

Hineni



Fall 2018

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the very first issue of *Hineni*! You might be wondering what *Hineni* is and how it got its name. Well, “hineni,” in Hebrew, means “here I am.” But saying “hineni” at Hopkins doesn’t simply mean being present physically on campus or in Baltimore. It means being fully present: mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

And — as I’ve discovered this semester as an Engagement Intern for Hopkins Hillel — that means something different for every member of the Jewish (and Jew-ish) community at Hopkins. Not every Jewish blue jay chirps prayers in Hebrew, wears a tallis on their feathers, or cooks matzah ball soup on the daily. Judaism shapes people’s identities in a variety of ways.

And so I decided to launch *Hineni*, a literary magazine that will be published once a semester in order to celebrate diversity within the Jewish community at Hopkins. For this issue, I asked Jews at Hopkins to explore and express what Judaism means to them spiritually, religiously, and culturally in an essay or poem. To share their personal narratives, customs, traditions, experiences, and beliefs.

Of course, articulating one’s Jewish identity with certainty is no easy task. After all, many believe that to be Jewish is to ask questions — to doubt. I believe that the pieces in this magazine lend credence to this notion. Judaism is no land of milk and honey rendered in black and white; it’s a gray area that might not always be so simple and sweet. Judaism is a land of shades of gray that clash and coincide and ebb and flow. It’s a land of nuance, inconsistency, and idiosyncrasy.

Many who submitted chose to react to the recent mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Indeed, it is especially important after such an atrocity for Jews to come together and take pride in their identities in the wake of — and in the face of — anti-Semitic violence. To showcase that pride in writing.

May you enjoy our Fall 2018 issue!

L’Shalom,
Rudy Malcom
Editor of *Hineni*

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I have always been Jewish. My dad's last name is Ginsberg, and my mom's last name is Lieberman, so there is definitely no ambiguity. I grew up in Manhattan, going to synagogue and Hebrew school and celebrating the holidays with my family. I loved my Grandma Bea's matzoh ball soup and noodle kugel (personally I go for salty over sweet every time). Judaism was a big part of my identity throughout my childhood and adolescence.

But then when I came to college, it fell a bit more to the background. I went to the very first Shabbat dinner at Hillel but didn't go back again afterwards. During the High Holy Days freshman year, instead

of going to Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah services, I stayed in my room and studied for a chemistry midterm. My family FaceTimed me from their dinner; when I hung up the phone, I started crying because I missed them. And honestly, I was a little mad at myself for not taking the time to celebrate the New Year.

Cut to sophomore Intersession when, as so many of students at Hopkins do, I decided to go on Birthright with Hillel. Because of that trip, I met so many new people who would not only add to my life in many ways, but, even more importantly, give me a real community as well.

I started coming to Shabbat consistently, and I even started working for Hopkins Hillel as an Engagement Intern. During training for that job, we were asked over and over again to answer the question "What does being Jewish mean to you?"

In my opinion, there is no right or wrong answer. Every individual is going to have an answer that is as unique as they are. For some people being Jewish includes every single ritual, prayer, and traditions; for others, it may not. For me, I have learned in college that being Jewish means that I have a community wherever I go.

That has been my most invaluable lesson — that we all have a shared history and so much in common while, at the same time, we are a group that is so diverse! As I look back over the past three and a half years at Hopkins, I am grateful that I found this community and made such great friends.

To tie it all together, I have a quick memory to share. One summer in high school, I had to go to a park in Queens to do some field work for a lab I was working in at the time. Before I could begin my work, I had to sign in with the gentleman at the front desk.

When I did, he turned the book around and said, "Your name is Ginsberg?"

I nodded, honestly wondering where this was going to go.

But he then proceeded to reach under his collar and pull out a necklace with a Star of David on it. He then took my hand and squeezed it.

That moment embodies what I love most about being Jewish: the connection and community.

You can find love in the most unexpected places,
even at a sign-in desk in a small little park in the middle of Queens.



Rachel Underweiser
Alma Beach in Tel Aviv



Prior to arriving at Hopkins, my Jewish identity was not something that I regularly thought about. If it wasn't one of the few holidays that my family actually celebrates, then Judaism wasn't on my mind. Regardless, my Jewishness consisted entirely of delicious food and my very old, European great-grandparents. There was a whole world that I was so close to, yet so far away from while growing up. Being African-American did not make things any clearer; in fact, it caused me even more confusion while growing up. It wasn't until I attended my first Shabbat dinner, accompanied by my Eritrean roommate here at Hopkins, that I asked myself "What is my culture?" or "How do I religiously identify?"

Upon setting foot in Hillel, I was immediately greeted by warmth and friendly faces. I could smell some of my favorite foods just down the stairs, but even that could not ease the anxiety that I had felt in that moment. I was worried that I would be judged for my lack of knowledge about the religion and my even more limited Hebrew vocabulary. Dinner began, and I couldn't have been more pleasantly surprised. As I ate the familiar food, I couldn't help but feel as if I was now part of a larger family. The curiosity of exploring a spirituality that was foreign to me was intriguing, and I left Shabbat excited to explore more of my own identity.

Prior to Hopkins, I never knew how to respond to the question "What is your culture?". And I still don't know entirely. What I do know, however, is that I am ready to explore what being Jewish means for me, and I am aware that spirituality is fluid and subjective. The complexity of my identity — my being "Jew-ish," my biracial background, and my beautifully blended family — is a blessing that I will continue to wear proudly. For now, I'll continue to learn from my experiences and wholeheartedly interact with the welcoming Jewish community here at Hopkins (as long as Hillel keeps bringing the challah).

My Jewish identity in 18 sentences

Ariella Shua

1. My Jewish identity is saying “two Jews, three opinions” while knowing that I already have four contradicting opinions of my own.
2. My Jewish identity is being the token Jew in the room, a role which I sometimes love and sometimes dread.
3. My Jewish identity is feeling like the least religious, least learned, and most out of place in a room full of Jews.
4. My Jewish identity is feeling like the most religious, most learned, and most out of place in a room full of Jews.
5. My Jewish identity is using bagels and lox as a cheap joke in front of non-Jewish audiences and having it get a dependable laugh every single time.
6. My Jewish identity is making fun of the practices that I grew up with, even though I understand them.
7. My Jewish identity is keeping the practices that I grew up with, even though I don't understand them, not as much, not anymore.
8. My Jewish identity is saying that I'm Open Orthodox with an asterisk and a four-sentence explanation, and waiting for people to ask me what the explanation is.
9. My Jewish identity is feeling disqualified from all of the accepted denominations for not thinking and feeling and being the exact same way.
10. My Jewish identity is Israel.
11. My Jewish identity is hating that I can't love a country without needing to qualify and defend and deny every aspect of its actions and existence.
12. My Jewish identity is feeling anger at Jews who go off the derech, even though G-d only knows where I'll be a few years from now.
13. My Jewish identity is spelling G-d as G-d and needing to physically force myself to write *God*.
14. My Jewish identity is a fear of disappointing my parents by choosing the wrong way to practice, eventually.
15. My Jewish identity is a fear of disappointing my friends by choosing the wrong way to practice, now.
16. My Jewish identity is being unable to hide it, even if I feel like I should, because there's no need to mention my background and who I am in every situation, but it just leaks out because, really, it's always going to be a part of who I am (I think), and I can't help but express it somehow.
17. My Jewish identity is loving how I was raised.
18. My Jewish identity is knowing that I can go on forever but also knowing that others won't read this forever and that 18 is a good place to stop.



I could have chosen not to be Jewish.
My brother did it —
It'd be easy.
Ask him whether he's Jewish,
A succinct "no."
I doubt he even knows what happened in Pittsburgh,
But I'm not masochistic enough to call and ask.
I could have chosen not to be Jewish.
Why didn't I?

**Bentley
Addison**

I would have fewer tragedies to mourn,
Less despair and devastation to feel,
Less trauma to remember and constantly be reminded of.
I wouldn't be looked at funny in Catholic school
Or be forced to "explain" this funky religion to the class.
Eyes wouldn't swivel to me whenever the Holocaust came up,
I wouldn't have had to sit,
Holding back tears, in my cafeteria
As kids pelted me with coins.
My high school class president wouldn't think it funny —
wouldn't think it funny at all —
To walk up to me,
Say "Six Million,"
And walk away, cackling to herself.

Life would be easier if I were not Jewish, yes.
But so much of its meaning would be
Lost.

Few things bring me more joy
Than closing my eyes at the start of Shabbat services
And letting the sounds of fifteen voices
Singing Yedid Nefesh
Cascade over my being,
Filling my ears with the sounds of my history,

**I could have
chosen not
to be Jewish**

My grandmother's matzo ball soup,
Slaved over for hours in her condo kitchen.
Carrots and celery sliced as a family,
Every time eaten from the same bowls —
Pastel colors with pictures of pears on the inside,

Going to shul with her,
Being fascinated by the pretty children's machzor,
The intricate designs forming a web across the cover,
The funny "ch" sound that, surprisingly,
Didn't sound like "check" at all!
Saying that letter
(although probably brutally butchering it
the first thousand times)
Marked me as a part of something.
Something beautiful,
Something foreign,
Something not mundane, like the "ch" in "check."

My ancestors made this sound,
My ancestors sang these songs,
My ancestors prayed these prayers.
I am here because they cannot be,
And I'll be damned if I let their memory slip away.

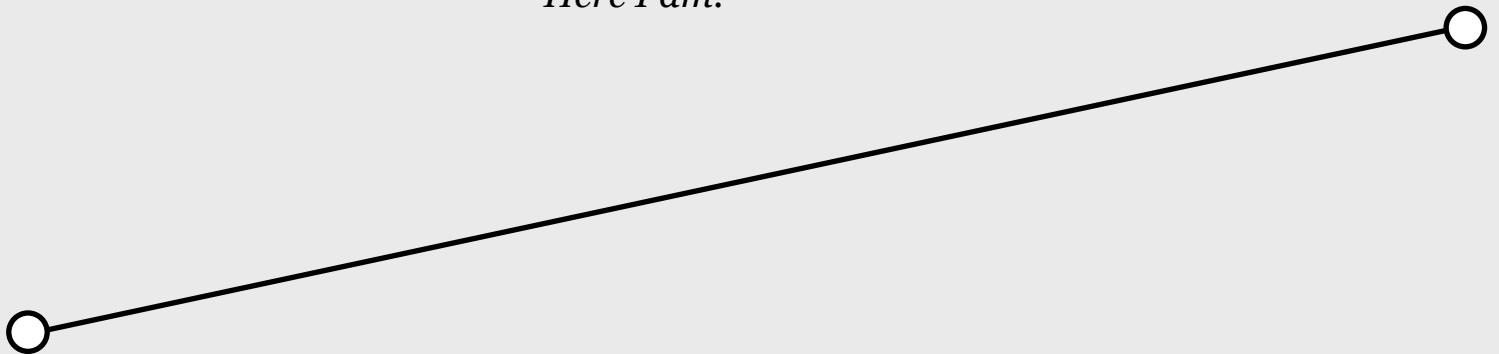
After the synagogue shooting

Elana Rubin

I lost my Star of David
necklace months ago.

We say halach l'ibud, it went to
ibud, the place where lost things go:
threads without shirts
sparks without candles
talitot without owners
piles of black shoes.

*Oh God,
Here I am.*



The winds of hatred threaten to extinguish
And Evil darkness quickly closes in
Upon the small beacon of hope that refuses to diminish
A flickering flame in the wind

A flickering flame illuminates the night
Fighting against the dark suffocation
From the tiny flame emanates a light
A light unto the nations

Max Muss

A
flickering flame

A chronological account of the collective Jewish-American soul

“Are you Christmas or Hanukkah?”, they’d ask
on the playground, naïveté escaping their Sunny-D breath.
The answer didn’t matter (except it made you wonder
how Santa always knew to skip your house
from way up there — did he still care?).

“Why won’t you eat that?”, they’d ask
as you peeled pepperoni off birthday party pies.
“I can’t,” you stuttered to explain (and it made you wonder
if your taste buds, too, were missing out
‘til they made you try it as a dare — it felt like an affair).

“You don’t look Jewish,” they’d say
as you pressed preteen flyaways firmly behind ears.
“Thank you” tasted bitter on your tongue (and it made you wonder
if feeling beautiful would always require
375 degrees to hair — it didn’t seem fair).



“Is it safe, there?”, they’d ask,
but you could never answer right. “L’Shana Haba’ah B’Yerushalayim”
now weighed heavy with fear (and it made you wonder
why you still felt so distant
from all your people there — is it ok to be scared?).

“Why is this night different from all other nights?”, we ask,
soaking herbs in symbolic tears, as if it is different;
as if we don’t remember past suffering
with every boker sun (as if we can ever forget
when bullets steal shul’s holy air — swallow it with a prayer).

Things that happen elsewhere



Those things you read are all from somewhere else.
That moving vigil's light will shine through screens
and shares, a safety grounded in impulse
to separate: it's in the gunman's genes.
But, in *Laramie* there is a priest who'd drill
the need to "deal with what is true," to melt
the smeared facades denial will instill.

*You children know not how to ask — You dwelt
in Egypt too. Say You, not they, were slaves
four hundred years, saw smokestacks, etched tattoos,
lived yellow. Fix a soapbox to our graves
to "say it all correct," else they'll confuse
what happened from what's next. Embrace that star,
remember where You've come from, who You are.*



Rachel Underweiser

Unite against hate

Max Muss



Izzy Rubin
Residents of the Negev

In the wake of the terrible atrocity that took place on Saturday, Oct. 27, in Pittsburgh, it is easy to draw a parallel between the heinous attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill and the vicious attack by Amalek against the children of Israel soon after the Exodus. In both instances a coward took advantage of our sense of freedom, be it in religiously free America or the newfound sense of freedom in the desert after years of bondage and servitude, and chose to attack those most vulnerable. Amalek attacked the “stragglers” when we were “faint and weary” from travel and escape. Similarly, the despicable Robert Bowers attacked our brothers and sisters while they were in the midst of prayer on our Sabbath. Both attempted to end the Jewish people simply for being Jewish. Bowers cried “all Jews must die” as he opened fire.

A few years ago, when I was in high school, I was asked to portray Haman, the wicked antagonist of the Purim story, in a play-like stomp. Haman was a descendant of Amalek who was hell-bent on exterminating the Jews of Persia. And he nearly succeeded. As Haman, I ascended a ladder to a raised platform and proudly held up a sign on which “KILL ALL THE JEWS!” had been written. I laughed thinking how preposterous of an exaggeration this must have been of the real story of Purim. Certainly nobody could truly be so bold in their wickedness that they would so bluntly proclaim such blatant anti-Semitism and hatred. It is only now that I realize how naïve I was.

In 1790, in the first year of his presidency, George Washington wrote a letter to the Hebrew Congregations of Newport, Rhode Island proclaiming, “The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy ... All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship ... May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants — while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.” The concluding words of Washington’s letter serve as a direct reference to the prophet of Micah, who preaches about the ideal peace and security that will come in the days of the Messiah. Micah’s message is that the ideal to strive for, and that will one day come about, is that everybody, Jew and non-Jew, friend and foe, predator and prey, will be able to live together in peace and harmony without the threat of hatred and violence. Over 200 years later, although America is certainly taking steps towards ensuring equality and security for all, we are still far from the promised Messianic peace to which Washington alluded.

While we mourn the losses of those 11 Jews and wish a speedy recovery to both the worshippers and police officers who were injured or traumatized, there is a larger issue at hand. This incident is a microcosm for anti-Semitism and racially and religiously motivated hatred. As long as there exists the notion of racial or religious superiority and unjustified hatred, which is only becoming more widespread due to social media, we can never and will never achieve the peace that God, through Micah, promised us.

There is a popular idea that the commandment to wipe out and destroy Amalek isn’t promoting the genocide of a nation based on the sins of their ancestors and their common ancestry, but rather commanding us to destroy what Amalek represents: unjustified hatred and evil. Today in 2018, Amalek is not only alive but thriving. Individuals who promote hatred against others simply for being different, who are so intent on wiping out or subjugating others because they feel superior, are the true incarnations of Amalek in today’s society.

The basis for attacks like the one in Pittsburgh isn’t rooted in politics, but the inbred hatred that is allowed to spread and grow in modern society. We mustn’t fool ourselves into blaming policy or politics for this type of attitude. The cause is not policy. Yes, policy is still relevant to the conversation in terms of preventing people from acting on their hatred, but it is far more important to obliterate the underlying mentality that makes people want to perform these acts in the first place. At a time like this, it is important that we don’t allow the actions of violent cowards to divide us in terms of policy. They should instead unite us in the cause to destroy the rampant hatred that is hiding amongst us. Only then can we achieve the peace and security that God promised us all those years ago.

The aftermath of Pittsburgh

Rebecca Penner

We're no longer safe here.

Our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents fled here seeking refuge from intolerance elsewhere.

Coming here was a step up, but it wasn't perfect.

In the U.S.:

My grandfather couldn't attend the university of his choice because he is Jewish.

My mother couldn't buy the home of her choice because of an old law in place stating that Jews could not buy houses the area.

Throughout high school, I was teased about my thick, curly hair and olive skin.

Like DNA, this intolerance of us was passed through generations, לדור ודור.

Even so, we felt lucky.

We felt fortunate that our forefathers had the ability and the instinct to make a home in this so-called bountiful land of refuge before we were inevitably slaughtered in our former homes.

Today, we are forced to begin thinking in the ways of our forefathers.

We have entered, yet again, a time during which we must decide what to do to keep ourselves and our families protected from violent acts of hatred.

It is so sad.

The Jewish home appears to have an expiration date in the eyes of the secular, but we have and will continue to overcome.

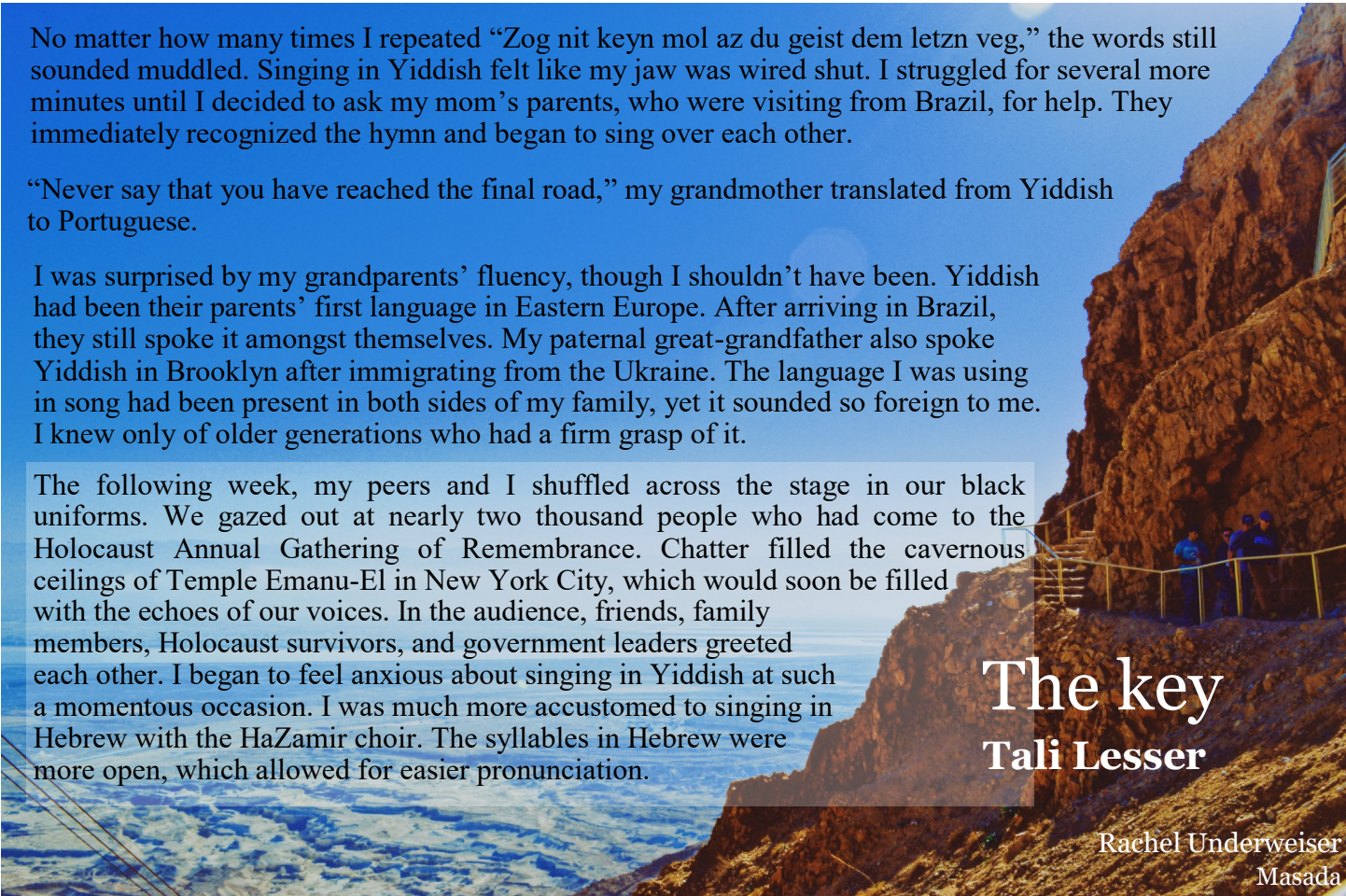
I wear a kippah,
Perched on top of my head
For the world to see.
But I'm not a "model Jew."
I'm not Shomer Shabbat
Or Shomer Kashrut
Or Shomer most things, to be frank.

Bentley Addison **Kippah**

I don't look Jewish.
No matter what your perception of a Jewish face is,
It's not mine.
Fine.
That's not going to change.

A kippah is my unspoken signal
To Jews:
Hello,
I am one of you.
Begin a conversation with me in Hebrew,
And laugh when all I can respond with is
"Mah?".
Say "Shalom"
Instead of saying "Hello" or simply walking by.
Smile, and nod as you find a compatriot.

To non-Jews:
My kippah says,
I am a Jew, DAMMIT.
That is what I am.
I am not someone you can peddle
Your anti-Semitism to.
I am not someone who will "get it,"
Commiserate with you about
Those dirty Jews.
Respect my Judaism,
Respect my kippah,
Or walk the other way.



No matter how many times I repeated “Zog nit keyn mol az du geist dem letzn veg,” the words still sounded muddled. Singing in Yiddish felt like my jaw was wired shut. I struggled for several more minutes until I decided to ask my mom’s parents, who were visiting from Brazil, for help. They immediately recognized the hymn and began to sing over each other.

“Never say that you have reached the final road,” my grandmother translated from Yiddish to Portuguese.

I was surprised by my grandparents’ fluency, though I shouldn’t have been. Yiddish had been their parents’ first language in Eastern Europe. After arriving in Brazil, they still spoke it amongst themselves. My paternal great-grandfather also spoke Yiddish in Brooklyn after immigrating from the Ukraine. The language I was using in song had been present in both sides of my family, yet it sounded so foreign to me. I knew only of older generations who had a firm grasp of it.

The following week, my peers and I shuffled across the stage in our black uniforms. We gazed out at nearly two thousand people who had come to the Holocaust Annual Gathering of Remembrance. Chatter filled the cavernous ceilings of Temple Emanu-El in New York City, which would soon be filled with the echoes of our voices. In the audience, friends, family members, Holocaust survivors, and government leaders greeted each other. I began to feel anxious about singing in Yiddish at such a momentous occasion. I was much more accustomed to singing in Hebrew with the HaZamir choir. The syllables in Hebrew were more open, which allowed for easier pronunciation.

The key Tali Lesser

Rachel Underweiser
Masada

However, I knew the experience was much bigger than my discomfort with Yiddish. In a few moments, I would be singing the songs that had accompanied survivors during the Holocaust.

As soon as the audience settled, we shifted our eyes to the conductor, and on the slight flick of his hand, we began to sing the Yugnt Hymn, a Yiddish youth resistance song from the Vilna Ghetto. As we belted out the boisterous tune, I felt somewhat uneasy. In rehearsals, the joyful melody felt fitting in an environment where I often joked with my friends. On stage, I felt conflicted that I was enjoying myself yet still remembering the loss of millions, including members of my own family.

After finishing the piece, we sat in the front rows of the audience. We watched Holocaust survivors await their turn to light a memorial candle. They ascended the stage with their children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren supporting them on either side. Some were so frail that they had to be nearly carried up the steps. Each year, there is a set number of candles to be lit by the survivors to represent those who passed. I watched as many lit multiple candles at once. Unlike in past years, there weren’t enough survivors for each to light only one candle. I remained in my seat and pondered the responsibility of maintaining the memory; it was slowly falling on fewer individuals, leaving more for younger generations to shoulder.

Before returning to the stage for “Zog Nit Keyn Mol,” the concluding song, I thumbed through the program. On the back page, my eyes fell upon the lyrics in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. Since I had practiced from sheet music that only contained the Yiddish transliteration, a particular lyric in English caught my eye. It said, “This song as password generations must maintain.” In that moment, the presence of tradition struck me. I could tell that it was constantly changing, but I could still feel how it was permeating my life. I did not sing in Yiddish often. Neither had I ever communicated in Yiddish with my parents. However, all through high school, I sang choral pieces in Hebrew to connect to my Jewish roots.

We rose to perform, and the audience joined in on the second verse. No matter the age, a sense of timelessness pervaded the crowd. Even when people are gone, the power of memory, culture, and tradition holds us together.

Give me another bracha to say for you

Lexie Botzum

I want to see you wrapping
tefillin next time I walk into
shul.
nonchalantly, in the corner —
what bracha do you make
when you tighten the straps?
baruch ata adam,
for being so impetuously
lonely that you tie yourself
in my shoelaces every day
and pray. *mi k'amcha*
yisrael goy echad b'aretz.
I remember you but I will not
return to you,
amen.

ask me to pray for you.
I breathe, and I pray to you
(I create a perfect world)
(I ask for redemption)
(ask for reflection)
(for a coming home)
but you can rise to meet me.
bow your head in supplication.
say *lexie, bati,*
barcheini.
if even your love is made
manifest only through us,
my prayer that your mercy
might conquer your anger
feels at most like a call to
the help-line, asking
a mechanical operator for directions,
desperately,
ones I could've looked up myself.
but I'll do it.
ask me to bless you.

I wasn't there when
we signed the *ketuba*

but I'm still supposed
to feel bound.
how could you leave
us all *agunot*,
your *goy echad b'aretz*,
while my friend hears your
voice every day.
they don't need a contract.
we have gotten so old
in your absence.
when you come back,
will you be surprised that
we waited?
did you want us to
long for you.

given a measure of wheat and
flax, I'd probably
think they were a gift.
you can be generous.
you left no instruction.
but you didn't hand them
to me —
I've been sitting at the
table my parents set,
with a flax placemat and
a loaf growing stale.
the bread is uneaten
and perfect.

maybe you'll walk in
this morning,
after shul.
you'll sit at the table
and cradle the loaf
in an arm (*min*) still (*hameitzar*)
wrapped (*karati*) in (*ya*)
bands (*anani*) of (*bamerchav*)
red (*ya*).
we'll say *motzi*.
we'll have a meal.


Berakhot 6a: God wears tefillin, which say *mi k'amcha yisrael, goy echad b'aretz*: who is like your people Israel, a nation alone amongst nations.

Berakhot 7a: God prays to Themselves that Their mercy might conquer Their anger. When R. Yishmael ben Elisha entered the *kadosh kadoshim*, the Holy of Holies, he saw God praying. God asked Yishmael to bless them.

Eikhah Rabbah 3.21: A parable. A king gives his wife a long and beautiful *ketuba* — a marriage contract — then disappears for many years. The woman grows old. Her friends tell her to forget him. He looks at the long and beautiful *ketuba* and she is comforted. When the king returns, he is surprised that she waited.

Tanna de-vei Eliyahu ch. 2: A parable. A king gives two servants a measure of wheat and flax with no instructions. The wise servant makes a placemat and a loaf of bread, and the foolish servant does nothing. When the king returns, he asks that they show him what they've done with what he'd given them.

A custom: To say a seven-word *pasuk* corresponding to the seven wrappings of the tefillin. *Min hameitzar, karati ya. Anani b'merchav ya.* Psalms 118: 5-6. Out of the straits, I called upon (God), who answered me with great expansiveness.



Yep, I'm talking about Judaism again

Laura Kaye

Rachel Underweiser
Bahá'í gardens in Haifa

My two best friends in high school had this slightly irritating game they called “Laura Bingo.” Topics included things like summer camp stories, how much I hate running, and, of course, Judaism. Before I started high school, my older sister told me not to tell people at our New England boarding school about my religious identity, but I wasn’t very good at keeping my mouth shut about it. I didn’t feel comfortable wearing my Star of David necklace I had gotten for my B’nai Mitzvah, but the early absences from school due to the High Holy Days, my annoyance at being unable to celebrate much of Shabbat due to Saturday classes (8am! Every! Saturday!), and some Yiddish words that I would forget my friends didn’t know gave it away pretty quickly. My Jewish identity in high school was a weird mix of excitement and concealment.

By my junior and senior years in high school, I was head of the Jewish club, yet I felt like I had to limit my Judaism to the set events in which the topic was, in fact, Judaism. There, I could explain that no, Chanukah wasn’t “the one with the good bread” (challah), and that fasting really isn’t that bad — and also not the main focus of our day of atonement. But I couldn’t ask any questions of my own; when I tried to do an independent study my senior year on Hebrew or Jewish history, I hit a wall because no teachers at my school were Jewish or had enough knowledge to facilitate the semester.

Arriving at college, I was shocked to meet people my age who seemed to know more about Judaism than I knew even existed. I finally could ask my many questions (thank you to everyone who fielded my plethora of questions last fall), but I also started to realize the extent of the huge range of beliefs beyond even nominal differences. I’d ask three people the same question and get four different answers, and I felt like the protagonist of the children’s book “Are You My Mother?” but without the happy ending in which the child finds the mother (in my case, my religious beliefs).

So this must be the part where I form an identity — whatever that means?
Wish me luck as I continue to sort through the answers, form new questions, and start to form my own answers to questions more complex than those still important ones about food.

Spirituality in Israel through visuals



I had never felt closer to God than I did standing before the Western Wall. On the bus with the other students from my program, NFTY Mitzvah Corps, our chaperones had warned us that, upon reaching the wall, people often have reactions that are the opposite of what they expect. I thought nothing of it, assuming I would react nonchalantly. However, when we arrived at the foot of the wall, I found myself stretching my hand out to touch it, tears involuntarily and inexplicably streaming down my cheeks. A friend took my hand and we stood there, unmoving for quite some time, undoubtedly experiencing similar feelings of awe.



As the sun came up the morning, we climbed Masada. Everyone scrambled to grab their cell phones to take photographs, but I chose to leave my phone in my bag that day because I knew I would be just as tempted as my peers to use it. I wanted to savor the moment and see the beautiful sunrise through my own eyes rather than through a screen. To this day, if I close my eyes, I can picture the scene perfectly. I don't think I'll ever forget it.



The Kinneret is a stunning place. This is perhaps my favorite picture from my time spent in Israel; one cannot look at it without thinking, “That is beautiful.” The other participants in the program and I had hiked up a mountain that day in order to get to this view. The hike must have taken three hours, but this sight at the summit made everyone forget their tired legs. This was a place that felt most holy to me.

Liza Goldstone



My favorite day of my Israel trip was meeting six siblings. The students on the trip and I were passing through an area near the Golan Heights, where the family lived, and my program happened to spend a night on the Kibbutz where the family were vacationing. This is me playing their guitar. The youngest sister was the first to notice a native English speaker in the family’s midst; she and her siblings walked up to my friend and me and asked if we were British. When we said “No, American,” they grinned ear to ear and asked if we personally knew Justin Bieber. Although we did not, they had already decided that they liked us, and for the remainder of the day, they took us to meet their parents (who cooked us the most amazing unfamiliar food), spoke with us about their religion, Druze, of which we knew nothing about, and taught us a few Arabic words that I remember still. When it came time to say goodbye, they offered me a Druze feather to lace through my hair; since returning home at the end of the summer almost four years ago, it has hung on my bedroom door, reminding me each day to love my neighbor.

**Bentley
Addison**

Liberation is the most Jewish thing of all

The history of the Jews is one of constant marginalization, victimization, and oppression. Our history winds a sad, lonely path from slavery in Egypt, to blood libels and expulsions in Europe, to attempted genocide. Our holidays and religious traditions reflect this: Jewish comedian Alan King remarked that every Jewish holiday could be distilled down to the mantra “They tried to kill us. We won. Let’s eat!”

The holiday of Channukah commemorates Jewish resistance to forced assimilation. Purim memorializes the success of Jews in Persia in foiling the plans of a king who wanted to kill all the Jews in his kingdom. Passover remembers the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, and the holiday of Sukkot pays homage to the impermanent structures our ancestors dwelled in as they wandered the desert in search of their permanent home. In each case, the existence and observance of Jewish holidays incorporates elements of our people’s suffering, oppression, and eventual liberation.

The dynamic development of the Passover Seder is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Halachically, the contents of the seder plate are simple. However, in recent years, liberation work in and by the Jewish community has led to the addition of new items to Seder plates around the world. The most common of these is the orange, which represents the role of queer Jews and Jewish women marginalized within the Jewish community.

These additions to the Seder plate do nothing at all to diminish the historical, cultural, and religious significance of the Israelites’ exodus from bondage in Egypt. Rather, the explicit inclusion of modern day political, social, and economic suffering in the discussion of Passover cements the Exodus in our institutional memory and increases its resonance.

How can we be truly celebrating these holidays if we divorce them from the oppression they discuss? Slavery, homelessness and impermanent housing, forced assimilation, and ethnic cleansing are realities that affect humans all over the planet. My history as a Jew — and the history of my people — means that I care about each and every people suffering in the same way my ancestors did, along with suffering under the yoke of oppression more broadly.

For me, honoring the values and origins of the holidays we celebrate and working to make sure that other groups don’t have to tell the story of “when *this king tried to kill us all*” or “when we were almost forced to give up all our most sacred customs” is the most pure, unadulterated celebration of Jewish history and Jewish holidays.

So, my friends, join me, and shake the lulav, have the Seder, light the menorah towards a world where all are free. It’s the most Jewish thing of all.

For me, being Jewish means being able to look at the world, see that it is broken, and yet still think "I must help fix this, for surely this must be fixed."

For me, being Jewish means congregating every Friday night after good weeks and especially after bad ones to rededicate ourselves to making the week to come a better one for all.

For me, being Jewish means, even in the midst of great joy, stopping to remember the poor and the infirm, the widow and the orphan.

For me, being Jewish means remembering, in times of darkest sorrow, that there are always those among us who carry with them the seeds of redemption, if only we will call them forth to bloom.

For me, being Jewish means knowing that every act of charity, of justice, of mercy, of compassion has the possibility to change the common fate of humanity.

For me, being Jewish means remembering and holding on to those memories despite the pain and despite the hurt because being Jewish means learning to love, truly love, a world which is not yours.

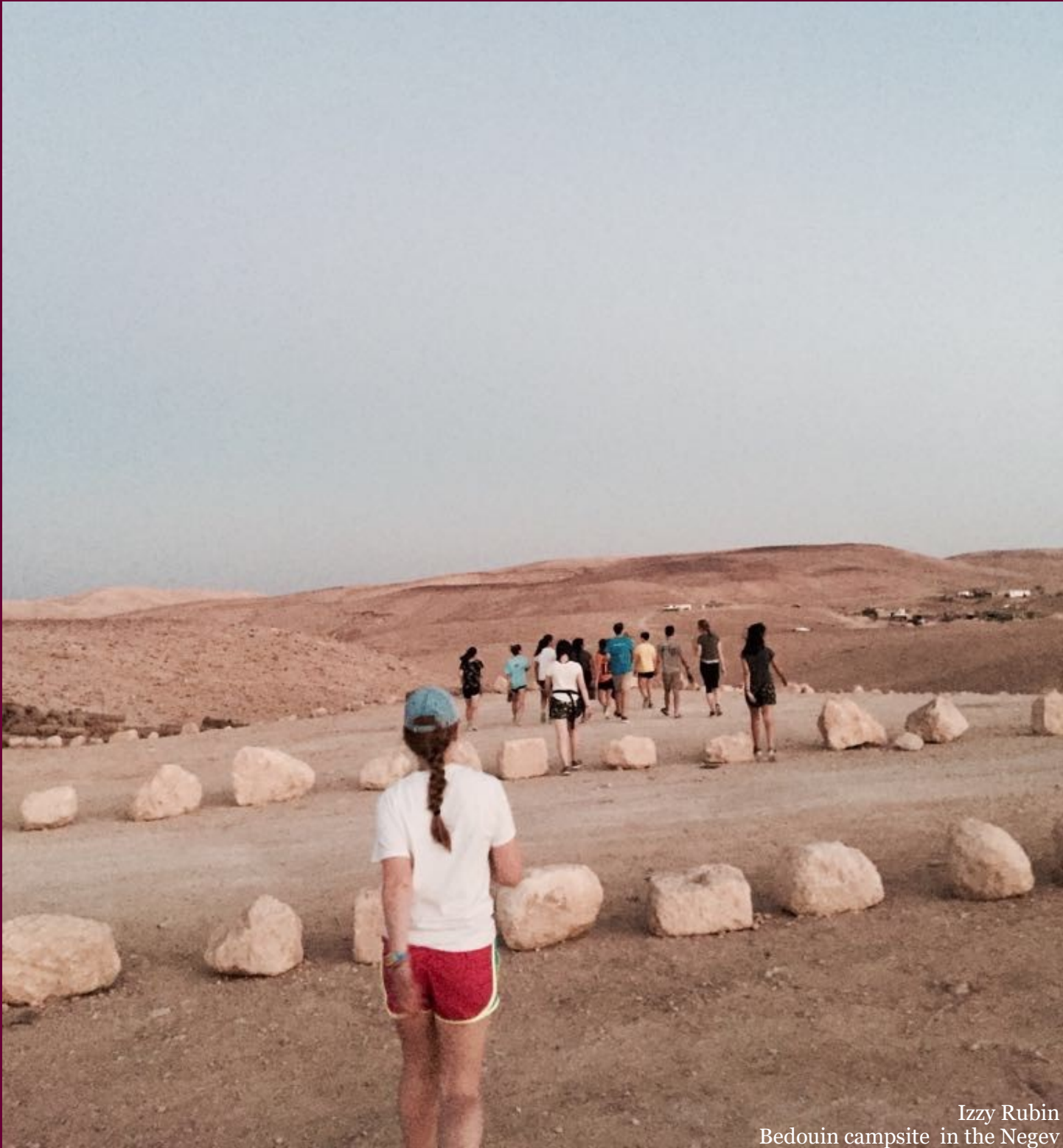
A world whose beauty was bought with the spoils of the plunder of our people and others.

A world which, for two millennia, tried to root us out, only to find a particular resiliency in the children of Israel, who had survived bondage in Egypt, captivity in Babylon, and subjugation by the Romans.

Aspire to be holy; do not accept less of yourself than at least to be good.
All the rest is commentary — now study.

מה שלמדתי: What I've learned

**Jake
Lefkovitz**



Izzy Rubin
Bedouin campsite in the Negev