

contact



BREAKING AWAY: FORMER HASIDIM FIND FULFILLMENT IN THE SECULAR WORLD

by SHULEM DEEN

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FOUNDATION
FOR JEWISH LIFE

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

Cover photograph is of Deena Chanowitz. Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs in this issue appear courtesy of participants in profiles.

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his issue of CONTACT explores diverse facets of an American Jewish community experiencing both transition and strength. The issue opens with a lead story by Shulem Deen that shatters the accepted narrative of endemic angst among

those who have left the Hasidic world. Contrary to headlines of ubiquitous emotional despair, Deen finds post-Hasidic Jews living full, vibrant lives outside the strictures of the communities in which they grew up. The issue then visits the DOROT Teen Internship Program via Ayalon Eliach, the rabbinic counselor for the program who witnessed teenage participants grow in their Jewish knowledge and commitments through their experiences with the elderly. Esther Schor takes us on a tour through the Jewish byways of Esperanto, and Ari L. Goldman visits the newest JCC outpost in New York City, in the historic Harlem neighborhood. The issue rounds out with profiles of young Jewish innovators making a difference in books, radio and film, and with the Amy Kurzweil's graphic narrative that ties three generations of Jewish women together.

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BREAKING AWAY: FORMER HASIDIM FIND FULFILLMENT IN THE SECULAR WORLD

by SHULEM DEEN

ONE BLOCK FROM the ritzy waterfront properties of North Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in a high-ceilinged, dark wood-toned living room — tastefully converted from a former warehouse loft — Deena Chanowitz sat on a sofa with her legs folded beneath her and explained to me why she often said no to prospective clients: “School is my priority. I figure out how much I need per month, and I work that many jobs. The rest I reject.”

As proprietor of the acclaimed culinary shop Chef Deena, which has been featured in magazines like *Elle* and *Vogue* and referred to as “New York’s Best Kept Culinary Secret,” Chanowitz often caters to the rich and famous, although to her they might as well be Joe Nobodies. She doesn’t have time to watch TV or keep up with pop culture. She isn’t familiar with popular new brands. Once, Warby Parker, the trendy Manhattan-based eyeglass company, contacted her to cater an event. She was about to say no — she’d never heard of them — until a friend, incredulous that she would reject such a high-profile client, convinced her to take the job. Another time, she was hired by a well-known film and television actress, but she had no idea it was a famous person until she saw her assistant’s jaw drop when they arrived on site.

During much of the week, Chanowitz, who is 34, attends medical school in Bennington, Vermont. She’d had a late start with school and is determined to stay focused. The oldest of 11 siblings, Chanowitz was raised within the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement, where secular studies take second place to religious instruction and where college education is anathema. She had a troubled adolescence, though, and dropped out of school at age 14. Now, she’s making up for lost time in double strides.

Chanowitz and others like her buck the most common narrative about those who exit the closed, modernity-shunning world of ultra-Orthodoxy, which often focuses on loss, isolation and the overcoming of deeply internalized handicaps, rather than on the strengths and successes of those for whom the road eventually smoothens. To be sure, the journey away from an insular religious



Deena Chanowitz

lifestyle entails significant hardship, and there are those who fail — who fall into depression or poverty or addiction, or who simply flail along with a variety of handicaps and dysfunctions. In recent years, there have been several instances of suicide, which have deeply rocked the small community of former *Haredim*. A far greater number, however, find their way to purposeful endeavors — schooling, career, creative work — not unlike people of any group across the country.

Narratives of success or normalcy, however, aren’t told often, and as the story of struggle remains dominant, it feeds a parallel narrative within the closed world of ultra-Orthodoxy. Those who leave, it is said, are left not only spiritually bereft but also materially destitute and psychologically damaged. It is a convenient tool wielded for ideological purposes; the ultra-Orthodox world relies in great measure on fear and disdain of the outside world to keep people within, and this narrative of doom serves that purpose well. In a 2013 essay, “The Post-Ultra-Orthodox Death Prophecy,” Leah Vincent, author of *Cut Me Loose*, a memoir of her exodus from the ultra-Orthodox world, described the pervasive messages of misery and failure destined for those who choose to leave the community. “We are taught — in stories, teachings, songs and gossip... [of the] prostitutes, heroin addicts and the psychologically imbalanced, who, we were told, made up the community of former ultra-Orthodox Jews.” (*ZEEK*, October 7, 2013)

The cautionary tales abound — real, exaggerated or imagined — and as a result many who wish to leave don’t, and those who do spend a lifetime trying to prove the doomsayers wrong. Success, however, can be measured in various ways, and what

can be said for certain is that what former *Haredim* might lack in stunning material achievement, they more than make up for in passion, grit, idealism and the search for resonance and meaning.

Chanowitz, too, could’ve ended up a cautionary tale. At age 14, her parents, deeming her rebellious and deviant, demanded that she leave home. She had started wearing denim skirts and socks instead of tights, which her parents thought modern and secular. She also got hold of a radio and began listening to secular music.

Eventually, Chanowitz found people to care for her — a woman she was acquainted with offered her a place to live in exchange for working in her clothing store. But she’d also had periods of homelessness, and struggled with trying to find her way in the world without the anchor of family and community. The experience left her scarred. “I felt that, to my parents, my value wasn’t in the fact that I was their daughter, or just a human being. It was only in how useful I was.” Her identity at home had been formed around the care she gave to her younger siblings. “I was the cook. I cleaned. I did all the kids’ homework. I got them dressed in the morning. I didn’t think my mother could function without me. Then I started wearing a denim skirt, and I was garbage.”

It took years for Chanowitz to regain a sense of her own worth, and it wasn’t until her late 20s that she applied to Hunter College, part of New York City’s CUNY system, to catch up on her schooling.

Last spring, she graduated valedictorian with a degree in biochemistry. It was during her time in school that she started Chef Deena, but she was determined from the outset not to take on more than she

Shulem Deen is the author of *All Who Go Do Not Return*, a memoir about his life in the Hasidic world. He is a columnist at the *Forward*, and his work has appeared in *The New Republic*, *Salon*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Tablet* and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn.

needed. She had a passion for the creative possibilities in food preparation, as well as for nutrition and the healing power of well-chosen ingredients, but she also had a passion for learning and to be of service to others. At one point, she spent six weeks volunteering at a rural hospital in Ghana. After that, she knew she wanted to be a doctor. Specifically, a general practitioner.

“I want to be a GP, not because it’s a particularly high-paying field,” she is quick to note, “but because I still take some tenets of Judaism with me, and one of them is the idea of giving. When I’m of service to others, that’s where I still find my value most.”

THE DRIVE TO BE of service is also what animates Zalmen Labin, a 38-year-old former Hasid from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, whose family is closely connected to the rabbinic elite of the Satmar Hasidic dynasty. Labin left the Satmar world in 2008. “I felt like it wasn’t even about God anymore,” Labin told me, speaking of his former community. “It was about your neighbor. It was about stature and family prestige.”

As a Hasid, Labin worked as a real estate contractor and building developer, but as he moved into the outside world, he left real estate and opened Loom Yoga, with one studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn’s latest hipster/bohemian settlement, and another in North Williamsburg. It was the cutthroat ruthlessness of his earlier occupation that Labin found so alienating. “You basically have to terrorize people to get anything done in that business,” he told me. He wanted an occupation in which he did just the opposite.

“This place,” he said to me, as we talked in the reception area of his Bushwick studio, “is like a laundry. People come in after a full day, you see the stress in their faces. After an hour, they walk out and they’re like, heeeyyy.” He dimmed his eyelids and his head went slightly limp, like someone hitting the sweet spot after a toke. He straightened his head and laughed. “This is where I feel fulfilled.”

“Part of this journey is an inclination toward creativity and self-actualization,” says Phin Reisz, a 31-year-old entrepreneur who sits on the board of Footsteps, a New York City-based community of those who’ve left the ultra-Orthodox world. “With the journeys they’ve undertaken, those who’ve left have also shown a significant amount of chutzpah and conviction and persistence and definitely a whole lot of resourcefulness.” That, Reisz believes, is vital for success.

IT IS THAT CHUTZPAH and resourcefulness, perhaps, that Malky Lipshitz and Melissa Weisz, founders of Malky Squared Productions, demonstrated when deciding, with little experience in film production, to start their own filmmaking company. They also set themselves a high mission: to tell the stories of women from their former communities.

The duo — who declined to give their ages but who appear to be in their twenties or thirties — were both part of the Hasidic world before leaving it in early adulthood. Lipshitz, who was raised in Israel before

her family moved to Brooklyn when she was a teenager, had been something of a rebel all along and had a secret boyfriend at 16. At 19, her parents insisted she marry a boy of their choosing in a traditional *shidduch* — the system of arranged marriages. Lipshitz was expected to take “bridal classes,” in which she would receive instruction on sex, procreation and the laws of family purity required by Orthodoxy. Lipshitz didn’t need sex instruction, but she went along with her parents’ wishes and turned it into a kind of project. “I took notes on everything, because it was all so comical and absurd.” She wrote detailed descriptions of each session — the clinical descriptions of the act, the euphemisms, the instructor’s awkward fumbling when a topic required a description a tad too explicit. Malky couldn’t help laughing as she read her notes later. “This,” she thought, “would make a terrific movie.”

Weisz, too, was influenced by film — though she never thought she’d make one. She, too, was supposed to marry a boy proposed by a matchmaker, but before meeting the boy, she was expected to meet his parents. Weisz freaked out. For advice, she went to her married older sister, who, something of a rebel herself, owned a DVD player, and who suggested they watch the movie “Meet the Parents,” the comedy starring Ben Stiller and Robert De Niro.

It was Weisz’s very first movie. “After that I met the boy’s parents,” she says. “It was nothing like the movie.”

Both women left their marriages early on and, each for her own reasons, decided



Zalmen Labin



Melissa Weisz and Malky Lipshitz

to leave the world of Orthodoxy. Now, working together, they have three films in various stages of production, and have procured a decent amount of money for a number of other projects, although funding remains a constant challenge.

When I met Malky and Melissa recently to speak about their work, I pointedly avoided asking the obvious: does their vision have a path to profits? Their company is new and their films have yet to be released, so it is fair, perhaps, to wonder: is it all just a fanciful dream? Will they be making movies five years from now? A year from now?

It is also fair, perhaps, to see viability as beside the point.

What's unique about Malky Squared is not its ambition, or its potential success, but its very ordinariness. These women are doing what young creative people are doing in all parts of the country, often under challenging but optimistic circumstances. The process brings considerable challenges, the same ones that would be faced by any doe-eyed filmmaker with dreams: 20-hour workdays, the stresses of learning on the job, the inevitable misunderstandings and occasional interpersonal blowups.

In fact, one episode contains all the elements for a movie. As Malky and Melissa tell it: On the set of their very first movie, there was a person allergic to nuts. It was Melissa's job to make sure there were no nuts anywhere. Malky, who was in charge of costume design and set design, had her own workspace, and one day an assistant brought in a package of nuts. Malky told him to hide it atop a closet. Later, Melissa found the nuts anyway.

"I'm freaking out that someone's life is on me," Melissa told me.

"And I'm, like, this is my space. Nobody walks in here and takes control," Malky said.

We were at The City Bakery, a popular lunchtime spot near Union Square in Manhattan. It was early afternoon, and the clamor around us was so loud I could barely hear them speak. Malky and Melissa, however, were animatedly shouting different parts of the story, speaking over each other, finishing each other's sentences.

"She's like, you can't have nuts. I'm like, I heard you. She's like, you're being passive aggressive. I'm like, stop treating me like this. She's like, stop screaming. I'm like, I'm speaking in your tone."

"Then we didn't talk the rest of the day."

"That night I cried."

"She cried."

"I was like, I'm not doing this anymore."

"She wanted to leave the set."

"Did you work it out in the end?" I asked.

"Oh, we didn't go to sleep before we worked it out," they said, almost in unison.

They laughed now, as they told the story, and I tried to pitch the idea as a movie: two ex-Hasidic women form a film-production company, only to have it almost derail over a package of nuts. They both shrugged. It's all in a day, they seemed to say. They were on to telling me about the next project, and the one after that, and where they were with post-production on the first film, and the festivals they hope to submit to. It struck me that throughout all of this, they spoke little about challenges relating specifically to their pasts — either their upbringings or the transitions they had undertaken. It wasn't that they'd forgotten, only that it wasn't the story they were telling. This was not a narrative of struggle, nor was it one of success. It was just about two women making movies, and the tears and laughter that came along with it. ■



BRIDGING GENERATIONS, BUILDING JEWISH LIVES

by AYALON ELIACH

When I told people that I had accepted a position as the rabbinic counselor for a summer internship program in which teenagers volunteered to visit the elderly, I was met with incredulity. The shock was not that I would take such a job, but rather that any high school student would sign up. Why, people asked and I wondered cynically as well, would any teenager choose to spend the summer helping older adults without being paid for their work?

While I don't know what motivated every applicant to DOROT's Jewish Summer Teen Internship Program (we receive more than 10 applications for each spot), working with the interns taught me that although the teenagers were not paid for their time, they received a huge return on their investment. As an ancient Jewish teaching suggests, the

giver often walks away with more than the recipient (*Vayikra Rabba* 34:8).

On the most basic level, the teen interns learned how to work in an office environment. While seemingly mundane, such responsibilities provided an invaluable understanding of organizational culture. As they spent hours every day in the DOROT office and worked with its various departments, the interns learned from the examples of those around them how to excel when they enter the workforce.

In addition to learning office decorum, the interns developed a wide variety of tangible skills. Those who worked on the internship's documentary film-making project learned filming, editing and production skills from some of the most talented filmmakers in New York. I was amazed to see the quality of the short films they produced over only four weeks.

Other interns focused more heavily on their facilitation skills. Some led weekly conference calls in which they taught seniors about Jewish humor. Others led in-person, intergenerational classes on Jewish

perspectives on issues in the news. All became more adept at preparing outlines for teaching, leading group conversations and balancing between teaching and taking questions and comments. By the end of the summer, I rarely had to step in to control the flow of the classes.

The biggest takeaways I saw, however, were not the many skills that the interns developed, but the new ways in which they began to relate to older adults, to each other and to the Jewish tradition.

Almost every day, the interns visited seniors in their homes. I had the privilege of debriefing with the teens after their visits and was amazed at the transformations that I saw. At the beginning of the summer, some felt very uncomfortable talking with any stranger for an hour, let alone with someone 60, 70 or even 80 years older than them. Others felt more at ease, but still felt a wide gulf between themselves and the seniors they were visiting.

After four weeks and more than a collective 175 visits, I was amazed at the difference in the interns' descriptions

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of their visits. They asked about the possibility of visiting the same people again; they told me about the unexpected things they learned about the seniors' lives; and they asked for the opportunity to do more visits in their already packed days. Every teaching I had ever learned about Judaism's emphasis on respecting the elderly could not compare to the ways in which these teens so naturally learned to live these lessons through their visits.

There were major transformations in their interactions with one another as well. On the first day of orientation, I sat outside our conference room as the teens arrived. The silence coming through the door was deafening. I was not surprised though. The 20 interns came from as many different high schools and ranged in age from 14 to 18. They also came from incredibly diverse Jewish backgrounds. Some attended yeshivah day schools; others had periodically attended Hebrew school; and a full 20 percent had never engaged formally with Jewish education and had not had a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony. There was very little common ground between them.

Over four weeks, those divisions began to crumble. Friendships developed across differences of age, school and Jewish background. The silence from that first day turned into constant chatter. After our closing ceremony at the end of the summer, many interns asked their parents if they could go to dinner together instead of returning home.

In developing these relationships, the teens did not just learn about each other; they were exposed to entirely new perspectives on the Jewish tradition. At least once a week we learned Jewish texts that addressed the big issues the teens were confronting: companionship, isolation, stereotyping, duty, kindness, the aging process and wisdom. In exploring these texts, the teens each offered their unique views informed by their backgrounds; and they taught each other just how many different ways there are to approach the Jewish tradition — that there are indeed “70 faces to the Torah.”

That learning was not limited to our formal gatherings. I regularly overheard interns asking each other about the reasons for their respective observance or nonobservance. I heard intense, yet respectful, exchanges about the meaning and importance of different types of kosher observance. I was reminded consistently of the expansiveness of learning that can take place in a truly pluralistic environment.

When I look back at the months before I started working at DOROT, I have difficulty inhabiting the mindset that caused me to question why teens would want to volunteer at DOROT during their summer vacation. After serving as the rabbinic counselor this past summer, the answer seems so obvious. ■



A JEW IN THE WORLD OF ESPERANTO

by ESTHER SCHOR

I am often asked why I wrote a book about Esperanto. (Correction: I am *always* asked.) I generally explain that I wrote the book not as an Esperantist — I learned the language while writing the book — but as a Jew, thinking about a perennial Jewish conundrum: the relationship between particularism and universalism.

Like so many books, this one started in another book, my biography of the American Jewish poet Emma Lazarus (1849-1887). In her writings of the 1870s, Lazarus forged the identity of the Jewish-American writer for a mainstream, middle-brow American audience. In the following decade, however, she embraced a different task: reconciling her particular identity as a wealthy fourth- or fifth-generation Sephardic American Jew with universalism. Lazarus's concept of universalism was one part *tikkun olam* and one part an Enlightenment ideal of human rights and world culture. When the pogroms of the early 1880s transformed her preoccupation with Jewish history into a passion to save Russia's Jews, she became a lone American voice espousing the cause of Jewish auto-emancipation — what would soon be called Zionism.

The year Lazarus died prematurely at 38 was the year Esperanto was born. Its inventor, Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, was a child of the *haskalah* (the Enlightenment). As a medical student in Moscow during the tumultuous early 1880s, he became embroiled in Zionist activism and fled to Warsaw, where he became the go-to man among young supporters of *Hibbat Zion*. He organized meetings, publicized the Zionist cause, and even channeled money illegally to settlers. For a time, he espoused a Jewish state on the banks of the Mississippi. Palestine, he maintained, was a “volcano” whose imminent eruption would sap the Zionist capacity for state-building. By 1887, when he published *International Language*, Zamenhof had become disillusioned with Zionism, partly because of infighting among settlers, and partly because his Zionism had always been in tension with his strongly universalist bent.

But while Zamenhof liked to speak of “crossing the Rubicon” from Zionism to universalism, Esperanto was from its inception embedded in a Jewish matrix. It was born in the mean streets of Bialystok, a place of inter-ethnic hostility among Jews, Germans, Russians and Poles. And Zamenhof believed that Esperanto would play a role in the future of Judaism. In 1901, he called on the Jewish intelligentsia of

the Russian Empire to embrace what he called “Hillelism,” a reformed Judaism purged of nationalism, in which Jewish observance was submitted to the test of conscience. Hebrew, he wrote, was a “cadaver,” and Yiddish a “jargon”; instead, the Jews of the future would be unified by Esperanto, a language free of nationalism. In 1905, ridiculed by anti-Semitic French Esperantists, Zamenhof agreed officially to sever Hillelism from Esperanto; thereafter he would refer to the “internal idea” of the international language, while continuing to revise, develop and advocate for what he came to call a “neutral -human religion.” In time, he believed, Hillelism would extend itself to all who sought an ethical religious community based not on ethnicity but on a shared future.

So my story, in its inception, was a Jewish story, and I hoped that it would be embraced by the Jewish press. And it was, with a twist that I found surprising. Reviewers in Jewish journals and websites, by and large, regarded Zamenhof as a tragic figure who made a devil's bargain. Hillelism itself was denigrated. As David Mikics put it in *Tablet Magazine*, “Hillelism had a tweet-sized credo ending in a variation on Hillel's famous command: What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.” Others bemoaned Zamenhof's renunciation of Zionism. Hillel Halkin, among others, remarked that Zamenhof should have stayed a Zionist and tried to preserve the tribe instead of redeeming all humanity. Still others portrayed Zamenhof as a *luftmensch*, a grandiose Quixote who, dying in 1917, never saw how tragically insignificant his vision would look when the largest storm of the 20th Century overwhelmed his people.

I was, perhaps naively, surprised at the animus toward Zamenhof. The Jewish press, I felt, had collectively failed to grasp two crucial points (*mea culpa*, it can take a reviewer to show an author what points needed more emphasis to emerge clearly). First, I'd intended to present Esperanto as a Jewish language, and not simply because Zamenhof offered it to the Jews of Russia. Zamenhof abandoned a three-year project to modernize Yiddish because Esperanto itself took on that work. Esperanto, a “mongrel” language like Yiddish, reversed the ratio of Romance to Slavic and Germanic words in Yiddish to frame a Jewish language pointed toward the west and the future. Second, reviewers were disinclined to read Zamenhof's Hillelism as a Judaizing movement. Zamenhof had an astonishing confidence that Jewish values and culture, purged of nationalism and fluent in Esperanto, would become universally meaningful and practicable. I understand why this is a distasteful claim. It comes dangerously close to conspiracy theories about global

Jewish aspirations, which is precisely how Hitler represented Esperanto in *Mein Kampf* (1925). Among the titles of reviews of my book were some odd choices (probably editorial): in *Haaretz*, “Esperanto: Universal Language, or yet another ‘Jewish Conspiracy?’”; in *Tablet Magazine*, “The Secret language of George Soros.”

To me, Zamenhof was anything but a failure. The language he invented alone at his desk and entrusted to its speakers is now spoken 130 years later on six continents. While he was shortsighted and mistaken in some crucial respects, he was heroic in his passionate commitment to inter-ethnic understanding, his respect for the capacity of human beings to ameliorate society, and his sustained, if unconventional, piety to a God he inherited from Judaism. Though Zamenhof did renounce Zionism (as he did all nationalism without exception), he never denied his Jewishness, even as other Esperantists did their best to protect him from anti-Semitism. In fact, he defended his Jewish identity vigorously and explicitly, reminding his challengers that in his *Dzika street medical practice* (where he also lived), he worked for decades treating eye disease among the poor Jews of Warsaw. When he traveled to England, he gave interviews to *The Jewish Chronicle* and responded when criticized in the New York Yiddish papers *Tageblatt* and *Die Wahrheit*. When anti-Semitic statements appeared in an Esperanto periodical published in Poland, he denounced them.

But perhaps the biggest surprise for me, as my book appeared in the polarized weeks leading up to the election of Donald Trump, was the positive reception of Esperanto itself in the mainstream U.S. press. Reviewers remarked on the vitality of the Esperantists, on their capacity to adapt to changing political climates and on their savvy expansion of the language to speak to new technologies and social practices. And in this deeply divided political climate, nearly all reviewers remarked on the strong affinities Esperantists feel across national, ethnic, racial and religious boundaries.

In fact, they brought me back to my initial, gut response to my first gathering of Esperantists, as I put it in the *Forward* in 2007: “Zamenhof's figurative children, without suspecting it, seem and act so much like Jews.” Esperantists call one another *samideanoj*, meaning “same-idea-nik.” Indeed, their sense of a shared culture, a shared language, even a shared sense of humor — all of these gave me the strong impression of a group of crypto-Jews. As I traveled the world and came to know more and more Esperantists, I felt how reductive it was to represent Esperantists this way, and I distanced myself from this perception. So much so, that I acknowledged in print that I had long been, even before learning the language, a crypto-Esperantist. The truth, of course, lies somewhere in between: between a people over whom Jewishness casts a very long shadow, and a Jewish writer who found her people, unexpectedly, among the *samideanoj* of Esperanto. ■

Esther Schor, Professor of English at Princeton University, is the author of *Bridge of Words: Esperanto and the Dream of a Universal Language* and *Emma Lazarus*, a winner of the National Jewish Book Award.

THREE PROFILES

In this issue we visit three individuals reshaping and redefining Jewish culture and contemporary life.

by BATYA UNGAR-SARGON

MARJORIE INGALL Shattering a Stereotype



“You have the extra baggage with Jewish mothers of basically a whole genre of anti-Semitic and misogynistic stereotypes that you don’t realize that you’ve internalized.”

If the first thing you think of when you hear the phrase “Jewish mother” is “guilt,” you’re not alone, but you are wrong. Marjorie Ingall’s book *Mamaleh Knows Best* (Harmony, 2016) aims to upend that stereotype of the Jewish mother. As opposed to the cultural image we have of a narcissistic, clingy, demanding woman who lives to make her children feel guilty, Ingall argues that Jewish mothers throughout history have been the secret to the outsized success of Jews (170 of the 850 Nobel Prize winners, etc.). “Jewish motherhood is not self-negating or martyring,” Ingall writes in the introduction. “It values women’s intellectual and emotional lives, which benefits the culture as a whole. And it leads to hardworking, creative, independent kids.”

Ingall carries this paradox in her body, in her very mien. Nurturing yet edgy, warm but also unsettling, Ingall embodies the kind of femininity she excavates in her book. It’s both new and old, kind of like Ingall’s tattoos, which depict her daughters’ initials in Hebrew.

Ingall is from Rhode Island, where she went to an Orthodox day school. Her mother was a fervent feminist who got her PhD in moral education in her 50s. Ingall’s father was a psychiatrist with no filter, interested only in the profoundly mentally ill.

After surviving a heart attack at 39, Ingall’s father wrote an ethical will for his two children. “Be what you choose,” he wrote. “Help other people feel good

about themselves.” Also, “Belch loudly at the dinner table.”

But it was Ingall’s mother who did the heavy lifting of the parenting in her home. She believed in finding out what your children are interested in, and nurturing those interests. Ingall was into magic, so her mother enrolled her in a magic course at the library. She indulged Ingall’s love of theater, and never restricted her reading materials. Ingall’s mother was herself a huge reader. The life of the mind was incredibly important to her.

Unlike the rest of us, forever vowing to do everything differently than our parents did, Ingall has done her best to stay solidly in her mother’s lane. “My mom was an excellent, excellent, excellent parent,” Ingall tells me.

Still, the transition from being someone’s child to being someone’s parent was a strange one, Ingall says. “Suddenly I’m the authority figure and that’s weird,” she recalled. “And you have the extra baggage with Jewish mothers of basically a whole genre of anti-Semitic and misogynistic stereotypes that you don’t realize that you’ve internalized.”

Mamaleh Knows Best is the antidote to that harmful genre. It’s full of anecdotes about “badass, funny, super cultured Jewish mothers throughout history,” as Ingall thinks of them; “accomplished, working, creative people who didn’t fit the stereotype of this unworldly home-bunny who only lived to cause guilt.” But the book also

makes an argument: “In my house as in most houses, the mother was the one who did the lion’s share of childrearing and all of the moral lessons, so Jewish mothers have been doing something very right,” Ingall says.

In between being the product of good Jewish mothering and becoming its scribe, Ingall went to Harvard, where she majored in English and American Literature and Folklore and Mythology. After college, Ingall wrote for women’s magazines, eventually ending up at *Sassy*, a sexually progressive, cheeky magazine that focused on culture and politics. Ingall met her husband, and spent some time in San Francisco, before returning to New York and having two daughters. They are now 15 and 12, and Ingall is a columnist for *Tablet Magazine*.

“Nobody needs another parenting book,” Ingall says. She herself hates the ones that try to convince you that you’re doing everything wrong. “I wanted to write one that was as much a Jewish history book as a parenting book and one that wasn’t trying to make you feel bad,” she explains. It has to do with surviving women’s magazines, with all their negative messaging.

Ingall prefers a message from another quarter. “Dr. Spock a million years ago had it right when he said, ‘Trust your instincts. You know more than you think you do,’” she says. “And that is the best parenting advice.” ■

Batya Ungar-Sargon is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn.

NOAH EFRON

Radical Radio Compassion



Every week, Noah Efron's distinctive voice rings out over the airwaves of Tel Aviv and the digital ones of my iPhone. Impossibly witty and unfathomably sharp, Efron is the host of *The Promised Podcast*, an hour-long radio show about Israeli politics. The show is instructive not only about Israeli affairs; it is also a moral education.

Efron achieves this effect with his utter refusal to write anyone off. On the show, which he co-hosts with Allison Kaplan Sommer and Don Futterman, Efron

embodies what I've come to think of as radical compassion. It's almost as though empathy and kindness are an essential part of the life of the mind for Efron.

For example, while Efron identifies with the Israeli left, he refuses to write off the right, arguing repeatedly on the podcast that the left has failed to find a language with which to address the

security fears of more right-leaning Israelis. "One of the keys to politics is coming to understand what is at the heart of other people's world views and their fears and their political commitments, and trying to really talk

to them," Efron tells me when we meet. So well do I know Efron's voice from my weekly appointment with *The Promised Podcast* that meeting him in person, and trying to connect his voice with his face, is at first jarring.

Efron was born in New Jersey and made *aliyah* after college. He served in the IDF, and later became a professor at Bar Ilan University, where he teaches in the Graduate Program in Science, Technology, and Society. He lives in Tel Aviv with his wife and two children, one of whom is finishing high school and one who is serving in the army. He has also served on the City Council of Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

But Efron traces his *Weltanschauung* back to his childhood. "It helped that early on my very beloved sister turned out to be a lesbian," he explains. She is five years older than Efron, and when she came home from her first semester in college, she dropped a stack of classic feminist texts on his bed: Susan Brownmiller, Robin Morgan, Adrienne Rich, Shulamith Firestone. "I'll be back for Christmas — read these," she instructed Efron. And, he remembers, "I spent that month of my life reading these feminist classics. I read every word. It was the most meaningful time of my life." Efron teared up speaking about his sister. It's from her that he says he learned that you never give up on people.

Efron views this radical compassion as part of his Jewish identity, even his Zionist identity. "I think there's a way for people to be deeply what they are,

but have that be a basis of empathy and understanding for other people being deeply who they are," he explained. "That identity is the source of a lot of the power and the pathos and the empathy and the connectivity and the pure animal attraction that I feel for other people, not just people who are like me," he went on.

It is in fact precisely as a Jew that Efron says he is able to appreciate the profound intimacy of otherness. "The beauty and the intricacy, the complexity of other people's lives that are different from mine that I don't understand, become a focus for me because I know what those things are like."

It is Efron's deeply held belief that people with radically different identities can look one another in the eye and recognize each other in a deeper way (than people who share the culture of liberalism, for example), that reduces us to that which is common to us all. This is Zionism for Efron: the belief that a shared history can be infused with decency, moral weight, and moral value. As he put it, "The stuff that we produce when we're particular is beautiful stuff."

If anyone could convince me of that, it would be Noah Efron. Experts say that baby gorillas will explore new toys and new friends much more willingly if they are holding on to their mother's hand while doing so. That is what *The Promised Podcast* is. In the safety of Efron's moral clarity and graciousness, I feel secure enough to release my tenacious grip on my own views and consider, if just for an hour a week, someone else's. ■

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JEFFREY YOSKOWITZ

Cuisine and Culture



Ashkenazi cuisine has a bad rap. With its kugels, its brisket, its *tzimmis*, and its gefilte fish, the culinary history of European Jewry is more commonly the butt of jokes than the source of adulation. It's directly into this sticky vat of *cholent* that Jeffrey Yoskowitz has waded.

Yoskowitz is the co-proprietor of the Gefilteria and co-author of the cookbook *The Gefilte Manifesto* (Flatiron Books, 2016). He's made it his life's mission to revitalize — and rebrand — Ashkenazi food. "I'd love to see people proud of Jewish food, and

not just of kosher food," Yoskowitz tells me. "I'd love to see the Orthodox community embrace *heimish* food again, not just sushi at bar mitzvahs. I'd love to see the downfall of the kosher sushi bar."

Yoskowitz is from New Jersey, where he went to Jewish day school. While his family ate the Jewish dishes during the holidays, more often they were eating like your average American family — mac and cheese and lasagna instead of noodle

kugel. Still, food was a topic of conversation. His father was rebelling against an erstwhile vegetarian mother and his mother had health issues that she would treat with healthy food. "The tension between tradition and nutrition was a big part of our conversation," Yoskowitz says.

As a senior in college, Yoskowitz wrote his thesis on the industrialization of the kosher food industry, from post-War War II to the mid 1960s. He explored how kosher food became big business and evolved into manufacturing. From college, he did a three-month farm fellowship with Adamah at Isabella Friedman, where he learned to farm organically and how to make pickles. It was what he called his "back to the land" moment.

From there he spent some time in Israel researching the food industry, and then worked on a farm in Connecticut, where he got deeper into pickling and preserving and started a business. Then he moved back to New York, working as a writer and with farmers' markets around the City.

Around that time, a friend wrote a book about the death of the Jewish deli. It made Yoskowitz aware of what was at stake, and what might be lost. This coincided with the recession, a time when people were being laid off from jobs and starting food businesses, he says. And then he met his business partner, Liz Alpern.

"We were tired of being embarrassed and ashamed of our food tradition as it was represented in the supermarket aisle," Yoskowitz says. "The way we remembered it in our family homes, it was made with love, made with *care*."

The two wanted to push away from the shlock and the kitsch of Jewish food, and find the true substance. They started cooking together and ultimately decided that they would revolutionize gefilte

fish. The little grey balls in a jar symbolized how bad things had gotten for Ashkenazi food.

Together with Alpern, Yoskowitz opened the Gefilteria. One *New York Times* story later, and they sold out.

Yoskowitz now lives in Brooklyn with his partner. As it was in his parents' home, food for Yoskowitz is a symbol as much as it is a source of sustenance. "It was always a way of accessing my Ashkenazi cultural identity," he says. "While I'm firmly in the food world, food is a proxy for something else: a way of talking about a lost piece of my culture, something that's lacking in the community that I came from, something that got buried and ignored."

Much of what we take to be Jewish food was canonized relatively recently, says Yoskowitz. "There are multiple ways to connect with one's culture and to cook one's food, and you could extrapolate, there are multiple ways to be Jewish," he says.

Yoskowitz hopes to impact the way Jewish Ashkenazi food is seen more generally. He wants people to value Jewish food the way they would Japanese or Italian food. "I want to see people getting in the kitchen, getting excited about making *kreplach*," he says. "I would like people to think of these foods as a cuisine, not just a series of foods. There's always this joke around it; 'Jews, oh we didn't die, so let's eat!' Jews love food and we laugh about it but we don't treat it seriously. We treat it in a joking way. I want people to think about Jewish food as something serious and something beautiful." ■

Much of what we take to be Jewish food was canonized relatively recently, says Yoskowitz. "There are multiple ways to connect with one's culture and to cook one's food, and you could extrapolate, there are multiple ways to be Jewish," he says.



JCC HARLEM

by **ARI L. GOLDMAN**

The Jewish community should invest in Harlem, CONTACT argued in a cover story two years ago. The article, an analysis by Steven I. Weiss, a Harlem resident, recalled that Harlem was once a vibrant center of Jewish life in New York but had lost its Jewish population during much of the 20th Century. Today, Weiss wrote, a growing number of Jews were once again opting to live in Harlem.

“Locations like Harlem,” Weiss added, “need an alternative investment in Jewish growth.” He argued for “a Jewish communal building in Harlem” which, he forecast, “will yield big dividends on both a

Ari L. Goldman, a professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, is an editorial consultant for CONTACT. He is the author of four books, including *The Search for God at Harvard* and *The Late Starters Orchestra*.

financial and a communal level.” He called on New York UJA-Federation to act.

That was written in early 2015.

We are happy to report that 2017 began with the opening of the new JCC Harlem, which is located in a trendy renovated garage space at 318 West 118th Street, between Frederick Douglas Boulevard and Manhattan Avenue. Among its very first events was a weekend of programming for Martin Luther King Jr. Day that included a youth carnival, movies and a community Shabbat meal on the theme of racial justice.

Rabbi Deborah Joselow, the chief planning officer of UJA-Federation, called the CONTACT article and the decision to open a space in Harlem “a happy coincidence,” but not a direct cause and effect. But, as she told the story of how the Federation came to open an outpost in Harlem, I couldn’t help but wonder if CONTACT hadn’t planted the seed. As it turns out, that seed was watered and nurtured by Rabbi David Gedzelman, the president and CEO of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, which publishes CONTACT.

Here is what happened, according to an interview with Rabbi Joselow.

In 2010, a study by Brandeis University identified 11 “emerging” Jewish neighborhoods that needed greater resources from Federation. (The Federation

covers the five boroughs of New York plus Westchester and Long Island.) Among the neighborhoods on the list were several in Brooklyn and some in northern Manhattan. Harlem was not among them.

In response to the study, the Federation went about opening satellite JCCs. The first to open were in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of North Williamsburg, Windsor Terrace and Clinton Hill. When the CONTACT article about Harlem appeared in 2015, the Federation was beginning to look for space in Washington Heights and Inwood.

The article had suggested that the Federation buy property, but, Rabbi Joselow said, that was never on the table. “We are not in the real estate business and have no desire to be,” she said. The model, she explained, is to rent space and then contract with the local JCCs to run the facility.

In early 2016, a real estate developer was given a zoning variance on a property in Harlem if he agreed to lease part of the property for communal use. Rabbi Gedzelman, who lives in Harlem and is also a founding board member of the Harlem Hebrew Language Academy Charter School, heard about the opportunity and urged the leaders of the Federation to have a look. He reminded them of the 2015 article and said that this might just be the place for a Jewish outpost in Harlem.

“We went with him to look at it,” Rabbi Joselow recalled. “It was a magnificent space,” she added, but not something the philanthropy could take on. “Afterward, the developer who showed us the space walked us to his offices. Right next door there was a co-working business in a renovated Harlem garage. He told us it would soon be available.”

At this point, the search for a property in northern Manhattan was not going well, she said. “We couldn’t find anything in Washington Heights. We couldn’t find anything in Inwood. Harlem was just down the hill. We wondered, could it work?”

Rabbi Gedzelman stepped in again. He encouraged both the Federation and the JCC Manhattan to work together to turn the facility into Jewish communal space. “There was no way we weren’t going to say ‘yes’ to this project,” said Rabbi Joy Levitt, the executive director of the JCC Manhattan. The JCC, located on Amsterdam Avenue and 76th Street, is one of the busiest JCCs in the United States. It serves 55,000 people annually in over 1,200 programs.

Its mission, Rabbi Levitt said, is to shape 21st Century Jewish life. “In many ways,” she added, “the Harlem Jewish community looks more like the 21st Century than the Upper West Side. It is more diverse, more dynamic and it is a place with fewer Jewish institutions.”

The much smaller Harlem facility on West 118th Street, is just two and a half miles away, but it is a different world. “This

gives us a chance to explore partnerships with the Hispanic community, with Muslims, with African Americans, people we don’t see in great number on the Upper West Side shtetl.”

Rabbi Joselow added that when the JCC looked at its database it found 3,000 names with zip codes in Harlem. “They didn’t realize the extent of the overlap,” she said. “They jumped into the pool with us.”

The JCC embraced the challenge with great enthusiasm. It has met with local Harlem officials and is exploring programs with organizations like the Police Athletic League and the Harlem School of the Arts. It has also reached out to fellow Jewish organizations such as PJ Library, Lab/Shul, Beineinu and Romemu and the Harlem Minyan.

JCC Harlem is a 6,000-square-foot event space and does not have a gym or pool, although the occasional yoga and Pilates classes are offered. It is also exploring after school programs with Harlem Hebrew and other schools. It does not offer memberships, but charges for individual programs.

The Federation spent \$440,000 to get it up and running and will support it for at least the first two years. The Federation plans to open such satellite facilities in other emerging neighborhoods. “You won’t see us slowing down,” Rabbi Joselow added.

Rabbi Joselow said that the historic nature of Harlem as a Jewish community was not a factor in settling on the Harlem location, but the history is inescapable.

The Federation plans to open such satellite facilities in other emerging neighborhoods. “You won’t see us slowing down,” Rabbi Joselow added.

In the early 1900s, Harlem was the home of numerous synagogues, cheders, JCCs, Jewish businesses and some 175,000 Jews. By 1930, that number was down to 5,000 and kept dropping through the years. It wasn’t until about 10 years ago that a significant number of young Jewish families, priced out of much of Manhattan, began discovering Harlem as a safe and affordable place to live.

Among the first events at the new JCC Harlem was a book talk by Jeffrey Gurock, the author of *The Jews of Harlem: The Rise, Decline, and Revival of a Jewish Community* (NYU Press, 2016). He marveled at the new facility. “This JCC is a throwback to another time,” Gurock said. “Harlem is once again an up-and-coming Jewish neighborhood.” ■



JOURNEY OF JEWISH GENERATIONS

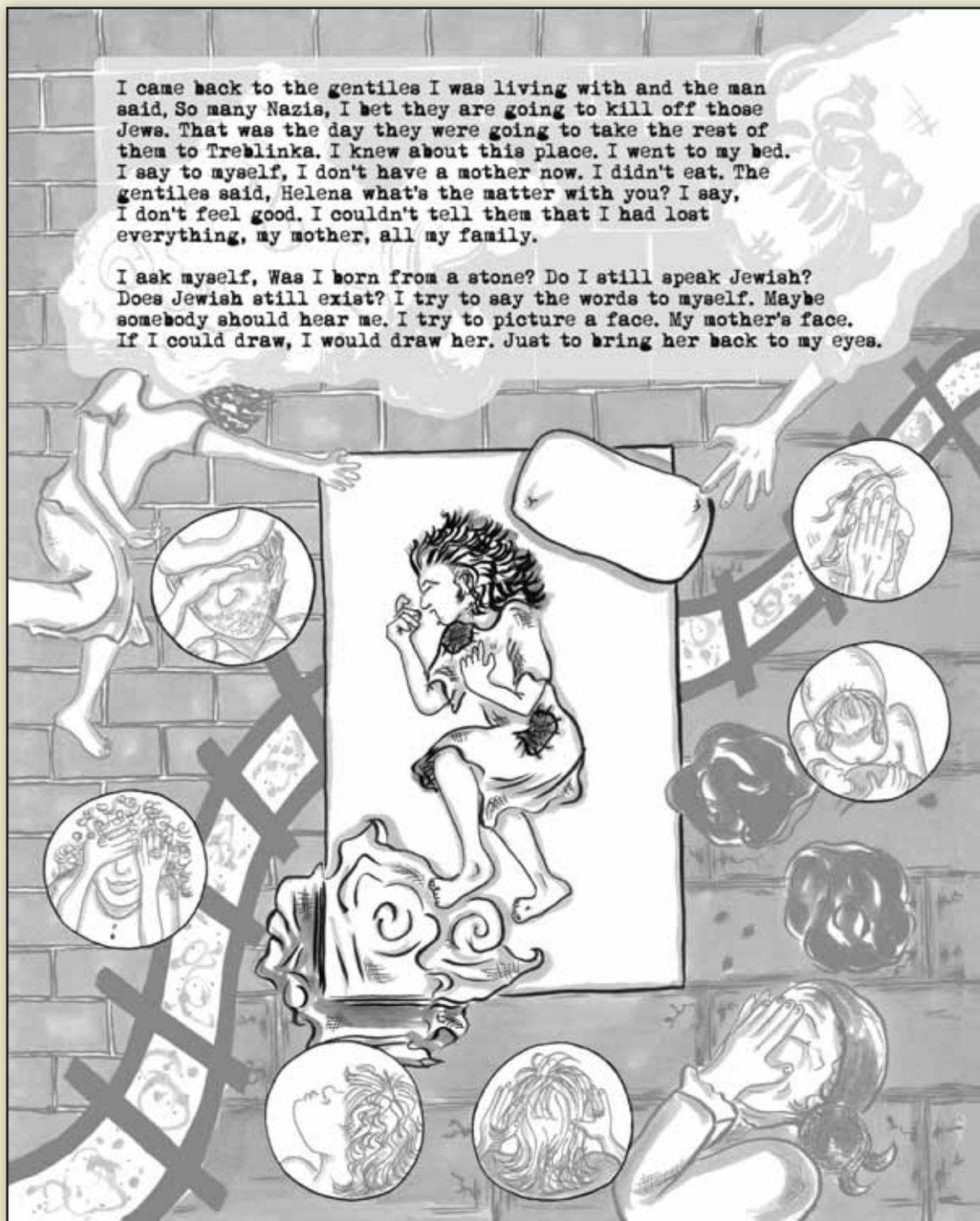
THE COMIC ART OF AMY KURZWEIL

For this month's Featured Artist, we take a look at the writer and comic artist Amy Kurzweil's debut graphic novel, *Flying Couch*.

A story of journeys — physical, intellectual and emotional — *Flying Couch* takes the reader on a tour through a multiplicity of Jewish experiences. Focusing on Amy herself as she navigates diverse outlets for American Jewish expression in college and beyond, the story interweaves Amy's coming-of-age

narrative with her grandmother's tragic experience during the Holocaust. Present-day stories of Amy's experiences with her mother and grandmother, often fraught and always wittily-drawn, link the narratives together. *Flying Couch* is a complicated and thoughtful portrait of three generations of Jewish women, each charting their own relationship to Jewish culture and to each other.

For more of Amy's work, check out her website, amykurzweil.com. ■



Zo you back to school now after all dat traveling?

VOT?

Zo you graduate dis year?

You Mit de catholic boyfriend still?

Okay zo you find yourself a nice

JEWISH-

VAITAMINUTE - OKAY I GO VATCH DE DESPERATE

HOUSEWIFE NOW GOOD-BYE!

LOVE ^{zclicky} YOU

Hi Bubbe-

I-

- No one more -

- no we broke -



Our conversations are always in fragments, like my knowledge of her life.



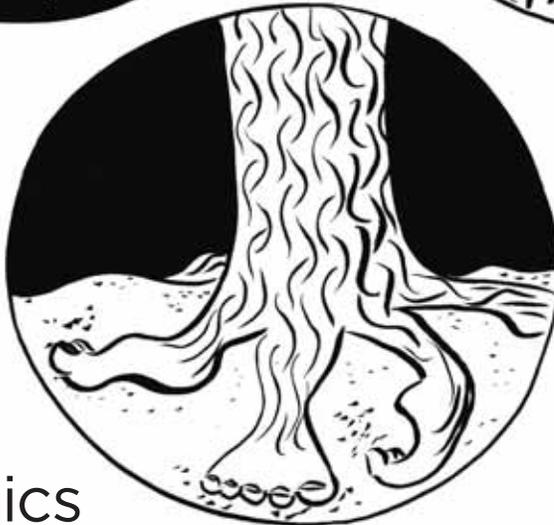
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In any case,
roots are
knowing
that, no matter
how far you
grow your limbs,



you will
always
be fastened
to the
ground.



INSIDE: Comics
by Amy Kurzweil