

contact



FROM JERUSALEM TO BERLIN THE ISRAELI LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE GERMAN CAPITAL

A.J. GOLDMANN

IN THIS ISSUE:



THE STEINHARDT
FOUNDATION
FOR JEWISH LIFE

**A Yiddish
Harvest:
Life on
Yiddish
Farm**

SHULEM DEEN

**Hebrew
Immersion
in Camp**

A. CHIZHIK-
GOLDSCHMIDT

**To be a Man,
Jewish and
Childless**

ELLIOT JAGER

The 613

PAINTINGS BY
ARCHIE RAND

Eli Valley*Editor***Ari L. Goldman***Editorial Consultant***Erica Coleman***Copy Editor***Yakov Wisniewski***Design Director***THE STEINHARDT
FOUNDATION
FOR JEWISH LIFE****Michael H. Steinhardt***Chairman***Sara Berman***Vice Chair***Rabbi David Gedzelman***President and CEO***Eli Schaap***Senior Vice President*

CONTACT is produced and distributed by The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, 729 Seventh Avenue, 9th floor, New York, NY 10019.

All issues of Contact are available for download at www.steinhardtfoundation.org/journal.html

Individual subscriptions are free of charge and are provided as a service to the community. To subscribe, please send your name and mailing address to info@steinhardtfoundation.org.

Phone: (212) 279-2288**Fax:** (212) 279-1155**Email:** info@steinhardtfoundation.org**Website:** www.steinhardtfoundation.org

For media inquiries about The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, please contact Dan Gerstein at dan@dangerstein.com.



Copyright © 2015 by
The Steinhardt Foundation
for Jewish Life.

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 of Dekel and Nina Peretz by William Glucroft. Unless otherwise indicated, all other photographs in this issue appear courtesy of contributors and staff.

T

his issue of CONTACT explores landscapes and languages that together weave a fascinatingly diverse fabric of contemporary Jewish experience.

The issue opens with the multifaceted trend of Israelis seeking fulfilment in Berlin. What drives them to leave the supposed comfort of home? What constitutes Israeli culture in a land far from Israel — a land fraught with unparalleled historical pain — and what successes, challenges and disappointments do they find?

CONTACT also explores two languages in two environments — Yiddish on a farm, and Hebrew at camp — amid recent efforts to strengthen Jewish connections among the next generation. It examines a Zionist approach to teaching Hebrew in America, and considers the underexplored phenomenon of Jewish men who do not have children. Our regular profile feature introduces three individuals who left one community to enter another community — or to forge a path entirely their own. Finally, the issue closes with another journey: the searing art of Archie Rand as he depicts the Biblical commandments in all their lurid and spectacular grandeur.

in this issue

3 FROM JERUSALEM TO BERLIN: THE ISRAELI LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE GERMAN CAPITAL

A. J. Goldmann

5 A YIDDISH HARVEST: LIFE ON YIDDISH FARM

Shulem Deen

7 TEACHING HEBREW IN AMERICA: A ZIONIST APPROACH

Rabbi David Gedzelman

8 HEBREW IMMERSION IN CAMP

A. Chizhik-Goldschmidt

10 THREE PROFILES

Batya Ungar-Sargon

13 TO BE A MAN, JEWISH AND CHILDLESS

Elliot Jager

14 THE 613: PAINTINGS BY ARCHIE RAND

FROM JERUSALEM TO BERLIN

THE ISRAELI LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE GERMAN CAPITAL

by A. J. GOLDMANN

BERLIN — It seemed that a sizeable chunk of this city's Israeli population showed up for an international dance party taking place this summer simultaneously in Tel Aviv and Berlin. In a dispatch about the event, the Jerusalem Post dubbed the two cities “the joint capitals of cool.”

Ronen Kaydar and his wife Osnat surveyed the scene with some satisfaction that they were on the Berlin side of the dance party. “We’re about to celebrate our five-year Berliniversary,” said Kaydar, a boyish 42 year-old from Haifa with a full mane of wavy hair.

The Kaydars are part of a generation of Israelis who have made the German capital their home. The Israeli Embassy estimates that there are between 10,000 and 15,000 Israelis in Berlin, although an exact figure is hard to come by, since many of the Israelis here travel on European passports. Few recent Israeli social phenomena have drawn quite as much attention as Israelis’ ongoing love affair with Berlin. The trend has been lauded and vilified, hailed and denounced.

The latest dustup started in 2014, after an Israeli living in Berlin started anonymously posting his cheap grocery receipts to a Facebook page called “*Olim L’Berlin*” to encourage Israelis to move to Berlin. It became known as the “Milky Protest,” after the famous Israeli pudding, once it was discovered that a similar desert was a good deal cheaper in Berlin than it is in Tel Aviv. The media circus around this non-event showed how sensitive the topic of Israeli immigration to Berlin was. Officials at the highest levels of Israeli government got involved. Yair Lapid, then the finance minister, wrote about how some people were “willing to throw the only state the Jews have into the garbage because it’s easier to live in Berlin.”

Ronen, a writer and translator who often picks up work giving Jewish tours to Israeli visitors, hears a lot of that attitude — and more. “There are two groups of questions I get from my guests,” he said. “The first is, ‘How could you live in Germany and when are you coming back?’ And the second is, ‘Is it really that cheap to live here? Is it really that easy to live here?’ So there are two radically different approaches.” Such questions also represent how Berlin as a

A.J. Goldmann is an American journalist and writer based in Berlin. His articles on European art, culture and German-Jewish issues have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *USA Today*, *The Forward*, *Gramophone* and *Opera News Magazine*.

destination has been both mythologized and, more recently, demonized.

Elad Lapidot, a Jerusalem native who is a researcher at the philosophy department of the Freie Universität Berlin, said that the discourse about Israelis in Berlin has

changed. “For a long time there was a celebratory tone, with everyone being impressed in different ways by the phenomenon,” he said. “Now you are hearing rather critical voices against the phenomenon.” He cited recent newspaper articles that have voiced a newfound skepticism of Israelis in Berlin, accusing them of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish tendencies, nihilism and escapism.

This heavily publicized phenomenon has been largely discussed in generalizations that are inadequate to capture the variety of reasons why thousands of Israelis have traded Ben Yehuda and Rothschild for the cafes of Kreuzberg and the clubs of Mitte. Various economic, political, artistic and lifestyle considerations often stand behind a life decision that many Jews — in Israel and outside of it — still find hard to understand.

“The political situation in Israel is not why I moved to Germany,” Kayder explained. “But it is one of the reasons why we’re not moving back.” He enumerated familiar grievances, including Israel’s shift to the right, despair over the peace process with the Palestinians and the economic difficulties faced by young people, especially the artistically inclined.

Kayder’s personal political views aside, others say it’s less about politics and more about artistic freedom and opportunity. “There’s respect for artists here,” claimed Anat Manor, an artist who was born in Hadera in 1961 and has lived on and off in Germany since her twenties. “It’s different in Israel, where the priorities are different, for obvious reasons, because they need to invest in security and protecting the country. So, the budget is very strapped,” she explains. For the past eight years, Manor, a painter and installation artist, has lived continuously in Berlin with her German husband. She recently completed a documentary about Israeli-German couples.

An artist from the younger generation, Liat



Liat Grayver at her studio in Lichtenberg.

Grayver, 29, a painter from the north of Israel near Afula, said that being an Israeli in Germany is often difficult. “Automatically people stop looking at you as an individual and start looking at you as part of a bigger group that you need to either defend or ignore,” she said. “People here automatically have two connotations: one is the current conflict, the second is the Holocaust. So you find yourself with people who either want to tell you how wonderful Israelis are or how horrible Israelis are.”

This issue flared up with unusual intensity around the time of last summer’s war in Gaza. Even friends started attacking her, asking her to take sides rather than expressing concern about her family. “I felt there was no place for me as an individual going through a crisis of my country falling apart into war and hate,” she explained.

While Grayver finds Berlin an exciting place to be as an artist, she doesn’t feel entirely at home here. “In the end, this is a white European city. I need much more multiculturalism than Berlin actually offers. Afula has more multiculturalism than Berlin,” she claimed about the city that is a 15 minute drive from her hometown. “Berlin is basically for the young, artistic, European middle-class people who move here. And in Afula, you have people from Yemen, India, Russia, Romania and they’re all in this little dinky town in the north of Israel, working class and downtrodden, but you get to know another culture and feel comfortable. I don’t feel that in Berlin.”

Then she paused and added: “That... and the weather sucks,” she said.

It would be difficult to date exactly when Israelis discovered Berlin in great number, but it goes back at least a decade, local Israelis say.

Although they are drawn to Berlin for many of the same reasons as Italians, Spaniards or Americans nowadays, most Israelis acknowledge that for



Everything that is not good in Israel is good here and everything that is good in Israel is not good here

them the city is especially freighted with meaning, even if people aren't always conscious of it.

"Germany is the figure of the necessity of Israel," said Lapidot, the university researcher. "Not being able to live in Germany meant not being able to live in Europe, meaning the impossibility of exile and the necessity of having a Jewish state. So going back to Berlin, on a symbolic level, defies the entire Zionist project, even if you're only talking about Milky."

For Lapidot, moving to Berlin, especially on a German passport (his grandparents were from Germany) also exposes fissures and maybe even contradictions inherent in Israeli identity. "I can trace my family back here five generations. So basically, if you skip a generation and a half of being Israeli, I am, in a sense, much more German than a lot of other Germans here."

Yair Haendler, a 36-year-old doctoral candidate in linguistics at the University of Potsdam, is the sort of Israeli one encounters very rarely in Berlin: a religious one. When we spoke, he had just returned from an extended research trip to Jerusalem. "Everything that is not good in Israel is good here and everything that is good in Israel is not good here," he told me off the bat.

Haendler, whose maternal grandparents lived in Berlin before the war (he, too, has a German passport), said he couldn't exactly explain his attraction to Germany or why he immediately felt at home here. From the first time he visited Berlin he was fascinated by the city. When he and his wife Cecilia were both accepted into academic programs in the Berlin metropolitan area, the deal was sealed.

Five years later, he feels Berlin offers optimal opportunities for them in every realm but the reli-

gious one. "It's a challenge on many fronts," he says, naming problems inside the Jewish community as well as difficulties of living in a secular society. "If you compare Berlin to New York or Israel, you almost have nothing here. You have three Orthodox synagogues and no kosher meat restaurants except for the one in Chabad." For the time being, Haendler seems resigned to not having a real community or synagogue where he feels that he belongs. Two other observant Israeli couples in Berlin who were close friends over the past year recently moved back to Israel, but not before benefiting from Germany's luxurious, state-funded maternity care.

Haendler said he's tempted to see the Israeli rush on Berlin as a fad, much the same way young Israelis once went travelling in Nepal, India and South America. Still, the sheer number of Israelis in Berlin right now gives him pause. "I'm actually quite curious to see what kind of influence they're going to have here. I mean, the numbers are really big."

At the international dance party in August, Dekel Peretz was tossing back a beer with some friends as Israelis, Germans and others danced on the artificial beach, played backgammon and polished off plastic bowls of humus and babaganoush. Like many present, Peretz, a 36-year-old Ra'anana native, had a signature Tel Aviv look, his tank top and shades issuing a sharp retort to the fussy scenester style that dominates in many of Berlin's trendy quarters.

Peretz thinks that Israeli immigration to Berlin has normalized in the 13 years since he moved here for love. Nowadays, he doesn't think Israelis flock to Berlin for significantly different reasons than anyone else. Like recent transplants

from Italy or Spain, many Israelis — especially those with European passports — are drawn here for economic reasons or job opportunities. It has less to do with making a political statement, of choosing Berlin over Israel, or of actively searching for an alternative lifestyle.

"Ten years ago, people who were coming were more politically, ideologically or lifestyle oriented people. Israeli immigration to Berlin today is very different from what it was even five years ago. Back then, you would not have had so many young families," Peretz indicated the children in bathing suits racing through the sand, dodging sweaty *mathot*, or Israeli paddleball, players. "And now you're finding a lot more middle-class families who come." Generally speaking, he sees the Israel society represented in Berlin as far more multifaceted than it was previously.

One thing that has changed is that a decade ago, flights between Tel Aviv and Berlin were far more expensive. Currently four airlines offer regular flights from Tel Aviv to Berlin: El Al's low-cost UP airline, Air Berlin, easyJet and Lufthansa.

"There is more mobility, so the people who are coming now are not necessarily escaping Israel, but they're actually living in both of these worlds," Peretz added. "They're not disconnected anymore, like the people who came here a decade ago. There was no Facebook back then. Back then, this was really a decision to leave the world you are in and now it's not like that. It's a more mobile society where people can live in both Tel Aviv and Berlin at the same time without having to make a choice. Of course, other choices are being made, like raising your children in German-language schools. But these are different questions and problems."

Another shift that has taken place is in Israelis' attitudes towards Berlin. "My parents were shocked when I moved to Berlin," Peretz admits. "Now, a lot of parents realize they want their children to have a good future and that the chances of that happening in Israel are not that high, and so they actually support their children moving to Berlin." Germany's public support of Israel adds to this view. Like others, Peretz credits Chancellor Angela Merkel. "Germany is also seen today as a good place for Jews."

Finding his place within a Jewish community in Berlin is important to Peretz, even if he realizes that many Israelis want nothing to do with institutionalized religion. "Most Israelis who come here need time to cool down from the whole tension between secular and religious Jews in Israel. But the ones who've been here a bit longer and have families and want to find ways to keep their families Jewish will turn to Judaism."

Peretz and his German wife Nina have been very active in the modest but significant renaissance of a century-old community synagogue in Kreuzberg called the Fraenkelufer. "This is why building a Jewish community in which we define what we understand by practicing Judaism is very important to me. We wouldn't invest all this effort in the synagogue, volunteer our energy and sweep the floors at late hours after Shabbos dinner if we didn't think we were doing it for our future and for our [future] children, creating a place in Berlin where we can be Jewish together." ■

A YIDDISH HARVEST: LIFE ON YIDDISH FARM

by SHULEM DEEN

“If language is just for communication, why do you need a thousand languages?”

“How do you make Yiddish sexy?” I asked Naftali Ejdelman, Education Director of Yiddish Farm, a 225-acre property in New Hampton, N.Y.

On my mind was the popular stereotype of the language as spoken mostly by octogenarians and Hasidic Jews.

“It already is,” Ejdelman said. He pointed to the group of young people around the table with us. “People who study Yiddish are the hippest people around.”

“Hip” is perhaps subjective, but the dozen or so college students there for a ten-day, full-immersion program in Yiddish and farming fit my own definition for hip — young, bookish and earnestly idealistic.

I was visiting Yiddish Farm after several years of a mild itch to learn more about the place. Founded in 2013 by Naftali Ejdelman and Yisroel Bass, Yiddish Farm was established for growing organic wheat and garlic, raising farm animals — goats, sheep, chickens — and for conducting day-to-day affairs in one of the most improbable languages for modern-day farming: Yiddish.

I had known the founders for several years and have my own abiding love for Yiddish, and yet, the farm’s precise purpose eluded me: it seemed so quixotic, so *random* — Yiddish, on a *farm*? In 2015?

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 *Forward*, and his work has appeared in *The New Republic*, *Salon*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Tablet* and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn.



“All visitors must bring beer,” Ejdelman had emailed me before I came. “It’s a *minhag kadmoynim*,” a custom of the ancients. And so I dutifully arrived with a six-pack of Samuel Adams and followed Ejdelman into the main building. The inside more closely resembled a Hasidic *shtiebel* than a farmhouse: a folded prayer shawl was tossed onto a pile of prayer books in a corner, and a white tablecloth, slightly stained in some spots, was spread across a large table. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the place looked as if still arranged for yesterday’s Shabbos meal.

Despite these religious accoutrements (both Ejdelman and Bass are observant Jews, and only kosher food is served), Yiddish Farm’s purpose is decidedly secular. On the wall is a framed, hand-drawn declaration in Yiddish which lists the farm’s three goals: A broadened role for the Yiddish language, unity among Yiddish speakers, and “preserving the land” through organic farming.

Ejdelman and I sat down to talk, and soon we were joined by Bass and his wife Yamit — the two met when she came to take Yiddish classes one summer — and soon students, too, trickled in to join us.

Ejdelman, whose manner is light and boyish despite a short red beard and bookish spectacles, spoke easily about the value of keeping Yiddish vibrant. “If language is just for communication, why do you need a thousand languages?” The notion that language holds more than just words, that it is also a container for identity, culture and ideas is plain to him. “Try to maintain Latino culture without Spanish,” he says. “You just can’t.”

As a language without a country, however, Yiddish faces a unique challenge. For a language to thrive, it requires a designated space, apart from the dominant language. And so, Ejdelman and Bass founded Yiddish Farm.

I don’t remember when I first heard about modern Yiddishists and their efforts to keep Yiddish alive, but I do remember my reaction when told that Yiddish was dying.

Huh?

It seemed such a strange claim, when all around me thousands spoke it, many of whom spoke little else — including my own five children.

I’d spent until age 33 within the insular worlds of the Satmar and Skver Hasidim in Brooklyn and Rockland County, N.Y., where the spoken language was almost exclusively Yiddish. It was the language in which I’d spent endless hours of Talmud study, gossiped with friends, loved (and fought with) my wife, and loved (and yelled at) my kids. The notion that Yiddish was dying seemed not only ludicrous but offensive.

It wasn’t until I left the Hasidic world, after I’d suffered a faith crisis followed by an implosion of my social and familial connections (including my marriage), and after I’d spent several years as a secular Jew in New York, that I began to understand: I missed Yiddish. Trickle of nostalgia turned into a steady drip, if not quite a constant flow, but Yiddish outside of the Hasidic world did not appear readily available. Sure, I could speak it. To myself.

In recent decades, Yiddish, once beloved and ubiquitous — at least to Ashkenazi Jews — has become known largely for schmaltzy nostal-



Yiddish is perhaps like a favorite dish from your grandmother's home.

gia, kvetchy inflections, joke punchlines and black-hatted Hasidim. Still, even if Yiddish today emitted little more than the reflective sheen of its old grandeur, for a long time I wasn't troubled. If the language was dying, I thought: *nu*, things die — plants, animals, humans — nothing lives forever. What's the *tummel*?

It wasn't until March of this year, when I was asked to give a video interview in Yiddish for the *Forverts*, now a weekly and one of the last remaining Yiddish newspapers, that I found something I never thought possible: After nearly eight years out of the Hasidic world, I was losing fluency in Yiddish. The loss was slight, barely perceptible, but I could feel it. For question after question, I had to think longer, harder — *what's that word?* my mind, again and again, tried to frantically recall. Even if the idea of Yiddish dying seemed remote, the idea that it was dying in *me* — or at least losing some life — began to feel very real.

And so I wondered: Could I stand to lose Yiddish? And if indeed secular Yiddish was dying, what could I do to hold onto it for myself?



Can Yiddish be a lingua franca in a world in which Jews do not seek to keep themselves apart? Can it be divorced from its religious roots?

Ann Toback, Executive Director of the Workmen's Circle, oversees an impressive list of Jewish cultural programs which include Yiddish classes for both adults and children. Fluency, she told me, isn't necessarily the goal. "We deal with Jewish identity as a whole, and Yiddish is part of that," she says. "How can you take away a language that was the predominant Jewish language 100 years ago? You can't."

Aside from the Workmen's Circle's Yiddish programs, there are numerous activities around Yiddish across the world: classes, summer camps, culture festivals and retreats. There are

two active Yiddish theatre companies. *Yiddish Vokh*, a weeklong festival dedicated to Yiddish, a project of *Yugntruf* — Youth for Yiddish — draws hundreds each summer. *KlezKanada*, an annual retreat in the Laurentian Mountains packed with arts and film programming, draws a veritable who's who from the world of contemporary Yiddish culture. The website *YiddishPOP*, an animated game that teaches Yiddish basics, is on several Yiddish-promoting groups' must-play lists.

Certainly, a lot of Yiddish is being learned.

Learning Yiddish, however, whether it's a couple hundred words or an advanced reading skill, is different from a language used in day-to-day life, which is why Yiddish Farm stands out with its peculiar mission: milking goats, harvesting wheat, planting garlic — all in Yiddish.

"It's immersive," Ejdelman told me, "not episodal."

How do you make Yiddish sexy? I had asked Ejdelman, and I suppose what I really wanted to know was: how do we get everyone to speak it? Or at least enough people for it to be considered *alive*.

Perhaps that's the wrong question, though. Perhaps aliveness isn't measured by the number of speakers, but by the fervor and enthusiasm of those who embrace it, promote it, learn it, teach it.

At Yiddish Farm, I looked around at the students who had come from all across the country — New England, the Midwest, the West Coast — and realized that my own attachment to Yiddish was, compared to theirs, quite limited. These students were there to embrace it all — they were happy to read any book, study it in any context, speak it while milking a goat or working in the garlic fields. They'd happily take any dialect or regional accent without prejudice.

I, on the other hand, missed a particular

kind of Yiddish, one rooted in religious ritual and practice, tied to a particular lifestyle, with particular accents and cadences, and filled with references I knew and understood. When I miss Yiddish, it is not the voluminous works of secular Yiddish literature, but the Yiddish of the Hasidic street, of the Hasidic home, the *shul*, the *mikve*, the *cheder*. But I am beginning to learn that Yiddish language and culture is more than just *my* experience of Yiddish.

To be sure, many of the classic Yiddish works were heavily informed by ritual and religious practice. From Sholem Aleichem's *shtetl* tales to Chaim Grade's *Yeshiva*, the stories are layered in the language of religious texts and lore. As Shane Baker, a 44-year-old Yiddish theatre actor, vaudevillian, magician and all around *kuntzler* told me regarding Bashevis Singer's use of Talmudic references: "They are as sensitive and beautiful as anything done by Shakespeare, but who's going to catch them?"

Perhaps not many, and that is unfortunate. But as culture changes, so does the language with it, and while some underlying components might be lost or forgotten as Yiddish speakers moved into different worlds, others come to replace it.

Yiddish is perhaps like a favorite dish from your grandmother's home; it isn't just about the food or its ingredients, or even the taste, but also the warm associations formed by the unique flavors, the unforgettable aromas, even the old china it was served on. The dish might be preserved, but it will also change, some ingredients substituted for others, prepared in new ways. A dish might also become unrecognizable through the passage of time (zucchini *latkes*, anyone? veal *cholent*?), but perhaps that is as it should be. Language, like a grandmother's dish, even when it is passed on, it changes.

And maybe that is exactly what makes it alive. And sexy. ■

What is the most effective way to teach Hebrew in America? In the Fall of 2007, we at The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life began to tackle that question by analyzing the viability of developing and supporting Hebrew language charter schools in New York and beyond. Charter schools, which are public schools, publicly funded but independently run, seemed like a promising vehicle for teaching Hebrew. After all, there are charter schools around the country that focus on dance, music, French, Spanish, Arabic, yoga and many other foci. How would we design a

isn't simply an immersion method, but an immersion method in which teachers continuously develop pedagogic strategies to help students internalize functional elements of language.

Ringvald, who when we first met her was the director of Hebrew and Arabic language at Brandeis University, adapted the method for use among primary school students at the Jewish Community Day School in Boston from its founding in 1995.

In February of 2008 we assembled a group of experienced public school educators to visit JCDS and determine if this Hebrew methodology would

work in the development of the School of Hebrew at Middlebury College, where she is now the CV Starr Research Professor of Languages and Linguistics.

To date, only a handful of Jewish day schools have adopted this approach. Some fear that it favors oral language over textual knowledge. But the research suggests otherwise: Whether it's Mandarin, German, Spanish or Hebrew, when students first gain oral proficiency, literacy, taught correctly, has a much greater foundation to build on. That's the way we learn languages naturally. When language instruction begins with letter recognition and phonetic decoding before the language is comprehensible, both oral proficiency and literacy suffer. Those of us who are native English speakers didn't first learn English by tasting honey that had been joyfully smeared on the letter "A" when we were three years old. We listened for months and months to the emotion-laden language of our parents with our small brains growing synapses in response before we ever produced a word. As we gained cognitive capacity, we understood more and more orally until we began to produce spoken language in the most rudimentary ways. We only learned to begin to read English at four, five or six years old after we could understand, comprehend and *speak* the language. Why in most of the settings where Hebrew is taught in the Diaspora do we try to teach letter recognition and literacy before ever trying to teach oral comprehension and facility? I think the answer is deeply embedded in the history of Jewish exile.

It is a tremendous fact of creative survival that the Jewish People, having lost its land and its natural connection to spoken Hebrew, preserved its national language primarily as a written and liturgical language. We developed educational traditions by which to do so starting with the nostalgic tradition of actually beginning a young child's learning of Hebrew by having him or her taste the honey that has been poured over the Hebrew letter Aleph. Learning began and in some quarters still begins with letters rather than heard language. Hebrew in exile was an unnatural language and therefore was preserved through unnatural means.

However, with the Zionist revolution and the resurrection, modernization and secularization of the Hebrew language in the modern state of Israel, Hebrew returned to being once again a natural spoken language. Through revolutionary discipline and force of will, Zionism's pioneers created a new reality and the return of Hebrew to being a natural phenomenon was central to that new reality. It's not clear whether the Jewish educational establishment in the Diaspora has thought through the educational implications of the success of Zionism for the teaching of the Hebrew language. Many Jewish schools still teach Hebrew as if Hebrew is not the language that Israelis use daily in their businesses and schools and theaters and restaurants and beaches, as if the new, living reality of a Hebrew speaking society in Israel doesn't exist.

To my mind, the approach to Hebrew education that calls us to first speak and then write is exactly what the founders of Zionism had in mind. Teaching Hebrew this way can rightly be called a Zionist approach. Teaching in the old way cannot. The founders of Zionism dreamed of a day when Hebrew would become a natural language. That day has arrived and we must seize it by teaching in a way that puts spoken Hebrew first. Hebrew literacy will be the better for it. ■

TEACHING HEBREW IN AMERICA: A ZIONIST APPROACH

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

school model focused on teaching the Hebrew language? Because these would be public schools, we understood the imperative that they be diverse and open to children of all backgrounds. We also knew that the best public schools differentiate instruction, taking into continuous account the strengths and challenges of every child through the use of data and assessment. As a result of our research, we chose the Columbia University Teachers College "workshop model," which begins each lesson with whole class instruction and quickly moves to small group learning to build particular skill capacities in each child, to guide the overall educational philosophy of our model. We then sought to find an approach to Hebrew instruction that would best align with the educational culture that would flow from this.

Our big breakthrough was to partner with Professor Vardit Ringvald, the co-founder, along with Arnee Winshall, of an organization called Hebrew at the Center, a dynamic program that adapts the Proficiency Approach for second language acquisition to the teaching of Hebrew. This approach enables students to function in Hebrew in four necessary skill areas: understanding, speaking, reading and writing. By adopting functionality as a core principle, the Proficiency Approach helps children internalize the target language.

Language, Dr. Ringvald said, was not to be learned through the memorization of word lists and rote learning of grammatical rules and structures. Instead, language is a relational experience to be internalized through lived experiences that imprint in authentic ways. Teaching of language is effective only if each student is assessed in a disciplined and consistent way that gives teachers the ongoing data they need to help each student move forward in mastery of real lived language. In this approach, students do not learn *about* the target language; they learn *in* the language. Translation is strongly discouraged. Teachers in this methodology never speak English to students. The connection between student and teacher is exclusively in Hebrew.

The Proficiency Approach works because it parallels the natural process by which human beings learn native language as infants, toddlers and children. Language is heard, understood, spoken, read and written — in that natural order. This

be a good fit for a workshop model based school.

Not only did the team come back highly encouraged that the Proficiency Approach was an excellent fit for our general design, but they (and we) observed students speaking and understanding Hebrew in ways that we had just not seen at other Jewish day schools. For example, a group of students, not from Israeli families, led us through the school on a tour speaking exclusively in Hebrew and conversing informally in a way that was obviously not in any way rehearsed. It was clear to us that we could adapt this approach to a public school setting.

The guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) became part of Hebrew Language Academy Charter Schools (HLA) educational goals as articulated in the Charter authorized by the New York City Department of Education. HLA opened its doors in Brooklyn, NY in August 2009. At the same time, together with our philanthropic partners in The Areivim Philanthropic Group, we founded the Hebrew Charter School Center to support the development of Hebrew Charter Schools nationwide. We were on our way to being a strong force for championing the Proficiency Approach in the teaching of Hebrew.

Seven years later, nine Hebrew charter schools with 1,700 students are open in Brooklyn, Harlem, San Diego, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., East Brunswick, N.J. and Minneapolis. Together they make up the Hebrew Charter School Center's network of schools, all teaching Hebrew per this approach. Professional educators at the Hebrew Charter School Center and at the school level have learned a tremendous amount since our first school opened as to how to best implement this approach and are learning and adapting continuously. In addition, we at The Steinhardt Foundation have worked together with Areivim to adapt this method to day camp settings with the Areivim Hebrew at Camp program. Now working together with the Foundation for Jewish Camp, we implemented Hebrew immersion programs at five day camps during the summer of 2015 and hope to ramp up the program considerably over the next few years. (See related story on page 8.)

Whether in charter schools or at camp, kids are understanding and speaking Hebrew in ways that we were told could never happen just a few years ago. We at the Foundation are so encouraged with seeing the proof of Professor Ringvald's approach that we have made a significant grant to support her

Rabbi David Gedzelman is the President and CEO of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.



HEBREW IMMERSION IN CAMP

by A. CHIZHIK-GOLDSCHMIDT

The camp schedule features a robust program: The day begins with *migrash* (a daily dance-off), and includes sports, art, cooking, swimming twice a day and science, among other activities.

Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt is a journalist living in New York City. Her essays have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Tablet* and the *Forward*, and she is a frequent contributor to *Haaretz*. She lives with her husband, Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt, in Manhattan.

There's a small buzzing slice of Israeli culture right in the heart of Rockland County. Up the winding country roads of Nyack, on a sprawling green estate, it's 8:30 AM, and Israeli music is blasting. Hundreds of children in colorful T-shirts, shorts and sandals are running towards the central field to dance to Tel Aviv's latest hits.

Welcome to Sha'ar, Camp Ramah's Areivim Hebrew at Camp program: seven weeks designed to instill Hebrew language fluency in young children through full language immersion. Here, roughly half of the campers are from day school, half are from public school, and some are from charter schools. Their knowledge of Hebrew is varied: some come from Israeli homes, while others don't know a word of Hebrew when they first enter camp.

Camp Ramah is only the first of many summer day camps featuring the Hebrew immersion program, with camps in JCCs across North America, including Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit and Toronto. The immersion program at Ramah launched three years ago and began with 20 campers. This past summer it had 63 campers, and demand is only growing.

The camp schedule features a robust program: The day begins with *migrash* (a daily dance-off), and includes sports, art, cooking,

swimming twice a day and science, among other activities. In Ramah's immersion track, all activities are held and taught in Hebrew — regardless of the child's background in the language.

Along with the rest of the counselors, the Areivim Hebrew at Camp counselors — which include Israelis brought to America by The Jewish Agency as well as local fluent Hebrew speakers — have their own program, too, once the campers go home: learning sessions, social activities, bonfires. It's a dual program — as in all of Camp Ramah, the staffers are at once participants and counselors. "You come as a college kid and want to come back," said Gideon Levin, a teacher at Heschel and a Ramah administrator who has worked at Ramah for 16 years now.

Amy Skopp Cooper, Director of Ramah Nyack and National Associate Director for the Ramah movement, spent her first summer at Camp Ramah when she was 16 and has worked professionally for the movement for 19 years. "Sha'ar has inspired us and demonstrated that we can really create a Hebrew immersive experience in camp," she says, smiling widely. "It works in seven and a half weeks. Within the first three weeks, we hear kids experimenting with Hebrew, and after three years, we have kids who are really speaking Hebrew. The ease

and comfort they feel within our community allows for that.”

Guy Shachar, from Reut, Israel, has been working at Ramah for five years. Two summers ago he was a counselor in Sha’ar, and this past summer he oversaw Sha’ar counselors.

“Every time I’m here, there’s so much energy,” he says. “It takes you to your very edge, this work. But it doesn’t matter to me that the work is so hard, this is my second home. I fell in love with the project. It’s informal education, we teach Hebrew with fun. They absorb so much more when it’s fun for them, because it’s nice here.”

Guy works alongside Yael Cohen — the two make a smiling duo, whom the campers greet with enthusiasm. “When I came here, I didn’t understand why I did it,” said Yael. “But now I know — to see how kids love Hebrew, how parents are so happy that their kids are returning home speaking Hebrew. It’s not just fun. I’m also giving, through the Hebrew language.” Yael shows how the children learn new words and phrases in all activities — lunch, she says, while standing in the middle of a bustling cafeteria, “is one of the most key moments for learning, as the children are encouraged to ask for food and utensils entirely in Hebrew.”

The Areivim Hebrew at Camp program was designed by a team of linguistic professionals spearheaded by Vardit Ringvald, professor and director of the School of Hebrew at Middlebury College, and who originally hails from Netanya, Israel. “I got involved with the charter schools first, because of my expertise in Hebrew language acquisition,” Ringvald explains. “Here, I was asked to conceptualize how Hebrew in camp can happen. There’s a difference between the charter schools and the camps, what can be used in both and what differs. Here, in the camp model, it was very interesting how they embedded the kids in Hebrew, what choices they made in language use, activities, etc. And it was very impressive to see the outcomes. The kids were



really able to communicate in Hebrew.”

The program at Ramah was launched by The Areivim Philanthropic Group with funding from The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life and The AVI CHAI Foundation. The Areivim Philanthropic Group now partners with the Foundation for Jewish Camp, which oversees the program across North America

Rabbi David Gedzelman, President and CEO of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, explains the thinking behind it: “One of the pillars for the Areivim Philanthropic Group, a consortium of nine foundations, is Hebrew education. Four years ago, we began exploring ideas for Hebrew in America. The group wanted to do more — to teach Hebrew in camp, to take the methodology from our Hebrew language charter schools and adapt it to a fun, informal setting. After doing initial

research, we understood that no previous models for Hebrew at camp were effective, and that we needed something new. In 2013, The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life and AVI CHAI funded Camp Ramah in Nyack, with 20 kids in the trial Hebrew immersion program. Every child was followed and assessed, and we saw a real change in the children. My six-year-old son, Ziv, who participated in the program this past summer, has 19- to 22-year-old male Israeli counselors, some just out of the Israeli army. In the fourth week of camp, he told me in Hebrew, “Abba, my children will be born in Israel and I will be a soldier.” Gedzelman’s voice grows emotional. “The kids’ cool Israeli counselors, Yuval and Ido, were idolized; their Israeliness is conveyed and transmitted in a more powerful way when they speak to children in Hebrew than when *shlichim* speak in heavily accented English to children.”

“We are excited to be collaborating on this transformational project,” said Jeremy Finger- man, Chief Executive Officer of the Foundation for Jewish Camp. “Our Foundation believes that Hebrew language experienced in a joyous, positive, fun-filled environment can be a powerful vehicle for Jewish engagement and for connecting with Israel.”

“We see serious potential here,” Gedzelman says. “In the next five years, we can be doing this in scores of camps. We see bringing Israeli Hebrew to North American Jews as a rich content piece for people’s Jewish lives, who may not necessarily be interested in religious experiences. It provides real, deep, intimate, tangible connection to Jewish civilization, that doesn’t require religious commitment, but nonetheless has substantive content for Jewish life. So we want to push Hebrew in a number of ways. We started with charter schools, now we’re working on this in camps but also exploring bringing Hebrew to public middle and high schools. There’s nothing like teaching culture and history through language. There’s nothing like it.” ■



THREE PROFILES

In this issue we visit individuals who were born into one community and have subsequently refurbished, reinvented or reclaimed their bonds to Jewish life.

By **BATYA UNGAR-SARGON**

LEAH VINCENT Proudly Frei



Leah Vincent has a message. “The Jewish world is failing its responsibility to hold ultra-Orthodoxy accountable for the sins it commits,” she told me recently over tea in a café in Williamsburg.

If anyone is an authority on the subject, it’s Vincent. Her memoir *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation After my Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* (Nan A. Talese, 2014) chronicles in harrowing detail the loneliness, hunger, suicidal desperation and repeated sexual assaults she suffered after being thrown out of her parents’ ultra-Orthodox home and left to fend for herself at the age of 16. She is a proud member of the OTD community — a group of individuals who have gone “Off the *Derech*” or path, making their way out of the cloistered Hasidic and Yeshivish (non-Hasidic, ultra-Orthodox) worlds and into secular society. The challenges of this exit are enormous. Many struggle with such basic needs as housing, which is particularly horrifying for those coming from a world where your community would never let you go homeless or hungry. Suicidal ideation — and even suicide — is all too common. Many struggle with financial security after a childhood in which secular studies were neglected or nonexistent.

Unlike many who choose to leave the ultra-Orthodox community, Vincent was pushed out. Perhaps for this reason, she still understands the allure of the world she left behind. “Life is terrifying and very difficult and the more we progress, the scarier it gets,” she said. “I would *love* to be able to outsource every decision to someone who would tell me what God wants — it

would be such a huge relief!”

It’s from this unique vantage point that Vincent was able to identify a powerful if dangerous myth that has shaped American Jewish identity, namely, that Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy are more authentic forms of being Jewish than Reform or Conservative. It’s a myth that has never been challenged and yet, to Vincent’s mind, must be. “If you care about Jewish identity, you should care about what other Jews are doing, especially the most visible and most quickly growing demographic of Jews,” she said. This means that less fundamentalist streams of Judaism must hold the ultra-Orthodox world responsible for its shortcomings, such as the treatment of women, the right to a self-determined life, and the way the abuse of children is handled.

Vincent herself has a strong Jewish identity, as a cultural Jew — evidenced by the issues she cares about as well as her eccentric wardrobe. Vincent tends to dress like an ultra-Orthodox male, donning a black fedora and *tsisis* as a way of manifesting her ethnic identity. Since leaving ultra-Orthodoxy, she has earned a graduate degree from Harvard. She is currently at work on a novel, and is teaching a class at City College on female sexuality in Judaism with a focus on modesty. The class takes students beyond the binary options of whether modesty is oppressive to women or a feminist choice. Vincent hopes to question what needs the laws of modesty fulfill in a world full of danger to women, and how else might those needs be addressed.

It’s a danger Vincent has experi-

enced firsthand, one which she details in her book. In many ways, her story fulfilled the prophecies she’d been told as a child: that if she strayed from the ultra-Orthodox path, she would end up a victim of sexual violence and even suicide. In fact, she worried that the book would be viewed as evidence of that prophecy fulfilled.

But Vincent had a powerful need to get her story out, especially after years during which no one wanted to hear it. “A big part of what damaged me is my parents’ insistence that my story is a lie,” she explained, an insistence that culminated in her father’s note to the press alleging that the memoir was full of falsehoods and that Vincent was mentally unstable. “To rewrite it in my way instead of adopting their experience of it was an incredibly empowering experience.” She went on, “To be honest, a lot of my motivation was selfish. I wanted to let that child speak and tell her story.”

Her hope is that the book encourages other women to speak their truth, and that it starts conversations about “the cost of modesty and patriarchy and ultra-Orthodoxy, for women in particular.”

Recently, Vincent found herself trying to explain to her three-year-old daughter the difference between being *frum*—religious—and *frei*—secular, literally free in Yiddish. “If you’re *frum* and you’re a girl, boys make all the decisions for you,” Vincent said. Then she explained the strict dress code that divides the genders. Her daughter, who loves dresses, said, “I want to be *frum*!” To which Vincent replied, “That’s the great thing about being *frei*. You can choose whatever you want.” ■

That’s the great thing about being frei. You can choose whatever you want.

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

CHRISTOPHER MCCANNELL

An Open Community



Christopher McCannell is a Jew by choice.

Born in Portland, Maine, McCannell was confirmed as a Catholic and went to a Jesuit high school and college. Though he respected Catholicism, he never really understood it, and throughout college and his twenties, he went to a number of different services — Episcopalian, Lutheran — trying to find a spiritual home, but nothing felt quite right. His spiritual journey was further complicated when he came out as gay at age 29.

Throughout this time, McCannell was attracted to the seasonal rituals of his Jewish friends, their Shabbat dinners, their *seders*, the rhythms of their practice and the value placed on community.

“What’s great about Judaism is that there are so many entry points,” McCannell said, of the religion’s draw. “I wanted to be part of a community, part of something bigger than myself.”

After college, he worked on Capitol Hill, first as chief of staff to Congressman Joseph Crowley, then for (former) Congressman Michael McMahon. Throughout this time, he continued to pursue social connections in the Jewish world.

“I was always doing more things that were Jewish, but I wasn’t authentically or *halachically* Jewish,” he told me over lunch in Brooklyn. In 2012, at

the age of 42, McCannell finally went to talk to a rabbi “to see if there was something there that I wanted to pursue.” It was then that he decided to convert with the help of Reform Rabbi Aaron Miller.

“What’s great about Judaism is that there are so many entry points,” McCannell said, of the religion’s draw. “I wanted to be part of a community, part of something bigger than myself.”

It felt very natural, he recalled. “I already knew a lot about it from beforehand from going to Israel, reading a lot, being engaged.”

Back when he was in college, before coming out, McCannell participated in a program called Volunteers for Israel. He received \$1,000 to go to Israel, where he lived on an army base. It was a formative experience, and one McCannell very much wanted to replicate. He went back again when he was working for Crowley in 2001, and then again with A Wider Bridge — an organization devoted to building connections between LGBTQs in Northern America and LGBTQs in Israel, funded by hedge-fund manager and philanthropist Paul Singer, whose son is gay and who has played an important role in the movement for marriage equality.

“Being gay in Israel these days is super positive,” McCannell said. “In Israel, they support equal rights.”

Well, except for marriage equality, McCannell admitted when pressed. That’s because they don’t have civil marriage in Israel. The only way to get married is through the Rabbinate, an organization led by ultra-Orthodox Jews that cleaves to strictly Orthodox standards.

Nor is he considered Jewish by Israeli standards — the Rabbinate, also in charge of conversion, only recognizes Orthodox conversions.

“Doesn’t it bother you that in

Israel you’re not considered Jewish?” I asked.

“It’s unclear,” McCannell answers. “Under the law of return I am.” And he says it doesn’t bother him that he couldn’t get married there either. “A lot of people get married in Cyprus or Canada or the U.S.”

The gay, Reform-converted McCannell is an unlikely choice as a spokesperson for Israel’s openness. While he concedes that pluralism is still a challenge in Israel, that hasn’t stopped him from spreading the gospel of Israel’s progressivism on Capitol Hill, where he can be found talking up Israel’s treatment of gays to Congress’s six gay members and other progressives who may be disposed to be critical of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. This method has been called “Pinkwashing” — using Israel’s treatment of LGBTQs to divert attention from what’s happening in the West Bank. But McCannell doesn’t like that term. Israel’s policies reflect the will of the people, after all. And furthermore, “Israel let gays serve in the military in the 1990s, when the U.S. was banning gays serving in the military.”

Now McCannell works on Capitol Hill for a public affairs firm. He’s been a Jew by choice since 2013 and lives with his partner of fourteen years, an Indian American who supported his conversion. He attends Washington Hebrew Congregation where he is in charge of the Couples Club.

McCannell hopes to draw attention to the community of Jews by choice — people who convert just because they have a desire to belong to the Jewish community. “Being a Jew by choice is often told as a relationship narrative rather than one of discovery,” McCannell said. “Jews by choice are not really a vocal voice. I think for Judaism to be relevant we need to talk about the openness and the opportunities.” ■

ITTA WERDIGER ROTH

Artisanally Orthodox



Itta Werdiger Roth has a dream for a restaurant, and it's this: "You build a reputation of a place people trust, they relate to the concept and the values and they know that the food will be good but they don't know what it will be and it's on a blackboard that's low down and small. Not high up," she insists. "It makes a big difference! See that blackboard?" She points to the blackboard of the café in Ditmas Park where we are sitting. "Someone has to get on a ladder to write there, so you can't change it that much. I want to have a menu that changes a lot."

Australian-born Werdiger Roth — in a breezy dress, san-

“We ended up buying a house that is too big for us, and I would turn the playroom into a bar once a month.”

dals, and a turquoise scarf tied loosely about her short-cropped hair — is a chef and restaurateur who is revolutionizing not only kosher food, but artisanal Brooklyn cuisine.

Her career kicked off at the same time she started having children. "I landed my first chef job when I was pregnant," she said. "That kid is now seven." That first job wasn't originally

posted as a chef job. "Some rich people were looking for someone to do stuff for them," she remembered. "They were offering 25 bucks an hour." She whistled. "It was an assistant job — she'd give me a list for Target, or ask me to fill up her car with petrol, or to make her GPS work. It was really unpleasant for me. But I really enjoyed the cooking part!" Werdiger Roth asked if she could just do the cooking, and could they find someone else to do the other parts of the job. "And they liked me and liked my food, so they did that, and I became their cook."

"I think I'm a really flexible person," she mused. It's not always a good thing. Sometimes it means compromising *too* much, giving up too quickly on fantasies in order to get things done.

And sometimes it's a great thing. Werdiger Roth's next venture was The Hester, a speakeasy and supper club with live music. "We ended up buying a house that is too big for us, and I would turn the playroom into a bar once a month," she explained. With food options like stuffed patty pan squash with figs, feta and capers, or macerated-laroda and yellow-shiro plums with rosemary and lemon zest, and drinks like watermelon-rosemary granita, Werdiger Roth was bringing to Jewish cuisine a rustic, artisanal flair the likes of which had never been seen before.

Her next venture was a cozy café in Prospect Heights called Mason and Mug. The creative twist on smoked fish, relishes and cocktails brought in a mixture of Orthodox and non-Jewish clientele. It was like a tiny microcosm of Brooklyn with all the diversity cultivated by the café's casual culture.

"There's a lot of pretention in

the food world, especially the kosher food world," Werdiger Roth said. "Good food is synonymous with table service, dressed to the nines in your *sheitel* and makeup and high heels, eating a really expensive steak. But there's not really a connection between good food and being fancy."

Werdiger Roth was four months pregnant the night before they opened. She spent the first year pregnant and then breastfeeding, taking breaks to pump in the tiny office. The hours were grueling. After a year, she and her partner, who also had a newborn, decided to sell, despite the fact that Mason and Mug was turning a profit, which is almost unheard of for a new restaurant. Now she's doing catering and looking for her next project.

"I grew up in a world where people are obsessed with food and really good cooks," she said. Obsessed sometimes in a bad way. She is the third of seven children and three of her sisters had eating disorders, Werdiger Roth said. Her grandmother is a really good cook, as is her mother, but they always cook the same things. She remembers flipping through cookbooks thinking that she wanted to try new things. She remembers the first time she decided to try "this thing called a curry — it was so spicy and amazing. I remember taking butter, sautéing veggies, adding flour and water and all the spices." She closed her eyes like she could still smell it.

When I ask if she had always been interested in food, Werdiger Roth laughs and says, "I was interested in eating it!" She went on to clarify in her raw, charismatic yet humble way: "I love eating. Why else does someone get into food? You've gotta love eating. That's the main prerequisite, I think." ■

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARIELLE LEVENTHAL

“Hi, how are ya? How are the wife and kids?” It’s an innocuous greeting that I get every so often from passing acquaintances who notice my wedding ring and take for granted that I have children — maybe even grandchildren.

Telling them that I don’t have either requires emotional energy I can’t always muster.

“When I go to a new shul,” one of the childless men I interviewed for my book told me, “what’s the second question people ask? ‘Are you married?’ is the first. ‘Yes, we’re married.’ Then, it’s ‘Do you have children?’ When I reply, ‘No,’ there are those who politely change the subject. Other times, I get a stony silence. The worst is when you get sympathy that borders on the maudlin. I suspect most people when they find out are privately sanctimonious.”

Actually, I have yet to meet a man who was embittered because he was childless. In his own way, each came to terms with the reality that he wouldn’t become a father. Even so, communal recognition of the issue could prove palliative.

Some 24 percent of American men aged 40 to 44 have no children, according to a recent Pew survey. About 51 percent said they would feel bothered if they never had offspring. Among non-Orthodox Jewish men between 25 and 39, less than a third are married. Marriage at a later age tends to be correlated with fewer children. And yet Jewish communal life in and out of the synagogue is child-focused.

Before an observant family sits down to enjoy Shabbat dinner, the parents bless their children. A few weeks ago, my wife and I were invited along with another couple from the neighborhood that we really didn’t know to the home of mutual acquaintances. When our hosts went into the kitchen to get the first course, the other male guest lifted his hands as if to place them on the heads of his absent children, moved his lips silently and blessed them virtually.

As a frequent bystander to this heartening Friday night ritual, I wasn’t sure what to make of it in this instance. I suppose this fellow figured that a blessing by pantomime was no less efficacious as when done live.

When my wife and I decided to abandon fertility treatments because they simply weren’t working, we embarked on a journey that ultimately brought us to accept that we weren’t going to be parents.

We found a wonderful and empathetic therapist to help us deal with the finality of childlessness. I also found it cathartic to write about my relationship with my estranged Hassidic father. We did not see or speak to one another for 30 years. Then the process of our reconciliation was overshadowed by his insistence — principally on religious grounds — that I seek the intervention of miracle workers to help overcome our childlessness. I also found it help-

To Be a Man, Jewish and Childless

by ELLIOT JAGER

ful to lay out the stories of other childless men and to converse with rabbis, philosophers and public intellectuals about what I saw as Judaism’s harsh attitude toward childless men.

Along the road toward acceptance, we experienced frustration, anger, and bereavement for the children we’d never have. And I also become mindful of the scores of references to infertility in the Hebrew Bible, Talmud and Jewish folklore. None of these were laudatory.

The Hebrew word for infertile is *akar*, meaning barren. Every time I come across it in the text I visualize it as written in boldface. It hits me in the gut because the connotation of *akar* goes beyond childless to a man who is literally uprooted from life, community and (some sages claim) the World to Come. It’s a heartless phrase that isn’t any more palatable when used in the feminine, *akara*.

The discomfiture of women who want children but can’t have them is intuitively plain to grasp. Everyone has heard of the “maternal instinct.” One way or another, women have been out front about childlessness — some about their efforts to conquer infertility, others about proudly embracing life without children. At the same time, the distress of similarly situated men is often overlooked. Some men feel drawing attention to their involuntary childlessness makes them somehow seem less masculine.

But you can’t insulate yourself or your partner from the pain of childlessness. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we’ll be in our seats for the *haftarah* reading. The storyline from the Book of Samuel (1:8) goes like this: Elkanah has two wives, the fruitful Peninnah and the beloved-but-barren Hannah, who is disconsolate over not being able to conceive. Elkanah asks, “Why weep-est thou? Am I not better to thee than ten sons?”

Broken with grief, Hannah heads to the Tabernacle in Shiloh, which is the dwelling place of the Ark of the Covenant. The next scene has her mumbling in supplication. The High Priest Eli takes notice, though he misreads her demeanor for drunkenness. Hannah straightens him out and in an about-face, Eli prophesizes that she will have the son she longs for.

Sure enough, she gives birth to Samuel. Rather than taking joy in raising him, she apprentices the boy to the priests as soon as he’s weaned. He grows up to become the greatest — arguably among the angriest — of the biblical prophets.

That’s the way it goes in the Bible. From

Genesis through Chronicles, the Hebrew Bible does not record a single instance where God turns a deaf ear to the prayers of a barren couple. Not once.

The tension between fecundity and barrenness is a fairly constant, I’d say almost obsessive, biblical theme. Will Abraham and Sarah conceive a child? Will Isaac and Rebecca? Jacob and Rachel? In Jewish civilization, making babies is the first imperative. Think about it. Jews are the *children* of Abraham; the *sons* and *daughters* of Israel. To give living expression to the Covenant, observant Jews are foremost obligated to “teach diligently to your children.”

Even if, like me, you are with Mordecai Kaplan in envisaging Judaism as an “evolving religious civilization” that wrestles with God, nationhood and ritual in a never-ending search for meaning — that search for Jewish meaning is made incomparably more complicated for the childless.

But let’s set aside the big philosophical and theological issues regarding the meaning of life without children to consider the social implications of being Jewishly-affiliated and childless.

Think about the Jewish holiday cycle from the perspective of a childless man. The Pesach *sefer* is emphatically child-centered, its very structure to provide an answer to the Four Questions recited by the youngest at the table.

In synagogues where the priestly blessing is recited, father’s wrap their sons, even those married with children of their own, in *tallit* prayer shawls, symbolically shielding them from the aura of the *Shekhinah* or divine presence.

And what is Purim without costumed children parading in the synagogue. Or Chanukah without youngsters playing *dreidel* (even if nowadays it might be a spin-the-*dreidel* app). Or Sukkot, when the children decorate the Sukkah, and the festival concludes with Simchat Torah and children parading around the synagogue with paper flags and miniature Torahs.

Of course, there are far worse experiences in the Jewish community than being a man without children. To be an unmarried man, for instance, can be much harder.

Moreover, perceptions vary. A man who finds himself in a religiously observant community is likely to be more discomfited over being involuntarily childless than someone in a more progressive milieu. In strictly Orthodox circles, a couple that’s been married for two or three years and doesn’t have children is likely to receive unsolicited advice on how to overcome their wretched predicament. In traditional synagogues of various stripes, a prerequisite for being a *ba’al tefillah*, or communal prayer leader on the High Holy Days, is being a married man *with* children.

The last thing I am suggesting is that that there is something wrong with putting children at the forefront of Jewish communal life. What is needed, though, is for clergy and communal leaders to begin a conversation about how Jewish institutions might advance a more welcoming, sensitive and inclusive environment for men — as well as women — without children. ■

Elliot Jager is a Jerusalem-based journalist. His memoir, *The Pater: My Father, My Judaism, My Childlessness* was published in November by The Toby Press.

THE 613

PAINTINGS BY ARCHIE RAND

The colors are vivid and the compositions kinetic, evoking comic books, film noir, pulp paperbacks and countless other artifacts of American history and folklore. In *The 613*, acclaimed Brooklyn artist Archie Rand interprets each of the Biblical commandments in a series of paintings that are at once whimsically lurid, broadly fantastical and subtly moving.

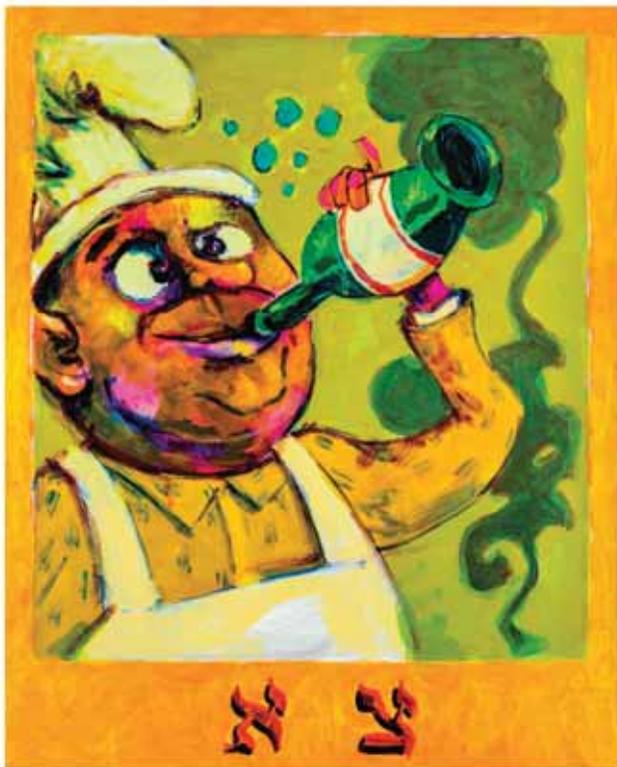
"I am the recipient of two traditions of American Jewish respect," Rand explains. "That of the humorist and that of one fascinated by belief." Both traditions intermix, collide and shine in *The 613*, a series five years in the making which originally exhibited in a Brooklyn warehouse for a single day. Together encompassing over 1,700 square feet of wall space, the collection has just been released as a full-color book by Penguin House's Blue Rider Press.

Describing the project, Rand writes in his Introduction:

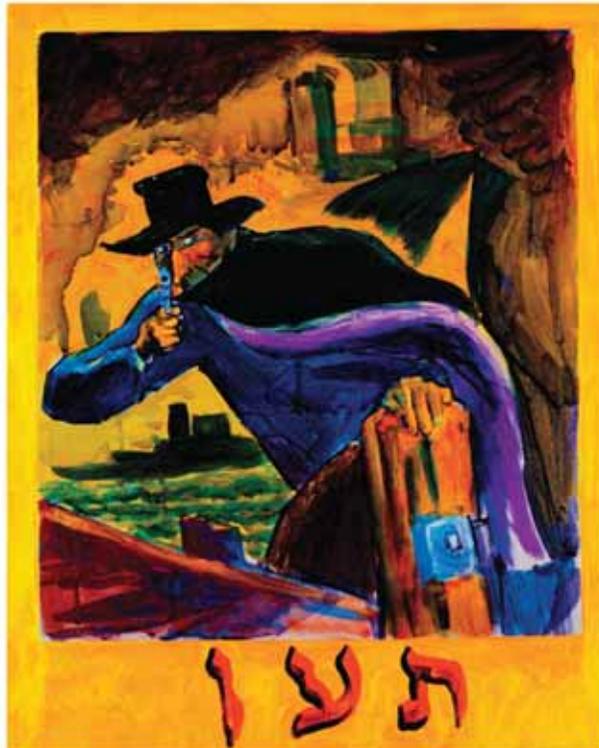
"There are Hasidic stories of children who whistle in synagogue because they don't know how to pray or of soldiers who can only recite the alphabet, knowing that heaven will rearrange their spoken letters into prayers. *The 613* is one of those whistles."

Rand opens *The 613* with the statement, "Judaism and art don't mix well." It is a point belied by the magnificence of his masterpiece, which brings an ancient Jewish list into the most freewheeling American vernacular. ■

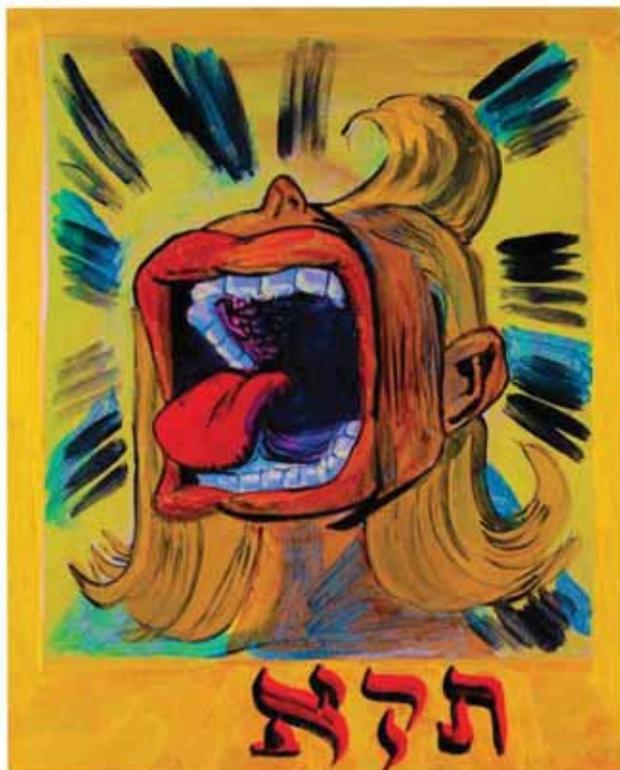




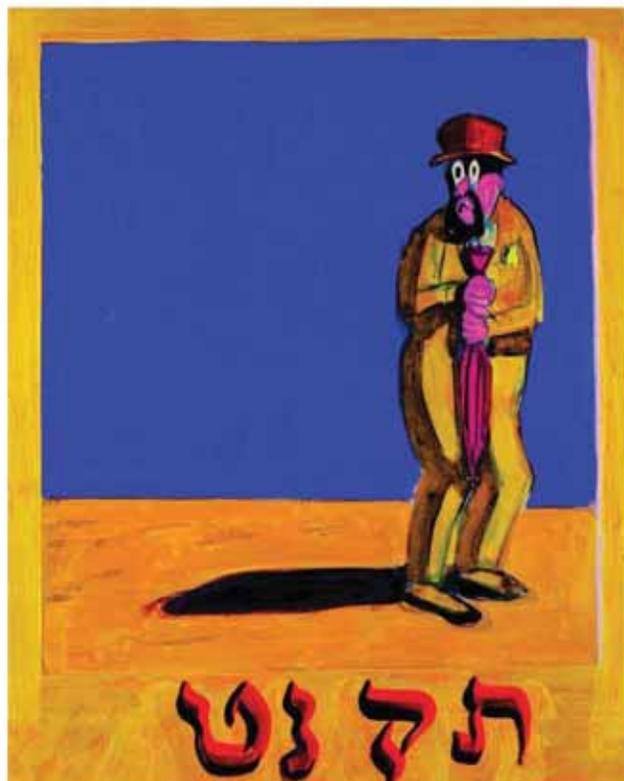
91 TO REMEMBER AND SANCTIFY THE SABBATH BY BLESSING WINE AND LIGHTING THE CONCLUSIONARY CANDLE. (Exodus 20:8)



476 NOT TO COVET OR SCHEME TO ACQUIRE ANOTHER'S POSSESSION. (Exodus 20:14)



501 NOT TO INSULT OR HARM ANYBODY WITH WORDS. (Leviticus 25:17)



559 THE JUDGE MUST NOT RESPECT THE GREAT MAN AT THE TRIAL. (Leviticus 19:15)

The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life

729 Seventh Avenue

9th floor

New York, NY 10019

Change service requested

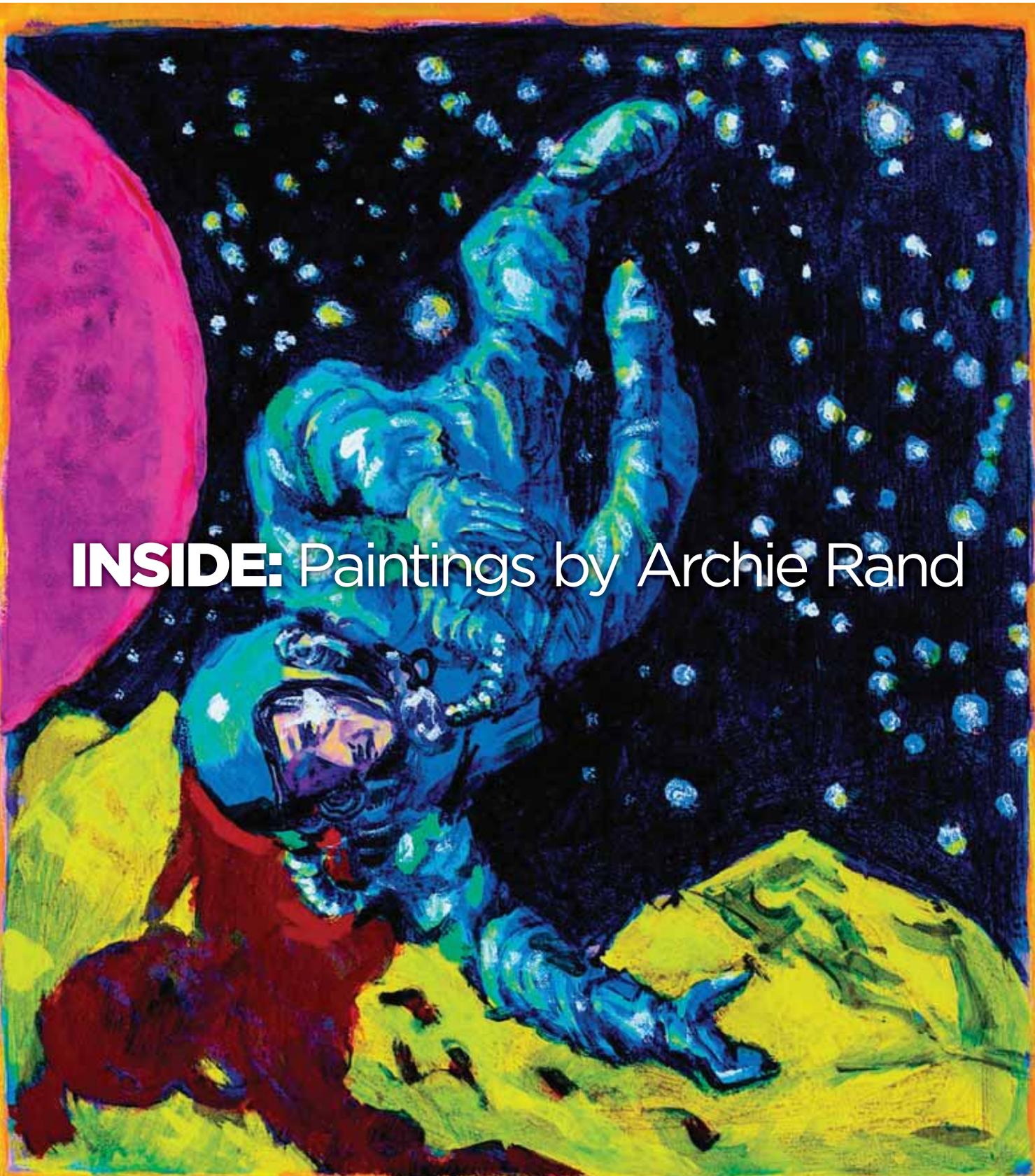
Non-Profit Org.

U.S. Postage

PAID

Rockville, MD

Permit No. 800



INSIDE: Paintings by Archie Rand