁵ Non-Jews seem to have the same capacity as Jews to do goodness if they walk in the way of God. How, then, do we explain the hierarchy of life saving in the aforementioned mishnah?

The Gemara’s interpretation of the Mishnah may offer an answer. The Gemara comments, “‘A Nathin takes precedence over a proselyte’ for the [Nathin] was brought up with us in holiness and the [proselyte] was not brought up with us in holiness.”⁶ Here it is not the ability to do mitzvot that matters, but the mere fact that one has done them; the Nathin has always been a Jew performing the mitzvot, whereas the proselyte just began to do so. Why is this important? Because mitzvot are not an end unto themselves, but work towards a purpose: shaping those who follow them to become better people. Whether in actively forcing the pursuit of justice
or in building reserves of self-restraint, the commandments foster a lifestyle of moral rectitude. As Maimonides says, “Every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train good manners or to warn against bad habits.” Thus, the Mishnah tells us to first save those who do more mitzvot not because they can do more mitzvot but because they have done more mitzvot.

This conception points to one way of viewing the chosenness of the Jewish people: a chosenness not of natural ability or inherent superiority but of an acceptance of God’s moral law. The Jewish people are chosen not because they have a special dispensation to perform mitzvot but because they in fact do them, because they accept God’s code as a wholesale guide to every aspect of their lives. Chosenness is something earned, not given freely—a moral calling, not an excuse for ethical laziness.

Chana Messinger  
The Universal Standard of Judaism

Chosenness is not the same as specialness. Judaism’s role as one of several equally valid options, if such it is, is not at odds with chosenness. Considering one’s own group to be essentially the best—having superiority inscribed in every molecule—is indeed a relic of a tribalist and particularist past which is better left behind. Being deemed “the best” excuses a community from further action and gives them more than sufficient reason to be complacent, especially if that excellence inheres in their being rather than their actions. But chosenness is something else again. It is the beginning of a question: “Chosen for what?” The “By whom?” and the “Why?” pale in importance.

Genesis’s twelfth chapter recounts the choosing of Abram, an event for which the narrative provides no prelude. More importantly, when God commands, Abram assents without hesitation or comment. This could plausibly be interpreted to mean that his descendants—the entire Jewish people—therefore belong to a group of people who recognize, without the need to question, the greatness of the divine and the promise of a future with land, prosperity, and progeny. A better interpretation seems to be that there was really nothing very special about Abram before he made a decision to turn his beliefs into action, following into the unknown because he thought it was the right thing to do. What consequences this action had! He accepted a covenant that was incumbent on him and his entire people-to-be, but which also had to be accepted by each individual Jew by taking on the obligations thereof.

Does chosenness, then, tell us nothing about Jews except insofar as they choose to accept their role as the chosen people through Torah? Not at all. The question, as above, is not one of what is required to become chosen; the question concerns the action to which this chosenness calls us and whether we’re willing to accept that burden. In fact, following the mitzvot of Torah is really the least of what a modern
conception of chosenness should call on Jews to do.

Every tradition has rules that apply only to its members and are meant to affect only its members, fixing their actions and bringing the community closer together. If Jewish chosenness were similarly circumscribed, it would represent a form of specialness which is not special at all. Taking chosenness seriously means engaging in a far more transformative project—namely, that of seeking to use our unique Jewish means to achieve universal ends. If we are not inherently superior and yet hold that we have been given a crucial choice by God, or by our community, or by Torah, then we must use these gifts to make ourselves the best not only by our own standards—which are geared towards us—but by more universal ones. Torah and later commentaries are filled with calls to righteousness, to justice, to peace. We are called to pursue justice,1 to respect the individual,2 to understand the importance of each person to God,3 to place the saving of a life above halakhic preoccupations,4 and to love the neighbor as one’s self.5

If, by some universal standard, there is something special in having received Torah, then we ought to hold ourselves to the best of those universal standards. Being ohr l’goyim (“a light to the nations”), in the words of Isaiah 42:6, is an incredibly difficult job—one at which we may never succeed. But if chosenness means anything—if we, out of all the nations, chose to take on such a burden and to receive such gifts—then it means living out the only kinds of values that matter to everyone. Focusing on those elements of Torah that matter only to Jews is at once particularistic and among the most universal behaviors of human cultures, and is thus not fit to be considered chosenness. To be chosen is to take on a transcendent task—transcendent not only of earthly concerns, but also of individual creeds. Judaism provides a way to do that: through seeking good in exactly the way our gift of Torah commands and allows us.

Ethan Schwartz

A sense of distinction is perhaps the central animating element of the Jewish consciousness; it is as old as Israel itself. It seems to me that if Israel is not chosen, it is not anything at all, and I find it difficult to see how Judaism can subsist without this sense of distinction—even in the face of a present society that justly abhors pretensions to superiority. I can maintain this because I believe that the idea of Jewish chosenness is decidedly not such a pretension, and I believe that the tradition supports this understanding—no exegetical acrobatics required.

Consider these passages from Deuteronomy, which is the first and most timeless example of the attempt to bring the force and meaning of tradition into the present (remarkably, this can be said whether one subscribes to Mosaic authorship or source-critical theories). At the close of Parashat Va’etchanan, Moses declares, “It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the LORD set His heart upon you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because
the LORD favored you.”¹ This turns our expectation of Ancient Near Eastern ethnocentrism completely on its head. We look to the text to find the reason for God’s favoring, but we discover that this favoring is itself the reason; God chooses Israel purely out of love. It is this love that redeems chosenness from synonymy with petty chauvinism, for it completely nullifies any pretense of merit and turns chosenness from a statement about Israel into one about her God. We would hardly say that one human being loves another because of qualities or merits, which surely sounds cold and reductive. Love is its own reason.

If God chooses Israel out of love, then Israel’s chosenness cannot possibly be an indication of essential uniqueness. Indeed, Moses explains, “Observe [God’s laws and rules] faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, ‘Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people.’”² Note that Moses does not say, “They will be proof of your wisdom and discernment,” but, “That will be proof”—not the laws and rules themselves but Israel’s fidelity thereto. No one would be so presumptuous as to claim that the wisdom of Israel produces Torah, but Moses goes even further: having simply been given Torah—having been chosen—is still not enough.

Israel’s chosenness only has meaning in the people’s assumption of the task that God, in His love, has set before them. If you are tempted to think otherwise, consider that the text that Jews revere as Scripture is one that obsessively emphasizes their profound profanity. Forced to identify the Bible’s overarching theme, one might well say that it is Israel’s continued failure to behave as a chosen people. Chosenness, it turns out, necessarily recognizes the essential human normalcy of the Jewish people, for it is only out of such humanity that they can be called to the task of Torah—and it is this task, not the people themselves, that is truly unique.

This identification of chosenness with the mission rather than with the people is not an act of midrashic desperation; it follows necessarily from the observation that God’s choosing is really God’s love. What does it mean for Israel to be loved by God? To be called to the life of Torah—for just as love pines for reciprocation, the call of revelation demands the response of action. It is thus the life of Torah alone that constitutes Israel’s merit for being chosen, and as long as there is more life to be lived, they have yet finally to prove their worth; by virtue of their flesh and blood—the same flesh and blood from which all human beings are wrought—they are never “worthy” of being chosen, never fully faithful to their divine Lover. Yet the task remains; the call persists. Israel’s challenge is to live with a sense of distinction but without a sense of entitlement—to walk humbly in the ways of God, pursuing the task that is perpetually set before them. Yeshayahu Leibowitz said it best: “The people of Israel were not the chosen people but were commanded to be the chosen people.”³
Jewish Chosenness

Zev Hurwich  The People Who Choose

I don’t buy the concept of “the chosen people” in the sense that people seem to generally understand it. I consider myself an observant Jew and wouldn’t want to be part of any other religion, but the idea that there is only one correct way to connect with God does not ring true for me. Nonetheless, my discomfort with the idea of chosenness does not keep me from finding tremendous value in Judaism’s concern with boundaries and separation. Separation “bein kodesh l’chol” (“between the holy and the profane”), as the Saturday-night Havdalah prayer says—a prayer whose name itself means “separation”—is an idea that is ingrained in many of our most important rituals and laws. It defines us not as a chosen people, but as a people who choose.

Read some of the world’s great creation stories, and you will start to see that they tend to follow a fairly evident formula. In the beginning, there are two opposing forces…then they mix…then comes the world as we know it. For the Greeks it was earth and sky, for the Babylonians it was fresh water and salt water, for the Vikings it was fire and ice. In stark contrast to this formula stands the biblical story, to which Judaism subscribes. Ours is a story about God taking chaos and turning it into order through separation. Every day, he creates two separate and opposite entities: light and darkness, the waters on either side of the firmament, dry land and sea, heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, the winged creatures and those that swim, beasts and humankind, and—finally—the seventh day (Shabbat), which itself is separate from the first six days of Creation. In this most important creation, which is actually the absence of creation, God creates the sacred. “God blessed the seventh day, and he made it holy, because he rested from all of his work which God in creation made.” Shabbat is holy because it is the day that God separated from the rest of Creation—and it is holy because we continue to devote that day to separating ourselves from the mundane world.

Separation—that is what holiness is for us Jews. We must insist on peaceful co-existence with and mutual respect for the other religions and cultures of the world, but we must also keep and value our own traditions, which derive their meaning from separation and uniqueness, not superiority. This is what makes all peoples holy: their individuality. Cultural exchange is a noble and worthwhile endeavor, but there is a time for mixing and a time for separation—a time for the mundane and a time for the holy. Sometimes assimilation is right and necessary, but a loss of identity comes with a loss of holiness. More important than our being chosen, we are a people who choose—a people set apart by our choosing our own tradition.
Mid-sunset, a man emerged from the ocean, and, per usual, I did all that I could to avert my eyes from his scanty beach attire. He held the hands of two young boys—his sons, presumably—on either side of him. Although both boys wore identical blue swimsuits, the boy on the right attracted my gaze.

I recognized that this child had cerebral palsy as though it were a matter of pointing out someone’s hair color—so familiar to me was the way that the father sat the boy down in a beach chair, wrapping a towel around him and tucking in the edge so that it would stay put, but at the cost of inhibiting the boy’s ability to move his arms freely. I recognized this because I too have held the hands of such children, gone swimming with them, dried them off—just like this father of a child with special needs. The past two summers, I worked at a program for teenagers with special needs, situated within the larger context of a Jewish summer camp. I had campers with cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorders, Down Syndrome, and other severe mental impairments.

After putting the campers to bed, those staff members who were not on night duty in the bunks would sit in the office or on one of the bunk’s porches, and try to remember how to hold a normal conversation. Once, the topic of discussion wandered to imagining what it would be like if we were in the same situation as our campers’ parents—something that I had thought about often but was always afraid to utter. I love my campers, and I know that life with them around is more interesting, exciting, challenging—and that when I am with them, I am simply better. And yet, I also know that if I myself were to have a child with special needs, none of this would seem to matter. Plainly and truthfully, I would be disappointed, if not devastated. Though a person with special needs is first and foremost a person, an individual, a human being, becoming the parent of a child with special needs inevitably seems like something unfortunate that happens to people. A child with special needs can be loved and embraced, but he or she is never chosen.

From the moment that a person with special needs is born, he is unchosen. His parents’ hopes for the future—once including spelling bees, soccer trophies, graduations, and grandchildren—are entirely transformed. He is begrudgingly included by mainstream public school systems. He does not immediately become the best friend of the other boy across the street. He will be at risk of unemployment and poverty. He may always be dependent, always someone else’s burden.

Sometimes I wondered whether camp had really done any good for our campers. While some of them made huge strides in personal care and independence, learned new skills, and grew as Jews, others made little progress at all throughout the summer and could barely participate in the vast majority of activities. What might be termed “independence” was simply dependence on us rather than on their parents. However, I believe that there is an immeasurable good for our campers in the experience of be-
ing chosen by us—of having an entire staff of twenty-year-olds that have decided that we want to spend our summer with them. Similarly, I cannot quantify our program’s influence on the Jewish lives of our campers. Although we focused all summer long on our campers’ development of increased independence, what I believe we achieved more significantly was the experience of interdependence—of community. We created a Jewish community that was not only accessible to them but which embraced them. We taught them about the tradition, which is their heritage as well as ours. We allowed them to experience chosenness just as any other Jew—just as any other person.

**Jonathan Nathan Priests for the World**

In the Aleinu prayer, Jews proclaim two pillars of the Jewish worldview. First, “[God] has not made us like the nations of earth.” Second, “May the whole earth take the yoke of your kingdom.” On the one hand, we rejoice that we are given the unique responsibilities of Judaism, and that we have an opportunity to serve God in a way that the overwhelming majority of humanity does not. On the other hand, even while we rejoice in our uniqueness, we still hope that everyone in the world will eventually come to serve God and live according to his will.

Should non-Jews want to be Jews? We might as well ask if a Jew should wish to be a kohen (Temple priest). Kohanim are obligated to follow commandments that other Jews are not, and one can even argue that, because they are strictly obligated to avoid defilement, they have access to a level of holiness from which most Jews are excluded. But with a few exceptions, aspiring to priesthood as a higher level of service to God (as opposed to an opportunity for power or prestige) is not part of Judaism. Levites have their calling, and Israelites have theirs.

In the Torah, God describes Jews as “a kingdom of priests.”¹ This suggests that we should see the position of kohanim in Judaism as analogous to that of Jews in the broader world. The laws of Shabbat, kashrut, and the sacrificial service have allowed us to serve God in a way that is inaccessible to non-Jews. But despite the level of holiness that following these laws permits Jews to attain, Jews have almost never proselytized or held that non-Jews are obligated to convert to Judaism. We do believe that basic morality is incumbent on everyone, no matter where they live. But do we cringe when we see a non-Jew eating a ham sandwich? No—because we do not believe that most of our laws have universal application.

So, chosenness is an essential part of any Jewish philosophy that upholds the validity of the law. Without the notion that Jews have obligations above what is normal (and perhaps even desirable) for the rest of humanity, the notion of halakha makes little sense. To abandon chosenness in the modern world means either to dismiss the commandments (or to reduce them to “folkways”)² or to expect that everyone in the world follow them. That Jews are not a chosen people is not an unthinkable or fool-
ish position, but it is incompatible with Jewish tradition. If we are to be true to our tradition, chosenness must stay.

Calling ourselves a chosen people, though, does not mean that we need to adopt a strictly particularistic worldview. To the contrary, the fact that we have a subset of commandments to ourselves does not imply that no one else in the world is obligated to follow God’s law. In my view, we should consider the Noahide laws\(^3\) to be even more binding on humankind as a whole than the laws of kashrut and Shabbat are on Jews. Many in the Tanakh—including Noah, the population of Nineveh (after Jonah’s rebuke), and Abraham himself—served God without any exposure to Jewish law. One gentile, Job, became our model of pure faithfulness to God. Just because a person isn’t a Jew doesn’t mean that he can’t serve God or be held to a moral standard. To be chosen, then, is simply to have a different calling from other people. It has nothing to do with merit—there is nothing, after all, that Jews did to be born Jewish. Neither does it give us a privileged position in history; surely two thousand years of suffering in exile make that clear. To be Jewish—to live by the commandments—is simply our appointment in life.

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**Notes**

**Doni Bloomfield** *Chosenness and the Value of a Life*

1. Horayot 13a, Soncino translation with my emendations and notes in brackets. The Mishnah clearly states that this only applies when all else is equal. However, if the mamzer “was a scholar and the High Priest an ignoramus, the learned [mamzer] takes precedence over the ignorant High Priest.”

2. This is the same reason often given to explain the more disturbing of the morning blessings, those thanking God for not having been made a non-Jew and not having been made a woman.

3. Lev. 13:5


8. Or at least, the Torah conceives of them as doing this.

**Chana Messinger** *The Universal Standard of Judaism*

1. Deut. 16:20

2. B.T. Berachot 19b

3. Gen. 9:6

4. B.T. Yoma 84b

5. Lev. 19:18
Jewish Chosenness

Ethan Schwartz  The Chosen Task
1 Deut. 7:7-8
2 Ibid., 4:6

Zev Hurwich  The People Who Choose
1 Hesiod’s Theogony
2 Enuma Elish
3 Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda

Jonathan Nathan  Priests for the World
1 Ex. 19:6
2 As Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, argued they should be.
3 That is, the prohibitions on cruelty to animals, murder, theft, blasphemy, and idol worship; and the laws of justice and sexual morality.
The Tourist Police

Dory Fox

The tourist police officer pulled a stack of white printer paper in front of him. He sighed and began to ask me my name, my account of how my passport was stolen, my nationality.

“Really? American?” He knitted his brow dubiously. “Neither of your parents is Egyptian?”

“No.”

“Oh. You look Egyptian.”

I tried to shrug this off lightly, sensing that looking like anything might not serve me well in this process taking place in a rundown police office on a backstreet of Cairo.

In the end, it was all quite benign. The officer would ask me a question, sigh as the translation wheels turned in his head, and then write in careful Arabic script, illegible to me, on the unlined page. All I needed from the police was a completed form that I could hand in to the American consular office the next morning, but there seemed to be some other process happening to which I was blind. Every once in a while another man would come in, the officer would give him instructions, and the man would return with a photocopy of whatever the officer had given him. I wriggled a bit in my scratchy chair; being an American in this environment was about as uncomfortable as my feeling that I had a secret that was about to be discovered.

Then, somewhere in the middle of this string of questions, answers, translations, and photocopies, the call to prayer sounded, and, without announcing that he was taking leave, the police officer picked up a prayer rug from the top of the television next to his desk and nonchalantly followed the other man out into the hallway. I was left in the room with a woman and her Egyptian tour guide.

“Are you a real American?” The tour guide asked me.

I stared at him, frozen, shocked to hear this phrase come out of his mouth. My first association with his term came from political rhetoric. Real Americans are honest and hard-working folk. But Real Americans are also people unlike me; people who use the word “folk”; people who love bacon and tractors and hate vegetarians and lawyers and taxes. I knew that for a lot of people I am not a Real American, and I had become comfortable dissociating myself from that Real America and even from America in general.

This phrase meant more to me than the great deviations-turned-divides within the American cultural landscape. The days are not out my family’s collective memory when my mother’s father was only allowed to buy a house in a certain part of town;
nor have we forgotten the days when antisemitism in academia meant that my father’s father never received the honor due him as valedictorian of his college class, or the nomination he deserved from his department of chemistry to a national honors society. My parents have not forgotten the morning ritual in American public schools that taught children to pledge allegiance to the flag and Jesus, the lord and savior of my parents’ classmates—the Real Americans.

I knew that this was not what he meant to ask me at all, and it had probably not even occurred to him that I might be the vegetarian daughter of a big city Jewish lawyer. He questioned my Americanness simply because I looked more like him and his family than I did like the American movie stars with golden hair and pink skin that my country has exported around the globe.

“Yes, real American,” I answered.

“No half?”

“No.”

“No both parents born there, though, right?”

“Both parents born there,” I answered, mimicking his question. My feelings were mounting from amusement to agitation.

“Really. Hm,” he said, making a confused and unconvinced curl-down of his lip.

“And their parents born in America,” I continued. “And their parents.” This last claim, that all eight of my great-grandparents were born in America is only one-eighth true, but I said it. I liked the rhythm of reporting so many generations of American-born family. And I was frustrated that politics—The Middle East Conflict—held me from a complete and honest answer. I knew that this line of questioning would end if I could simply tell him, “No I’m not Egyptian, I’m Jewish. That’s why I look like this!”

The Conflict. As a good liberal Jewish girl studying Islamic history in Cairo, I was increasingly confused and timid about discussing the subject of Israel, or even being Jewish. I generally felt equally embarrassed as afraid to divulge my religion, my involvement in Jewish (read: Zionist) youth programs, and my family in Israel. But sitting in this office, I began instead to think about a different part of The Conflict: the events that befell the Egyptian Jews in the 1950s and 60s. My own understanding of this community’s fate had been pieced together from hearing stories about friends’ parents fleeing from Egypt in their childhood or adolescence.

Alongside The Conflict were the words of another tour guide from earlier that very day. This tour guide had explained to my group why there were no more Jews left in Egypt. We had stopped briefly at the Ben Ezra Synagogue, famous in the Jewish faith for formerly housing the Cairo Geniza—a buried collection of hundreds of thousands of sacred texts too holy to throw away. My awe at being in the historic building was quickly overcast by our guide’s narration of the Jewish exodus from Egypt that we don’t recount during Passover—the one that happened in the
“Well, it is not true that the Muslims kicked them out,” she told us. “Muslims, Christians, and Jews all lived happily together in Egypt. But then, in 1944, you know General Rome-el? Rommel. Well, he was with the Nazis, coming to North Africa, and the Jews in Egypt got scared. So they went south, to South Africa. But it’s all okay. Now, they run the diamond business there. So, you know, when God closes one door, he opens another.”

She told us that this account came from her mother. As she said this, my arms and my back heated up. I was fuming. And in light of the stories strung together in my own mind, I was mad at this woman for the stories that she had heard from her parents.

And then, in the tourist police office, I remembered some of my unfocused anger, and gave it freely to the innocently inquisitive man who, I effortlessly assumed, must have held a similar understanding of the Jews’ history in Egypt. In that moment, I did what a lifetime of Jewish education had taught me to do: I adopted the history of another group of Jews as my own. I felt personally hurt by events that had happened in Egypt half a century ago, before I was born, when my own parents were going through grade school in New Jersey. Yet in so doing, I suddenly became afraid that I had abnegated some right to claim my full Real Americaness, because I had given precedence to belonging to a different community.

Nonetheless, I repeated my answer to his question of my nationality, because feigning proud, dominating American pride felt like the only weapon at my disposal. His country might have had some power over the Jews, and they might have had the power to make me feel uncomfortable as a Jew, but I took comfort in reminding myself of the power that America, my other community, had over Egypt. I chose to be everything I had ever hated about America. In my tone, I tried to remind him where things stood—that my government gave the world foreign aide, a remorseless military, Hollywood, Coca Cola. I wanted to remind him that I could waltz into his country with tourist dollars—and that no one would have any choice but to roll over and accept.

“Yup, ree-al American,” I said, making sure to carry out my “e” sound as long as possible, extending the pronunciation into the realm of obnoxious—a declaration of the legitimacy of my claim as an American. The real kind.
I. I’m sitting in Riga, in a dive bar that looks like a dungeon, drinking a local unfiltered beer whose initial sweetness yields quickly to a strange bitter aftertaste. The beers are incredibly inexpensive by my American standards, and it would be easy to pound them back with abandon, but I don’t plan to have very many. There’s only so much self-control you can ever surrender as a solo traveler in a country many of your friends back home haven’t heard of.

Tonight, at least, I’m not alone. I was brought here by Davis, a Latvian who has graciously invited me to spend each of my three nights in Riga1 on a mattress on the floor of his apartment in the gorgeous Art Nouveau district of the city, where the pastel-colored walls of the buildings are guarded by ornate white dragons and gargoyles. (My first afternoon in town, he generously overcame his own boredom with the neighborhood to give me a tour, smirking each time I took a picture, not really believing my protestations as to the beauty of the buildings and the impossibility of seeing anything like them back in the States.)

Davis speaks near-fluent English—gleaned from countless hours watching downloaded American and British television shows—with an accent that sometimes reminds me of that of Ringo Starr. He is rail-thin and a head or two taller than I, with thick curly hair that straggles down to the small of his back. His passions are heavy metal music and video games; he hopes that the computer programming degree he’s currently pursuing will eventually help him to move to the United States. My practiced cynicism, customary in an undergraduate in the America of 2011, finds such a desire—a rational one to be sure, given the economic disparity between the States and Latvia, Great Recession or not—quaint and almost cute. But without a similar yearning for something better and willingness to set off into the unknown—that which inspired Simon Conn to leave Riga for New York more than a century ago—I would not exist.

It is a relief to be laughing and drinking tonight, after a trying day—one of the hardest of my trip so far. In the morning I walked a mile or so through the broken-down, boarded up Russian section of the city, to a mostly empty park at the edge of what was once Riga’s bustling, over-crowded Jewish quarter. Until the war, this was the city’s oldest and largest Jewish cemetery, where many of my ancestors—as I imagined, pacing through the mostly empty grass—were buried in plain pine boxes, as the ancient laws require. The Nazis burned down the prayer house and the mortuary, and the pristine cemetery became a mass burial-ground for the thousand-odd Jews brutally killed in the streets and houses of the Riga Ghetto. In the sixties the...
Soviets completed the demolition, razing the site and re-christening it, “The Park of the Communist Brigades.” After the overthrow of communism the park’s name was changed back to the Old Jewish Cemetery, and simple monuments in the shapes of a Torah scroll and a Star of David were built. I snapped photographs of them with my little brother’s iPhone.

I walked back to the city center. After a simple lunch of vegetarian Indian food sold by the local Hare Krishna chapter, I visited the modest Museum of Jews in Latvia, housed in the same building as the city’s sparsely attended Jewish Community Center. I spent a few minutes lingering over a photograph of a few dozen young men about my age, all wearing tuxedos, some draped in what appear to be the blue and white stripes of what was then the Flag of Zion, later to become the flag of the State of Israel. The occasion was the fifth anniversary, celebrated in May of 1927, of the Riga and Tartu chapters of the Hasmonean Jewish Student Fraternity. Previously I had pictured the lives of Eastern European Jews before the War (when I had the rare occasion to picture them at all) as taking place exclusively in bucolic and somewhat primitive shtetlach in the countryside. This was, of course, true for some, but it is also a vast over-simplification which allowed me some extra distance from the victims of the Nazi genocide—a distance which was impossible to feel from the modern, cosmopolitan young men in the photograph, who, but for the formality and explicit nationalism of their outfits, could have easily been my friends and me, also the members of a Jewish student fraternity.

My last stop, before returning to Davis’s apartment to join him in watching Penn and Teller videos on YouTube, was the Riga Ghetto and Latvian Holocaust Museum, centered around the decaying walls of some of the original Ghetto buildings, most of which were razed. A new wall of simple grey marble has been built, stretching long and bleak through a narrow courtyard, bordered by barbed wire. They are inscribed with the names of each Latvian Jew murdered by the Nazis. Not really knowing what to do or think, I took pictures of each section of the wall that commemorated victims who shared any variation of my surname. Reisa Kahan, Anatol Kahn, Henoch Kahn, Bertha Kahn, Musa Elka Kahen, Sascha Kahaner, Ella Riva Kahn, David Kahn, Adam Kahn-Kagan, on and on and on, numerous as the stars in the sky, as the sand by the seashore.

By the halfway point of my second beer, Davis’s friends and I have become reasonably comfortable with one another, aided by the shared twenty-something touchstones of American popular culture and funny, awkward stories about dating. They apologize for the quality of their English, but it impresses me, and I assure them it’s much better than my Latvian. One girl displays a particular ease with American idioms, turning to me with a smile, asking, “Why did you leave America to come to a shithole like this?”
II. For most of my life, I took Judaism for granted. I was raised in the affluent town of Owings Mills, Maryland, where everyone was Jewish and everyone was assimilated. We children of the relatively innocent and prosperous nineties celebrated the High Holidays, threw lavish Bar and Bat Mitzvah parties, played soccer at the JCC, but rarely had occasion to define ourselves as part of an ancient tradition, a tumultuous history. Why should we have? How could the occasional boring Hebrew School lecture cribbed from the pages of a dusty book compete with the tangible world around us, in which everything was easy and everything was new?

When I finally began to really notice Judaism—my own and that of others—it was so that I could create a cheap straw man against which to pit my fitful early attempts at self-understanding. I became the proverbial Wicked Son, creating an artificial distance between myself and my heritage, half-listening to the old stories and asking, “What do they mean to you?” without any real interest in the answer. I didn’t fit in very well in my hometown, for reasons that mostly had very little to do with Jewishness; it was easy to tell myself, however, that I simply had little in common with other teenagers who happened to have Jewish parents. At the same time, I possessed the acidic mixture of precociousness and ignorance that makes so many kids insufferable in high school. Not yet having acquired self-confidence in other respects, I clung to a (vastly premature) image of intellectualism, an identity which I foolishly believed required a faith in reason as zealous and unshakable as that of the fiercest fundamentalist. The very idea of the belief in God, which had sustained my ancestors through lean European centuries, was ridiculous in Owings Mills.

My feelings toward Jewishness and (much more slowly) Judaism started to thaw once I began college at the University of Chicago, which was in so many ways the fresh start I craved, the opportunity for a redefinition of self that is the stuff of both cliché and reality. Here was a chance to acquire a little bit of the knowledge and experience I had so painfully lacked in countless high school nights passed alone in my bedroom, enraged and confused. Here was the opportunity to be surrounded by smart people, many of them far smarter than I, and with it a path out of imprisonment by my own mind and its myopic faith in its own capacities. And here, too, was the first Jewish community I ever really wanted to be a part of. In the spring of my first year at Chicago I became a brother of the school’s chapter of the Alpha Epsilon Pi fraternity, to the great shock of my family and friends back in Owings Mills, who had known me to be neither a “joiner” nor a frat boy—and certainly no kind of active Jew.

If we’re lucky, real experience corrupts and complicates the hopelessly simple generalizations we acquire in fits of unknowing abstraction. I was quickly forced to surrender my conviction that I did not fit in among Jews. Although previously I had been able to find a few wonderful, like-minded friends at each stage, here was the first community in which I’d ever truly felt at home. AEPi has no specific Jew-
ish identity other than its foundation as an organization whose members each have some sort of connection with Judaism. The incorporation of actual Jewish ritual in the day-to-day activities of the fraternity is minimal from the perspective of those brothers whose upbringings included the religion as a deep and constant presence. But for those like me, who were Jewish children and adolescents despite ourselves, or like others, for whom it was a last name, a non-issue, to mark the Sabbath at all, to sit around a folding table piled high with challah and schnitzel across from people we have come to truly consider our brothers, singing half-remembered hymns at the top of our lungs—to us, it can be a small revelation, a rare and fragile moment of convergence with harried forefathers who were able to find real joy at least once a week.

For our ancestors, the release of Shabbos—a release from worldly cares, from the harsh forward motion of time itself—was granted by the grace of God. But whatever liberation I felt during my first few years of fraternity Shabbos dinners was thanks to feelings of connection to my friends and my history. It had nothing to do with God. Not until I went to Europe.

III. The city of Warsaw is a testament to grim human determination. As punishment for the city’s bold, failed uprising in 1944,10 Hitler ordered that it be reduced to rubble, wrecked as the Romans wrecked Carthage. And, for the most part, it was. Almost nine out of every ten buildings lay in ruins after the Nazis enacted their savage justice.

To visit it at all is a kind of miracle, a surreal experience. One sunny morning my Polish host leads me past the picturesque castles and churches of the Old Town. The Old Town is not more than six decades old. It was rebuilt with love and obsession, from paintings, from architectural drawings, from memory. The replication is of such quality that it was even added to UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites. Notwithstanding the painful complexity of the relations between the Poles and their Jewish neighbors before, during, and after, the War, I am happy for my host, watching her eyes beam with pride at her country’s ability to rebuild itself and reclaim its past from the ashes. (We are not our grandfathers, I remind myself sternly.)

But, all the same, there is nothing like this waiting for me in her city. My past has not been rebuilt. No part of it lives. A prewar Jewish community of some 350,000 lingers, for the most part, not in people but in tombstones and monuments. You can visit very few of the houses were they lived, the shuls where they prayed. Those that do remain are museums—reverent and lifeless.

Just before sunset, having long since parted from my host, I find myself standing, sore from a long day of wandering unsettled through unfamiliar streets, on the Um-schlagplatz,11 a square which was once on the edge of the Warsaw Ghetto, where for several years the city’s Jews were stored like livestock being prepared for the slaughter. Like livestock, except that a farmer at least cares about the states of his animals in the
years before he kills them. This is the square where the Nazis made Jews wait for the freight cars that would take them to Treblinka.

I’m as alone as I’ve ever been in my life. But I imagine a group of them standing a few feet away from me, huddled close together, wearing only rags. I make out the face of my grandfather’s aunt. She is in early middle age. The past few years have left her hair almost entirely gray, but touches of black remain around the edges. Wrinkles surround her eyes, and she’s shivering, but she’s beautiful. You can tell, just barely. Every few minutes she forces a half-smile, because there is part of her that wants to believe what she is being told: that she and her family are being taken out of the grimy city to work in the countryside.

But she is a mystery. Even my grandfather—Irving Shulbank, my mother’s father—never knew her. His father, Morris, had long since left Warsaw (he was however the last of my forebears to depart the Old World, sailing just before the first War). After a few years’ detour in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine, he arrived in New York City, eventually opening a candy shop in the Bronx. The store was never very successful; his wife, my great-grandmother Rose, claimed that this was because his dogmatic socialism inspired him to give away too much free candy to the neighborhood children. In the last years of the grim thirties, my great-grandfather would walk, his son at his side, to the post office each week to mail a letter to Warsaw, urging his sister to please, please come to America.

Grandpa Irv was the bright spot in Morris and Rose’s difficult life. His talent and ambition drove him to skip two elementary school grades, serve as a code-breaker and POW camp administrator during the War, and achieve considerable professional success as an accountant and then as a tax attorney, building a “dream house” for his wife and four daughters in a pristine Baltimore suburb, a long, long way from the Bronx. The dream that had been deferred for his parents came true for him. The world against which I would later rebel was for him a kind of paradise.

He, too, is a mystery. Colon cancer killed him in 1974, when my mother was still in junior high school, and everything I know about him derives from fading photographs and the stories of my mother and her mother and her sisters. The only thing I’ve ever been able to truly share with him is a name. As is Ashkenazi Jewish custom, my parents named me for a deceased relative; I was given Grandpa Irv’s Hebrew name, Yitzchak, which is reflected in my middle name, Isaac. I have for as long as I can remember felt honored and challenged by this formal connection to a person who means so much to my mother, and whose absence still wounds her across the chasm of decades. Whenever my mother observes some resemblance between he and I, whether it’s our minds or our smiles, I am briefly overcome by awe. Yes, we are not our grandfathers. We are of course different people, acting under vastly different circumstances; growing up, I took for granted the things he worked so hard to attain.
But I do feel, in a neglected corner of my mind distant from all reason, that some small part of him lives on in me.

Today, the *Umschlagplatz* is surrounded by busy modern streets, but it’s easy to forget this once you step inside the monument. Its stone walls hint at the shape of a freight car. On the walls I find the following inscription, in English and Hebrew: “Along this path of suffering and death over 300,000 Jews were driven in 1942-1943 from the Warsaw Ghetto to the gas chambers of the Nazi extermination camps.” Also inscribed are a series of Jewish names. My eyes scan them. My hands take photographs. As at the countless other memorials and museums commemorating the destruction of European Jewry that I’ve visited so far on this trip, I am possessed by a grim fascination, a desire to understand as much as I can, a measured sorrow that will not break me in ways I can’t afford while traveling alone so far away from home.

Then I get to my brother’s name, and I bawl my eyes out until there’s nothing left.

**IV.** A year before I went to Europe, I made the first—and, until the events of my trip, only—genuine prayer of my life.

Recently returned to Maryland for the summer following my second year at Chicago, I dropped my brother off at an appointment at a state government agency, which was supposed to help him find employment following his high school graduation. A few minutes into an interview with a social worker, Nate became highly agitated, as he sometimes does when faced with the challenges of the future. He paced down the hallway of the government building until he felt the mild relief of fresh air. Too immersed in anxious delirium to notice the danger, he stood precariously on the edge of the balcony. Soon his body was suspended in mid-air, falling swiftly down two stories. In the instant before he hit the ground, his paralyzing fear of the future had been replaced by a fierce desire to live.

I didn’t learn any of this until later. All I knew from my mother’s phone call urging me to rush to the Shock Trauma ward at the University of Maryland Hospital was that something terrible had happened. My mind was wiped clean, intellect swapped for adrenaline.

Ever since Nate’s illness had emerged years before, when he was thirteen and I fifteen, it had validated my atheism, even proved it. That such a wonderful, innocent person, who in the years of our childhood had been a bright spark lending light to his nervous, lonely brother, now suffered so severely could not, in my mind, be reconciled with the idea of God.

Our mother felt differently. Although she rarely alluded to it, within her a quiet but constant faith survived the unimaginable challenges of caring for a severely ill child. “I know there’s something out there looking out for him,” she would say every once in a while, pointing to the fact that, despite everything, Nate still lived, was still
able to put up a fight against the demons that besieged him. It shames me to admit that, in the throes of my smug adolescent rationalism, I found the noble, modest religion of my mother a bit ridiculous. In the face of everything our family had been through, what could possibly be salvaged of the ancient faith on which she’d been raised?

That terrible afternoon, I sat in the hospital lobby with my parents, holding their hands, trying in vain to console them. We knew nothing of my brother’s fate. The Shock Trauma Ward, we all knew, treats patients with extremely severe injuries, and our minds ran through the worst-case scenarios, imagining him paralyzed or dead.

After what felt like an eternity, my father succeeded in convincing the obstinate waiting-room receptionist to allow him and my mother upstairs to see Nate. I had to stay behind, as only two visitors at a time were permitted. The floor on which my brother was being treated, it turned out, had terrible cellphone reception, so I could not even communicate with my parents once they had reached him. I was left completely alone to stare into an abyss.

I found myself filled not with sadness but with a shrill, frenetic energy. I must have made a hundred laps of the long narrow corridor adjacent to the waiting room. Midway through one of these restless trips, I suddenly possessed the impulse to call a close friend and fraternity brother, who was more intellectually and spiritually engaged with Judaism than I. Dispensing with conversational niceties, I simply said, “Do you know a Jewish prayer for the sick? I need you to say one for Nate.” He raced through a prayer book until he found one, reciting it in a breathless monotone into the phone. I hung on every word, though I understood almost none of them, and, when he finished, whispered, “Amen,” with all the strength, all the feeling, that I could muster. Absent was my atheism, but also any abstract belief. It simply felt like the appropriate response, if there was such a thing, at that moment.

A few minutes later, my mother raced down the stairs from my brother’s hospital bed back to the waiting room, having finally realized that the message she’d sent a half hour earlier had not reached me. She grabbed me with an intensity that belied her small frame, and told me that everything was basically fine, that my brother had merely broken his arm—just about as little damage as he could have possibly sustained, given the seriousness of his fall. We ran up the stairs together, to reunite a family that had once again stared death in the face, only to emerge intact.¹⁸

During the ensuing year I came to downplay the significance of the prayer I had made at the hospital. I acquired a (very) begrudging respect for religion,¹⁹ but I still saw it as something that I had turned to, irrationally but understandably, at an especially trying moment. Once life slowed back down to its normal speed, I rarely thought of God. And when the fantastic opportunity to travel halfway across the world came, I thought I knew what I would find there.
V. I had thought that to go looking for the Jews of Europe would be to find only death. And, to be sure, death was rarely far from me. It waited in poorly maintained cemeteries to which no Hebrew-lettered gravestones had been added in decades. It followed me into Kazimierz—the neighborhood where I slept in Krakow—which was once a bustling Jewish quarter and is now a pale shadow of itself, filled with crumbling synagogues where no one prays and “Jewish-style” restaurants whose only patrons are tourists. It shouted out to me in Prague, at an exhibition of artwork created by children imprisoned at Theresienstadt before being sent to their deaths at Auschwitz. For a long time I gazed at a rough drawing in which a young girl depicted her imagined return home, and wept, dreaming of the small soul into which I was staring, cursing a world which had robbed her of everything.

But life, too, had a strange way of showing its face when I least expected it. One night in Vilnius, I was walking home from a dinner I’d eaten alone, exhausted from a day of learning about the city’s once-thriving Jewish community and how it had been virtually obliterated, when I came across a group of five recent high school graduates beginning a night out on the town.

“Where are you from?” a tall, skinny boy asked me. He knew upon looking at me that I was foreign. They always did.

“America,” I said. Everyone nodded.

I was starting to walk away when a diminutive girl with jet-black hair, a pale face, and enormous dark approached me. “Are you Jewish?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied, taken aback.

“One hundred percent?”

“Yeah.” I grinned.

“Amit!” the other kids teased her, in English for my benefit. “You found another Jew!”

Amit and her friends were my guardians the rest of that night. They took me to a strange nightclub filled with a strange substance resembling a bubble bath. We danced for hours to songs that had been popular in America a year before. At one point I asked her how she had known that I was Jewish. “I just did,” she said. She told me about how her grandmother had, as a young girl, escaped to the East during the war, only to find, upon returning to Vilnius, that the world of her youth had been irreversibly destroyed. Unlike most survivors, however, she had decided to stay. Today, Amit and her family are aware of their heritage, but it rarely plays an active role in their lives.

Eventually the club died down and Amit and her friends insisted on walking me back to my hostel. She and I still chat occasionally online. I will always be grateful to her for giving me the reminder I sorely needed of the incompleteness of the tragedy in which I was immersed.

A week or so later I took a bus tour from Krakow to Auschwitz-Birkenau, about
which it is almost impossible for me to write. All I can say is that I did not cry—although I had expected to—because I was not capable of progressing to that point in my understanding of that place. There was no moment of catharsis, no spark of knowledge, no explanation my mind could devise to fill my eyes with tears. In the ruins of a monstrosity of such dimensions, I felt only a deep, terrified confusion that masqueraded as numbness. Despite years of courses taken and books read about the Holocaust, despite all the photographs and film footage I had seen, I was shocked to my core. I cannot take you there. You must witness it for yourself.

After nightfall, I found myself wandering the streets of Krakow in a daze, making laps around the majestic Old Town Square. Every so often I mechanically snapped photographs of the elegant medieval buildings, but I was not really looking at them. I barely knew where I was, who I was.

I fled from the noise of the crowds to the relative peace of the park that connects the Old Town to Kazimierz. The trees let in almost no light from the stars or the city. My mind was empty, for once, of words.

Suddenly I came upon a cathedral. Its white columns were trimmed with gold and contained statues of saints. Its turrets were a perfect shade of turquoise; when hit with neon light from the nearby streets, they reflected back a ghostly emerald glow. The aged building arched far above me into the night sky. I craned my neck upward.

This, too, is a place I cannot really take you. I stood there mesmerized for almost an hour, staring at the cathedral. It had a quality of otherworldly beauty which shocked me as much as the ugliness of the death camp. The confusion that had filled me for hours did not abate, but instead became warm, almost reverent.

How, I asked myself, could the same world possess, the same species create, both such ugliness and such beauty? I knew, as I had never known anything before, that I did not understand, would never understand—that some things cannot, despite everything I had once believed, ever be explained.

So I knelt to the ground and whispered the second prayer of my life, and embraced the mystery, and felt, if for only a moment, nothing but gratitude, undying, timeless.

Notes

1 As facilitated by a social networking site which pairs tourists all over the world with hosts in their destinations. No money changes hands. Ideally—and as was my experience in each city I used the service—you make a friend and learn a bit. My gratitude to Stephie and Phobe in Berlin, Davis in Riga, Aneta (and the rest of her lovely family) in Warsaw, and Petr in Prague for opening up their homes to a wide-eyed stranger cannot be overstated or even properly articulated at all.

2 An incredibly good sport, Nate has exchanged phones with me (orders of magnitude less adept with or interested in high tech than him, I don’t own a smartphone) for the duration of my trip. I enjoy using the iPhone, but this is mostly for our parents’ sake. Like any good
Jewish parents, they are (understandably) a bit anxious about me traveling around foreign countries by myself, and the phone makes it easy for me to check in periodically without having to lug around a laptop. (Knowing that I have little in the way of a natural sense of direction, they were also relieved that the device’s GPS was able to assist me in the “difficult” task of navigation.)

3 I was to later re-encounter the Hare Krishnas in Prague, where they were putting on a loud and colorful festival/revival meeting, allowing a light meal of lentils and chickpeas to once again relieve my stomach from the Central/Eastern European staples of dumplings, potatoes, pork (which, yes, I confess I ate with a shameful and ironic frequency on my Jewish-heritage themed trip), which were frequently delicious but always very heavy.

4 Named, rather bullishly, for the Hasmonean Dynasty, which ruled Judea for a century following the Maccabean victory marked on Hanukkah and preceding the region’s conquest by Rome.

5 Namesake, English spelling aside, of one of my uncles.

6 The “why” of my trip to five varied and fascinating Central and Eastern European countries, none of which (let me be perfectly clear!) I consider a “shithole,” is the subject of this essay. The “how” is very simple: it would not have been possible without a very generous Seidel Scholars PRISM grant awarded by the University of Chicago, thanks to the contributions of Kathy Seidel. Once again my gratitude is boundless.

7 Both of which, I am coming to realize, I still have in rather short supply. To very loosely paraphrase Bob Dylan’s “My Back Pages,” twenty-one feels an awful lot younger than seventeen did.

8 Not to mention my conception of fraternity brothers as universally anti-intellectual, misogynistic, and homophobic—qualities which, while truthfully all too common in Greek Life, are not to be found in my brotherhood.

9 Or, as in the case of some of my closest high school friends, refreshingly, intriguingly different-minded.

10 The Warsaw Uprising, the armed insurrection by the Poles themselves; not to be confused with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising by the last group of Jews to be shipped from the ghetto to Treblinka, which took place one year earlier.

11 German for “collection point” or “reloading point.”

12 Despite not speaking a word of English until kindergarten.

13 That is, the City College of New York, “the poor man’s Harvard.”

14 Apparently he would address German POWs under his charge in Yiddish, just to piss them off.

15 He went to law school at night after working by day as a C.P.A., because accounting just wasn’t stimulating enough.

16 Sorry for all the notes. I am totally in awe of this guy.

17 A complex and severe mood disorder which combines depressive, anxious, and psychotic symptoms, currently diagnosed as Schizoaffective Disorder.

Notes continue on 66
Translator’s Introduction

Yehuda Amichai is one of my favorite Modern Hebrew poets, and I chose to translate this particular poem because it showcases his literary and thematic style so well; additionally, I was unable to find a complete English translation already available. The poem is intensely personal, but the theological issues he grapples with are collective—pulled straight out of the Jewish cultural consciousness. In translating it, I decided to avoid the “domesticating” approach popular in literary translation, in which the translator makes the foreign text more accessible to the domestic reader by changing certain elements of the text to fit the target language or culture. But the language an author uses isn’t just a medium for his or her ideas; it also influences his or her cultural outlook and makes up the very conceptual framework within which he or she is working. While a more “literal” translation (one that translates bluntly and doesn’t attempt to change the content to make it more accessible) might be awkward, it communicates the author’s mind more authentically. I tried to err on the side of literal equivalency when translating the piece.

Gods Come and Go, the Prayers Remain Forever

— 1 —

I saw in the street, on a summer evening—
I saw a woman who wrote words
  on paper spread against a locked wooden door,
  and she folded it and put it between the door and the mezuzah1 and went on her way.

And I didn’t see her face and I didn’t see the face of the man
  who will read what was written
  and I didn’t see the words.

On my table lies a stone, on which is written “Amen,”
  a tombstone fragment, a remnant from a Jewish cemetery
  that was destroyed about a thousand years ago, in the city where I was born.

One word, “Amen,” carved deeply into the stone—
  a hard and final Amen, about everything that has been and will not be again—

Amen, soft and singing like in a prayer—

Amen and amen, and thus may it be His will.
Tombstones are destroyed, words come and go, words are forgotten, 
the lips that said them turned to dust; 
languages die as humans do, 
other languages come to life, 
gods in the heavens change, gods come and go, 
the prayers remain forever.

— 2 —
Jewish theology, Theo, Theo, in my childhood I knew a boy 
whose name was Theodore, like Herzl, but his mother called him Theo, Theo from the playground, come home Theo don’t stay with the bad children, 
Theo Theo, log, y y y. ²

I want a god who can be seen but does not see, who I can lead 
and tell him what he doesn’t see. And I want 
a god who can be seen and sees. I want to see 
how he covers his eyes, like a boy who plays a blind man.

I want a god who is like a window, such that if I open it 
I will see the sky but I myself stay at home. 
I want a god like a door that opens only outward, 
but God is like a door that spins on an axis 
inward and outward, round and round 
without beginning, without end.

— 3 —
I say in perfect faith³ 
that prayers preceded God. 
Prayers created God, 
God created man 
and man creates prayers 
that create God that creates man.

— 4 —
God is steps ascending 
to a place that no longer exists, or doesn’t exist yet— 
the steps are my faith, the steps are my disappointment. 
Jacob, our Father,⁴ knew that in his dream
the angels just adorned the steps of the ladder
like a decorated fir tree during Christmas
and the Song of Ascents\(^5\) is a song of praise
to a god of steps.

\(--- 5 ---\)

When God left the land, he forgot the Torah
with the Jews and from then on they search for him
and shout after him, You forgot something, you forgot, in a loud voice
and other people think that these are their prayers, of the Jews.
And from then on they take the trouble to search for hints in the Tanakh\(^6\)
about God’s location, as it is said, “Seek God where He can be found,
call for Him when He is close.”\(^7\) But he’s far.

\(--- 6 ---\)

Traces of birds’ feet on the sand of the beach,
like handwriting that someone drew, to remember
things, names, numbers and places.
Traces of birds in the sand at night
remain also in the day, but I didn’t see
the bird that imprinted them. Such is God.

\(--- 7 ---\)

\(Avinu malkeinu.\)\(^8\) What does a father do
when his children are orphans while he still lives? What will a father do
when his children die and he becomes a father bereft for eternity?
He will cry and won’t cry, won’t forget and won’t remember.

\(Avinu malkeinu.\) What does a king do
in the republic of the pained? He will give them
bread and amusements, like all kings,
bread of memory and amusements of forgetfulness.
Bread and longing. Longing for God
and a better world. Avinu malkeinu.

\(--- 8 ---\)

The god of the Christians is a Jew, a bit of a crybaby,
and the god of the Muslims is an Arab Jew from the desert, a little hoarse;
only the god of the Jews is not a Jew.
In the same way that Herod the Edomite was brought to become the king of the Jews,
so they brought God from the never-ending future
an abstract god, not a statue and not a picture, not wood, not stone.

— 9 —

The Jewish people read the Torah to God’s ears
all year long, every week a portion,
like Scheherazade,9 who told stories to save her life;
and by the time they get to Simchat Torah10
he forgets and they can start anew.

— 10 —

God is like a tour guide
describing our lives and explaining to the visitors
and to the tourists and to God’s children—is how we live.

— 11 —

“There is none like our God, there is none like our Master”—this is how one prays.
“There is none like our God, there is none like our Master” we sing loudly
and he doesn’t respond. And we strengthen our voices and sing
“Who is like our God, who is like our Master” and he doesn’t stir
and doesn’t turn to face us. And we add more to the strength of our supplications:
“You are our God, You are our Master.” Maybe he’ll remember
us now? But he remains indifferent, even when
he faces us with distant, cold eyes.
And we’ve stopped singing and shouting and we talk to him in a whisper
and remind him of something private, something small—
“You are the One before Whom our forefathers offered
sweet incense”—maybe now he’ll remember?
(Like a man who reminds his wife of a dormant love:
Do you remember when we bought shoes
in that little store on the corner and it was raining hard
outside and we laughed so much?)
And it seemed that something woke up in him and maybe he remembered,
but the Jewish People is already finished.11

— 12 —

Even for solitary prayer two are needed:
Always, one who sways12—
and the other, who doesn’t move, is God.
But when my father prayed he stood in place,
erect and without movement, and forced God to sway
like a reed and pray to my father.

— 13 —
Communal prayer: Should we ask, Give us peace,
in broken wails and screams, or should we ask in calm quiet?
But if we ask quietly, the god will think
that we don’t need peace and quiet.

— 14 —
P’sukei de’zimra. Innocence ascends from mankind,
like warm vapor that rises up from hot food,
and turns into God, and sometimes other gods.

— 15 —
A collection of holy vessels in the museum: spice canisters
with small flags, looking like a festive camp,
with the fragrance of many generations and the memory of many
Saturday evenings that didn’t end in death.
And happy menorahs and weeping menorahs and oil vessels
with chick-beak-spouts, like children singing,
mouths gaping in lust and love.
And long metal arms point to everything
that no longer exists. Human arms that held them
long ago are in the ground, separated from their bodies.
Seder plates that spin as fast as time
so that it seems like they’re standing still, and goblets for Kiddush wine
on shelves, like rows of trophies for
sports victories, ballgames, a marathon of generations.
And everything is gold of disappointment and silver of yearning
and copper of darkness. A collection of holy vessels like toys,
oily and lustrous, a baby god’s,
which he got from an old nation, like the strange
musical instruments of a phantom orchestra, like
strange, motionless fish under the waters of time.
A collection of holy vessels, of Dr. Foichtvanger, who was
a dentist in Jerusalem. And whoever hears this will place
a gentle smile on his lips, like tender masterpieces.
God is like a magician who performs magic tricks, tricks from his beginning: making doves fly from his pockets and pulling rabbits from his sleeves and sawing a woman in two and splitting the Sea of Reeds in two and making ten plagues and ten commandments in fire and columns of smoke and hovering above the water and disappearing into the wall.

And everyone wants to catch him in the moment of a mistake and find out how he does it all without really doing it, and no one wants to know and find out how he does it all; they want to believe—everyone against everyone. Nothing against nothing.

I fully believe in the resurrection of the dead because, just as a man who wants to return to a beloved place will purposefully leave behind a book, a basket, glasses, a small photograph so he’ll have an excuse to return— in this way the dead leave behind their lives and will return.

Once I stood in the mist of a distant autumn in an abandoned Jewish cemetery, though not abandoned by its dead. The groundskeeper was an expert on flowers and the year’s seasons and not an expert on the buried Jews, but even he said: They practice night after night, for resurrection.

The path of my life is tangled and complicated. I’m a knot that’s impossible to untie, like a knot that a man makes in his handkerchief to remember something. I don’t know what I’m a reminder of or who I’m reminding, so that he’ll remember. Maybe I have to remind God to make a better world. I don’t know—I’m the knot in the handkerchief. That’s all, and this is my life.

One who wraps himself in a tallit in his youth will never forget: Taking it out of the soft velvet bag and opening the folded tallit, spread-out; kissing the length of the collar (the collar is sometimes embroidered and sometimes gilded). Then, a big swoop over his head like a sky, like a chupah, like a parachute. And then wrapping
it around his head, like in hide-and-seek; and then wrapping
his whole body in it, so closefitting, and surrounding himself in it like the cocoon
of a butterfly, and opening it like wings and flying.
And why is the tallit striped and not checkered in black and white
like a chessboard? Because squares are finite and without hope,
while stripes come from infinity and go to infinity,
like the runways at an airfield,
for angels’ landings and their take-offs.
One who wraps himself in a tallit will never forget—
when he comes out of a pool or from the sea
he wraps himself in a big towel, and spreads it open again
above his head and again surrounds himself in it, so closefitting,
and shivers a little more and laughs and blesses.

— 20 —
I’m a kosher man. I chew my cud in my soul.
From the closed darkness of what has happened and has been,
don’t forget, don’t lose. Again, “Renew our days, as of old”—
again, “Bind the festival,” extend the holiday another day.
Whoever has seen cows resting in the pasture, chewing cud
with a look of contentment and serenity on their faces, the memory of the green
grass
in their eyes and on their tongues, knows what pleasure truly is.
And I am split, cleft. I don’t have hooves but I do have
a split soul. The split, the cleft, gives me strength to stand
and I strike myself like when I beat my chest
on Rosh Ha’Shanah or like a man who looks for something
he lost, slapping his jacket and his pockets to find it.
And maybe I’ve forgotten which sin I’m beating myself for.
I want to add to the prayer “We have transgressed, we have betrayed”
the words, We have forgotten, we have remembered, two sins
that have no atonement. They would seem to cancel each other out,
but instead they strengthen each other. I’m a kosher man.

— 21 —
Passing thoughts on the night of the Seder: What has changed, we asked—
what is different about tonight, different from all other nights.
And most of us grew up and we won’t ask anymore and others
continue to ask throughout their lives, as if they’re asking,
How are you? or What’s the time? and they continue walking
without hearing the answer. How has every night changed, like an alarm clock that ticks soothingly, soporific; What has changed, everything will change. The change is God. Passing thoughts on the night of the Seder. The Torah speaks of four sons: one wise, one wicked, one simple, and one who doesn’t know how to ask. But it doesn’t say anything about one who is good, and it doesn’t say anything about one who loves. And this is a question with no answer, and if there’ll be an answer I won’t want to know it. I who passed through all the sons in different combinations, lived my life—the moon shined on me without purpose and the sun went on her way and the Passovers passed without answer. What has changed. The change is God, and death is his prophet.

— 22 —

The love that God has for his nation, Israel, is a backwards love. At first, it was rough and physical, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm—miracles, ten plagues and ten commandments, almost in transparency, without even knowing names. Afterwards, more and more emotional, more spiritual—without body, a disappointing love, a yearning, eternal love for an invisible god in the heavens. A hopeless love.

— 23 —

We’re all sons of Abraham but we’re also the grandchildren of Terach, Abraham’s father. And now maybe it’s time for the grandchildren to do to their father what he did to his father: break his statues and his idols, his religion and his belief. But this will also be the start of a new religion.

— 24 —

The sound of a drawer being shut—the voice of God. the sound of a drawer being opened—a voice of love. But it could be the other way around. Footsteps getting closer—a voice of love. Footsteps getting farther—the voice of God who left the land, suddenly, temporarily forever. A book that remains open on a table, and next to it a pair of glasses—God. A closed book and a lamp that remains lit—
love. A key that turns in the door without sound—
  God. A hesitant key—love and hope.
But it could be the other way around.
A pleasant-smelling sacrifice to God.
A sacrifice for the rest of the senses to love:
  a sacrifice for touching and caressing, a sacrifice for seeing and hearing
  and a sacrifice for taste.
But it could be the other way around.

I learned love in my childhood in the synagogue of my childhood
  with the help of women in the women’s section behind the mechitzah
that imprisoned my mother with all of the women and girls.
But the mechitzah that imprisoned them imprisoned me from the other side;
  they were free in their love and I remained
imprisoned with all of the men and all of the boys in my love and in my yearning,
  and I wanted to be with them, there, and know their secrets
and say “Blessed is He who made me according to His will” with them. And the mechitzah,
a muslin curtain, white and soft like summer dresses, and the curtain
moved back and forth on rings and loops,
if only if only if only loops, if only if only, voices of love in a closed room.
And the faces of the women are like the moon’s face, behind the clouds
  or the fullness in the opening of the curtain like an enchanting
  cosmic system. And at night we made the blessing
  of the moon outside and I thought about the women.

I learned love in the synagogue of my childhood:
  I sang, Come to me bride, come to me bride, on Friday nights
  with the excitement of a groom; I practiced yearning for the days of the Messiah
  and I did exercises of longing for the days of old that will never return.
And from the depths the cantor sings of his love
  and Kaddish is said over lovers who stay together
and the bird of memory adorns himself in an abundance of colors.
And we dress the rolled up Torah scrolls in silk underwear,
  and over that, dresses of embroidered velvet
  held together by slender straps.
And we kiss them as they pass, out of the aron ha-kodesh and toward the stage,
  and we caress them as they pass, as they pass, as we pass.
After Auschwitz, there is no theology:
From the chimneys of the Vatican, white smoke rises,  
a sign that the cardinals picked for themselves a Pope.
From the crematoria of Auschwitz, black smoke rises,  
a sign that the Gods haven’t yet decided on choosing the Chosen Nation.
After Auschwitz, there is no theology:  
the numbers on the forearms of the annihilation’s prisoners  
are God’s telephone numbers—  
numbers that never get an answer.
And now they are being disconnected, one by one.

After Auschwitz, there is a new theology:
The Jews that died in the Holocaust  
have now become identical to God,  
who has no figure and has no body.
They have no figure and they have no body.

Notes

1 A mezuzah is a small rectangular case placed on doorposts by religious Jews. It contains a piece of parchment with a name of God on one side and passages from the Torah on the other.
2 Amichai inserts a subtle dual meaning here: the word for theology in Hebrew is teolog’ya, and the last two Hebrew letters of the word (which make the ya sound) form an alternate name for God. The structure of the line allows Amichai to separate these letters from the word and repeat the name three times.
3 A reference to Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith, each of which begins with the phrase “I believe in perfect faith…”
4 After fleeing into the wilderness out of fear of his brother, Esau, Jacob had a dream in which angels ascended and descended a ladder to heaven.
5 Psalms 120-134, attributed to David and Solomon.
6 An acronym used to refer to the entire canon of the Hebrew bible, which includes the books of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings.
7 Isa. 55:6
8 “Our father, our king.” The phrase is from a song in the Jewish prayer service. It connotes a pleading tone.
9 The storytelling protagonist of One Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights).
10 The Jewish holiday celebrating the completion of the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings and marking the beginning of the new cycle.
11 All of the quoted lines in this section are from Ein Keloheinu (“There is none like our God”), a hymn sung out loud or said quietly during prayer services.
The movement to which Amichai refers is more commonly known as “shuckling” (from the Yiddish shakhn), an almost meditative swaying during prayer.

“Hymnal Verses” (Aramaic). A group of blessings, psalms, and verses in the daily morning prayer service.

Ancient instruments and vessels used in the Temple.

Spice boxes similar to those used today during Havdalah, the ceremony that ends the Sabbath (hence the subsequent reference to Saturday evening, the end of the Sabbath).

A reference to a yad, a small metal rendering of an arm and hand, used to keep one’s place while reading from a Torah scroll.

Section 16

Gen. 1:2

Possibly a reference to the Kotel (also known as the Western Wall or Wailing Wall), the last standing outer wall of the Temple in Jerusalem and the holiest site for Jews today.

A prayer shawl worn traditionally by males. Amichai describes some of the details involved in the process of putting the tallit on before prayer, which include a blessing said quietly.

A ritual cloth canopy used during Jewish weddings.

According to Jewish dietary law, a land animal is only kosher if it “chews its cud” (digestive rumination) and has split, or cleft, hooves. In this section, Amichai compares himself to a cow (a kosher animal) in the context of dietary law.

Lam. 5:21

This refers to the day after each of the three major pilgrimage holidays: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. From Psalms 118:27.

Perhaps a reference to Nietzsche, who wrote that cows were happy because they could not remember. Amichai’s description differs, however, in that he ascribes their happiness to a memory, rather than to a lack of memory.

The Jewish New Year and first of the High Holidays, which focus on repentance. The sin-beating (makeh al chet) is a segment in the prayer service where one symbolically strikes one’s chest as one recites the various ways in which the community may have transgressed. The quoted phrase in line 14 is from this prayer.

A traditional question asked during the Seder is, “Why is this night different from all other nights?”

Another traditional segment of the Seder involves discussing the archetypal “Four Sons.”

In the Torah, this is the description of how God took the Israelites out of Egypt during the Exodus.

The Hebrew word used here (alimut) is Amichai’s own invention. In pronunciation, it is identical to the Hebrew word for “violence” (which was certainly intended) but is spelled so that the root connotes disappearance or transparency, instead.

A story from Judaism’s oral tradition tells us of how Abraham decided one day to destroy all of the idols in his father’s house as a rebuke to his father’s idol-worshipping.

A partition present in traditional synagogues, which separates the women’s section from the men’s section.
A blessing said exclusively by women in traditional congregations. The corresponding blessing for males is, “Blessed is He who did not make me a woman.”

The Hebrew word for “if only” (łu) is the same sound that begins the Hebrew words for “loop” (lula’ot). There is, therefore, a deliberate alliteration in the Hebrew that isn’t present in the translation.

A line from the Friday night prayer service, which is the first prayer service of the Sabbath. The “bride” is a common metaphor for the Sabbath; the purpose of this prayer is to welcome the Sabbath on Friday night.

“Holy” (Aramaic). A prayer said multiple times throughout any given service, especially by mourners.

Amichai is describing a ritual at the end of the Torah reading service. The scroll is “dressed” in various covers and accessories, and carried around the room so that congregants may kiss the Torah to show respect. The aron-ha’kodesh is the ark where the scrolls are kept.

Notes continued from “Something Like Home”

That afternoon turned out to be the nadir of Nate’s struggle. What followed was a remarkable year of movement towards health, in which he reclaimed much of his mental and physical power. He recently began his freshman year at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland, an achievement won through hard work and an awe-inspiring ability to distance himself from the dark days in which mere survival, far from such success, had been the best that could be hoped for. Challenges remain, but I am confident that he will meet them with strength and grace. I could not be prouder to be his brother.

As had my father, who had become a follower of the pragmatist philosopher William James and, although not a believer in the traditional sense, a supporter of what religion can do for human beings. He even fasted on Yom Kippur that year, for the first time in decades, out of “gratitude.”
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