

contact



OUR FINAL ISSUE

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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.

Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs in this issue are courtesy of contributors.

FROM THE FOUNDATION

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the final issue of CONTACT, the magazine of the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

When we launched CONTACT in 1998, we wrote that “there must be free discussion and unrestrained debate about vital Jewish issues and the Jewish future. We hope to use CONTACT to stimulate this conversation.”

We believe we have ably fulfilled this mandate over the last two decades. We’ve explored issues of Jewish unity, American Jewish demographics, the changing nature of families, the financial crisis and the Jewish community, and the relationship between American Jews and Israel. We tackled the looming crisis of personnel in the Jewish community, efforts at reinventing the synagogue, the challenges facing those who have left Hasidic communities, the importance and potential of Jewish service, the need for Jewish early childhood education, the importance of Jewish summer camp, and so much more. From Hebrew in America to Jewish life in the public sphere; from exploring opportunities to build Jewish infrastructure in emerging neighborhoods to reporting from global Jewish communities in Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and India, CONTACT has helped shed light on the contemporary Jewish experience.

We’ve been privileged to include a truly diverse array of writers, thinkers, activists, artists, and commentators who have contributed to CONTACT since its inception. Eli Valley has steered this ship expertly over the past 19 years, and we at The Steinhardt Foundation thank him for his professionalism and camaraderie.

In recent years, as opinions have exploded on blogs and social media, it has become clear to us that a print magazine is not the best way to reach our community. Thus, after 20 years of publishing CONTACT, we have decided to cease publication. In doing so, we are joining hundreds of magazines, journals and newspapers that have closed in the past decade. While some print publications find new life in digital form online, we have decided to close the magazine. However, this and all of our previous issues will still be accessible on our website, <http://www.steinhardtoundation.org/publications/>.

For the community of contributors and readers who have valued CONTACT and enjoyed its pages, we know this decision is a disappointment. We hope to continue being in touch with our readership in new and developing ways to shape and stimulate Jewish communal debate.

We want to thank our readers for your time and feedback. It has been a pleasure to engage with you over these two decades.

Sincerely,

Rabbi David Gedzelman, President and CEO, The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life

EDITOR'S PIECE

The Summer issue of CONTACT, and the final issue of its twenty-year run, explores a panoply of issues, themes, and personalities central to the contemporary Jewish experience. We begin with Shira Dicker's reported feature on the growing phenomenon of single women rabbis. Often facing a multitude of preconceptions and expectations regarding both their gender and the rabbinate itself, these pioneers are charting new paths of Jewish communal belonging — and in the process reimagining the role of spiritual leader in the community.

CONTACT then explores new expressions of Jewish ritual with a piece by Paul Golin, Executive Director of the Society for Humanistic Judaism. Turning the Bar and Bat Mitzvah experience into a celebration of not only Jewish history and tradition but of a multiplicity of cultures and experiences that define contemporary Jewish life, “Cultural B Mitzvahs” aim to make the coming-of-age ceremony more poignant, personal, and relevant for all involved. Ari Goldman then examines the challenges and imperatives of secular education in the Hasidic world through a profile of YAFFED, which aims to spread secular education via internal Hasidic persuasion and via the arms of city and state regulations. We visit three Jews deepening their Jewish connections through music, history and the rabbinate, and we excerpt from Ilana Kurshan's *If All the Seas Were Ink*, a deeply affecting memoir that uses the Talmud to explore love, loss, heartbreak, and hope. Finally, we share some of the beautiful and gripping art of David Wander, who uses imagery to penetratingly analyze and reflect on Jewish narrative and text.

As we end our run, CONTACT would like to thank our dozens of contributors over the course of the magazine's history who have helped illuminate the most compelling, thought-provoking, and little-known reaches of the modern Jewish experience. Thank you to Ari Goldman for his invaluable input and experience. Thank you to Erica Coleman for her expertise in copy editing. Thank you to Yakov Wisniewski, our Design Director, whose elegant and streamlined designs brought an unmistakable visual allure to the magazine. Finally, we offer our heartfelt gratitude to you, our readers, with whom we've learned, discovered, and shared so much in the way of Jewish life, history, culture, and memory during the past twenty years. May you continue to reflect on the thoughts, ideas, and perspectives CONTACT has helped stir for years to come.



SINGLE. FEMALE. RABBI.

WHAT THE
EXPERIENCE
OF UNMARRIED
WOMEN RABBIS
TELLS US ABOUT
CONTEMPORARY
JEWISH LIFE

by SHIRA DICKER

Rabbi Nina Mandel

Rabbi Raquel Fein faces an empty sanctuary. Her hair is pulled back into a careless ponytail, her face scrubbed clean of make-up. Wearing running clothes, she squints as the early morning light filters in through the stained-glass windows. She begins speaking haltingly: “Thoughts on Passover. You wake up with two words emblazoned on your chest. It’s time. You’re gonna make a break for freedom. You will not be a slave anymore.”

Now she is outside, walking through the woods. Her voice grows confident.

“Get out of bed, grab your things, run outside and then, there you are. Free.”

Millions of people got to share the experience of a rabbi drafting a sermon owing to the fact that Rabbi Raquel Fein is a beloved character on the award-winning series *Transparent*. Played with exquisite sensitivity and nuance by Kathryn Hahn, she is both groundbreaking and relatable,

Shira Dicker is a restless writer-at-large and publicist captivated by contemporary culture. She has specialized in promoting social causes, events, books, documentary films, musicians, art exhibitions, religious leaders, and issues of pressing concern for the Jewish community. Shira is currently working on a memoir entitled “The Adopted Wife.”

not only because of her gender but also because of her marital status.

Like many of her real-life counterparts, Rabbi Raquel is professional, intelligent, accomplished, attractive, empathetic, grounded, grown-up, caring, complex, loving.

And single.

Rabbi Leah Rachel Berkowitz of Congregation Kol Ami in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, hails the creation of this fictional character as an important sign that the story of the single woman rabbi is finally being told. She salutes *Transparent* for its ability to show the complexity and blessings inherent in the lives and work of contemporary female rabbis who are single.

“This show gets it right,” says Berkowitz. In renderings of women who are rabbis, “there’s a tendency to fetishize their sexuality or simply not view them as protagonists,” she says.

Very much a protagonist in her own publicly documented life, the 36-year-old Berkowitz, a Reform rabbi who was ordained at Hebrew Union College in 2008, writes frequently about the experiences of being a young female rabbi on her blog, “This is What a Rabbi Looks Like,”

and for the Jewish Women’s Archive, for newspapers, and for other publications. A contributor to the anthology *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate* (CCAR Press, 2016), she is especially outspoken about her singledom.

In an April 2017 column, “Shabbat is a Two-Person Job,” Berkowitz writes about the challenges of making Shabbat solo while balancing pulpit responsibilities. In May of this year, she wrote a scathing account (“Dear Male Comedian”) of being at the receiving end of crude humor at a Jewish conference:

“You’re a rabbi?” you asked. I nodded...
“Wow, you’re really pretty,” you said.
“Are you married?” My readers can tell you that I don’t love that question. “No, I am not.” I smiled through gritted teeth. You couldn’t read my body language, but I was shooting daggers at you with my eyes. I didn’t like where this was going.
“Oh,” you said. “Maybe I’ll divorce my shiksa wife and marry you!”

But Berkowitz also writes warmly about the gift of the network of single rabbinic gal pals she has cultivated who support one another; the luxury of having long, lazy

Shabbat afternoons to herself; and the ability to choose vacations that truly recharge her soul, such as writing retreats.

"It's not like I opted into a single place. This is how life unfolded and it has its great and its hard parts," Berkowitz said.

Although the pressures facing unwed rabbis are not confined to a single gender, and single male rabbis face their own challenges, the experiences of unwed women rabbis are a relatively new phenomenon that merits exploration. Although exact numbers are not available (as the marital status of rabbis is not tracked by denominational organizations or social scientists), unmarried female rabbis are a noteworthy and increasingly visible demographic. With women being ordained across the wide spectrum of Jewish denominational life, their complex — and fulfilling — experiences are being shared now.



Rabbi Jennifer Singer

"I have time for excellence in my career," states Rabbi Cookie Lea Olshein, 50, of Temple Israel in West Palm Beach, Florida. "I am not pulled by a spouse. I give my heart and soul to my congregation. I believe in the mission of the Jewish people."

Ordained 10 years ago from Hebrew Union College, Olshein came to the rabbinate after an 11-year career in law, a common trajectory. She reports having heard the timeworn advice about seeking a spouse while still in rabbinical school during her time at HUC. "People were wise in telling me that," she says, before detailing the challenges of finding a compatible partner when one is a highly educated spiritual and community leader.

"I have four degrees; it is hard to find a man who is single, age appropriate, interested in being heavily involved in Jewish life or at least not averse to it!" she explains.

Yet as Olshein shares that she never thought she would be single at 50, she also

admits to being picky in her choice of partners. "I recently ended a three-year relationship that just wasn't right. I'm not willing to settle. I've seen too many unhappy people in my field. I'd rather not be in a relationship than be in an unhappy one."

As a single woman, Olshein serves a unique role within a congregation where many women are widowed. "The older women who have lost their husbands are usually devastated. I talk to them about reinventing themselves as happy single people," she says.

Northwest of West Palm Beach, at Congregation Kol HaNeshama in Sarasota, Rabbi Jennifer Singer, divorced after a 31-year marriage, finds that she is serving a similar role within her community. A 2017 ordainee of ALEPH: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal in Philadelphia, she says that "one of the benefits of living in 'God's Waiting Room' is that there are lots of ladies living alone."

The split with her husband came with her move towards Judaism. Prior to entering rabbinical school, Singer had been a Jewish communal professional, working in endowments and major gifts for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and the Technion. But "at one point everything I did was Jewish and it made him crazy," she said, and they split up. With her kids going off to college in 2011, there is now "no one at home. Just me and the dogs."

Though Singer, at 61, is one of the youngest of the single women at Kol HaNeshama, in her community she is "one of them." As a survivor of aggressive breast cancer with a double mastectomy and no reconstructive surgery, she is also a visible role model for those struggling with their mortality.

Even with her accessibility, Singer explains that she is still "The Rabbi," and her community has expressed concern about her dating, she says, recounting a fascinating conversation on the subject of what stand it would take if she began dating a non-Jewish man.

"When your first name is 'Rabbi,' it tends to desexualize and depersonalize you a bit," says Singer. Recently, an attractive widower slightly older than her began attending services at her synagogue. A congregant, noting him, exclaimed, "Oh! I have to hook him up with someone," while Singer stood there thinking, "What am I? Chopped liver?"

Singer recounts several funny/not funny stories of dating debacles. One man responded to the news that she was a rabbi by showing up with a manila folder filled with homework for his adult Bar Mitzvah and then brought along a shofar on the

second date. Reporting that her younger, single colleagues are anxious about dating, she adds that "they also have a huge thing with getting touched," validating the fact that for female rabbis, broaching boundaries — physical as well as otherwise — is an ongoing issue.

Like Berkowitz, Rabbi Eve Eichenholtz is in her thirties. Though young, her unmarried state has led congregants to speculate as to her sexual orientation. Like all the rabbis interviewed for this article, Eichenholtz is heterosexual, yet the assumption that an unmarried female rabbi must be a lesbian is common. Rabbi Nina Mandel, a divorced rabbi ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2003 who serves a non-affiliated rural congregation in central Pennsylvania, playfully posits that this is a game congregations like to play. "I call it: 'Guess the Rabbi's Sexual Orientation,'" she says, "Or, 'What's the Story with our Rabbi?'"

Onlookers might also pin lack of a sexual life on a single female rabbi — and sometimes they are correct. A 40-something, never-married, Conservative rabbi, who declined to be named for this article, said that celibacy is often a sad fact of the life of a single female rabbi. "Nobody talks about sexuality," she says. "For a good number of women in their 40s and 50s, their sex lives suck. It's an issue."

Ordained at the non-denominational Academy of Jewish Religion in New York in 2013, Eichenholtz arrived at her current pulpit — Beth Israel Congregation in Fayetteville, North Carolina — the following year. For Eichenholtz, the social fluidity of Fayetteville is key. "People lead single lives here, even if they are married. I'm very aware that that's one of the reasons I feel so relaxed in this community," she says.

Location can indeed influence the happiness of the single female rabbi, said a pioneering personality in the Conservative Jewish world who also declined to be named for this article. Now in her 60s, this rabbi said that she sought out rabbinic opportunities in major urban centers so she would be one single Jewish adult among many. "There are different family configurations in urban settings," she says. "I have never once felt the kind of isolation or social pressure that would have been prevalent in a suburban setting."

This rabbi reflects on the difficulties faced by some of the best and brightest female rabbis in finding life mates. "The dirty little secret is that guys don't want to marry us. I think that men figure that if they are going to spend their lives with a woman who is married to her job, he might as well pick a lawyer who will make serious money



Rabbi Nina Mandel

and command more status,” she opines.

And while she speaks warmly about colleagues who have loving marriages, she also reveals another dirty secret: some female rabbis end up marrying men who are far from their ideal mates because it is so difficult to meet someone ambitious and accomplished who is also willing to accommodate the demands of his wife’s career.

For Rabbi Sally Priesand, whose name is synonymous with “female rabbi,” compromise was never an option.

Ordained from HUC-JIR in 1972, Priesand became the first female rabbi in the United States. Retired from the Monmouth Reform Temple, where she is rabbi emerita, she speaks frankly about what she had imagined her life would be like as a younger woman.

“When I was in rabbinical school, I assumed I would get married and have children, and I used to say that in my synagogue there was going to be a nursery next to my study so I could bring my children with me,” she says.

Priesand speaks about having dated “some of my fellow students,” and having come “close a couple of times to getting married, but always chose my career over that. Once I got into pulpit life, I realized that I could never have a family and a synagogue and do both well. I just had to know myself...it doesn’t mean others can’t do it. I couldn’t do it. I give everything I have to the synagogue. I don’t regret it because I feel that all of the children I have helped

educate are like my children, too.”

Even without biological children, those who count themselves among Priesand’s spiritual offspring are many. “None of us can truly understand what it can be to be the first,” states Rabbi Mary Zamore, head of the Women’s Rabbinic Network of Reform Judaism. “The path she blazed was for us. At the WRN, we appreciate the sacrifice she made and feel that we are her daughters.”

Thrust into the spotlight with her ordination, Priesand was a symbol of women’s empowerment and achievement even as she fulfilled the demanding daily tasks of the congregational rabbi. “I will say that in my life, dating was just not important. Neither was entertaining, though many rabbis think it is key.”

Even without traditional hostess skills, community and friends became an extended family for Priesand. “Certain people became really good friends of mine. I always spent 36 years with the same family on Pesach and have travelled for the Bar/Bat mitzvah of grandchildren. I have a group of people who have remained my really good friends. In fact, one of the reasons why when I retired I stayed in my community, is that I feel they are all family to me.”

Priesand reflects upon the choice faced by female rabbis of an independent or partnered life. “This is very difficult for female colleagues,” she says. “It’s hard to do both. I find that people really appreciate my willingness to say that I had to make a choice. It’s alright to make a choice; I still struggle

with it.”

Regarding the ability of female rabbis to find mates, she notes that some men still tend to be intimidated by accomplished women. “A lot of it is about power, but having women in these roles has allowed other men to be nurturing and to use that side of themselves where before they hid it. I see on Facebook very often that some of our male colleagues really want to understand (the gender gap) better.”

Directly across the denominational aisle from Priesand, Rabbanit Esther (not her real name) is a newly-ordained Orthodox rabbi from Yeshivat Maharat who is working at a large synagogue in a major city. Divorced after nearly 40 years of marriage, with grown children and grandchildren, she applied for her job wearing a head covering and removed it months later when her *get* came through.

“It is different for me than other single Orthodox women; I don’t fit the mold,” she says, by way of understatement. “I’m 59, ordained one year ago. Four years ago, I finished 30 years in high tech in Israel. I worked, raised a family and was married until half a year ago.”

Rabbanit Esther’s identity as a newly-divorced Orthodox woman has many dimensions, including that of lightning rod for congregants who are dealing with marital difficulties, she says. It has also made her a bit of a curiosity. When she first arrived, “women came over to me with questions: what’s the story, is there a husband, children? They did



Rabbanit Esther

it in a nice way. They were curious.”

With her level of self-confidence and grounding in the world, Rabbanit Esther says that being publicly single in a frum community is something that those who have never been married may experience very differently. Also, in instances where boundaries were breached — she has had “one or two uncomfortable situations with a congregant I didn’t like, including a guy my age, struggling with divorce, who said ‘if I could, I would give you a hug’” — she has been able to maintain her equilibrium. People will often compliment her hair or outfits, another common experience for female rabbis, married or otherwise. *If Men Rabbis Were Spoken To the Way Women Rabbis Are Spoken To*, a video made at JTS in

2015 by rabbinical students, hilariously lampoons the ongoing objectification of female clergy by reversing gender roles.

“I invite people for meals. I don’t feel uncomfortable with men and women around my table, but sometimes I joke that I need a wife,” Rabbanit Esther says, a sentiment expressed by many other unmarried female rabbis. “The rabbinate is still structured imagining that there is a non-working spouse at home, taking care of household needs,” concurs Berkowitz.

Rabbanit Esther is candid about her interest in forging a new partnership. She is also open, even elated, about her newfound freedom. “I carry myself. I feel liberated. I do! There were things in my marriage that I wasn’t happy with and I needed to be free

to be myself,” she says.

“I have a lot of agency in my life,” echoes Rabbi Jan Urbach, rabbi of the Conservative Synagogue of the Hamptons and a faculty member at JTS. A high-profile, second-career rabbi who practiced law for about nine years, including a stint clerking for Judge Kimba M. Wood and a partnership at a Park Avenue firm, Urbach says that she arrived at her pulpit “with the experience of singlehood,” and, like Priesand, doesn’t “know if I could have done it if married with children at home.”

“On the one hand, it was scary to make choices alone; on the other hand, it was freeing,” she says. She left her law firm in 1997 and was ordained in 2003 at the Jewish Theological Seminary. During that time, she was involved in helping to found the congregation she now serves, so she never went through the initial interview process coming out of rabbinical school like most of her peers.

Urbach speaks about how being a woman and a single person “created sensitivities in me.” Understanding marginal experiences and groups comes naturally to her, she says. And in a culture of two-by-two and traditional family units, “you might feel something is wrong with you if you are not that thing.”

A keenly developed outsider perspective is something Urbach has cultivated and refined. It informed her role as Associate Editor of *Siddur Lev Shalem* in 2016, and guides her recent social-action work.

Regarding being unmarried, Urbach says, “I wouldn’t say that I haven’t struggled with being single. There are times when I feel lonely and wish that I was partnered in that way.”

Still, says Urbach, we need to reframe singlehood as more than the failure to marry. “I think that if [marriage] was the first priority in my life, I would have made it happen. Many men want someone less successful, less smart. That was challenging. I had an unwillingness to restrict my being. There was never a question of that kind of trade-off.”

The fortyish rabbi who flagged celibacy among her peers quipped that one of the most interesting — and available — men she recently met was an imam at a conference in Israel.

“The part about being single that’s hard is that it was never Plan A. Everyone, I think, wants to be in a committed loving relationship,” she says. “It’s human nature to continue to have desire and to want that.”

“Blessing doesn’t mean an easy life,” Urbach explains. “You learn in life that you don’t get everything you want.” ■



THE NEWEST B'NAI MITZVAH TREND IS OLDER THAN YOU THINK

by PAUL GOLIN

Imagine a Bar/Bat Mitzvah program that is learner-centered, develops skills that will remain useful beyond the ceremony, and aligns with the values and beliefs of most Jews today.

Must be a new initiative, right? Try fifty-five years and counting.

When Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine founded Secular Humanistic Judaism in 1963, many focused on what he discarded: a God-centered liturgy. Few beyond the movement considered what was gained when youth stopped memorizing a lengthy Hebrew liturgy and were no longer assigned Torah portions based on the randomness of a calendar date.

What's gained is the opportunity for students to follow their own interests, to genuinely explore and discover rather than simply memorize, and to connect to Jewish subjects in a deeply personal way.

In recent years, the American Jewish community has seen several new attempts to reimagine the B'nai Mitzvah experience. That's good news. One of the

most surprising — yet least-discussed — findings from the seminal 2013 Pew Survey is that only half of American Jews have had a Bar or Bat mitzvah.

The Pew report did not break down the demographics further as to who forgoes B'nai Mitzvah; certainly, in older generations few girls were granted the opportunity. Still, it's likely that the percentage of young people who benefit from this transformative coming-of-age ritual is declining. Today's parents are less likely than older generations to say, "Well, I had to suffer through it and now it's your turn."

Continuing a ritual — any ritual — for continuity's sake is no longer motivation enough. Today's family must understand the meaning and benefit of doing it. Two major and related trends accelerate this shift: intermarriage and declining American religiosity. The B'nai Mitzvah experience in Secular Humanistic Judaism has always addressed those trends directly.

Celebrating Culturally and Multiculturally

Cultural B Mitzvah, an umbrella name for the Society for Humanistic Judaism's programs ("B" is a gender-neutral abbreviation), allows for equal participation

and celebration of all sides of the student's family. While the Cultural B Mitzvah educational program is about Jewish history, culture, and achievements, and the ceremony is about young people affirming their Jewish identities, we, as Humanistic Jews, acknowledge and appreciate that everyone has multiple aspects to their identities. This is particularly true of those of us in multicultural and interfaith households. Our students are encouraged to consider and, if they want to, honor all aspects of their identities.

For example, one young man of Jewish and Irish-American descent presented on the Jews of Ireland. Although his Irish-American relatives are not Irish Jews, his interest and exploration of both sides of his heritage intersected. By educating himself — and by extension, everyone attending his Bar Mitzvah ceremony — about the Jews of Ireland, his Cultural B Mitzvah ceremony fostered warm feelings among both sides of his family far more powerfully than had he simply acknowledged their attendance in a thank-you speech. And his deep dive into his full family background, not just his Jewish side, gave him a greater understanding of where he fits, both in the Jewish story and in the human story.

Paul Golin is the Executive Director of the Society for Humanistic Judaism (www.SHJ.org), the congregational arm of a movement that combines a Humanistic philosophy of life with Judaism as the cultural and historic experience of the Jewish people.



Cultural B Mitzvah at the City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in New York City (above and previous page).

When the approach to Judaism is cultural, not religious, we can offer a message of genuine inclusion to intermarried families, who now outnumber in-married households in the United States. Multiculturalism does not require a diminution of any participating culture to celebrate them all. Western theistic religions, by contrast, require exclusionary boundaries to define themselves.

Critical Thinking and Belief

The Pew Research Center has been tracking the decline in American religiosity for years, and Jews have been in the vanguard of that trend. Today, *most* Jews do not believe in the God of the Bible. This inevitably makes B'nai Mitzvah — as religious ritual — a harder sell. Offering a cultural B'nai Mitzvah can provide these households with a meaningful way of expressing their Jewish identity that also feels truthful to them.

The message of such a program is: you don't have to say anything you don't believe — not during a ritual or ceremony, and not in the rest of your life either. The poetry, songs, and humanistic blessings used are neither anti-religious nor anti-God — they focus on the human experience, evoking similar emotions of yearning, hope, inspiration, and wonder as theistic services. The liturgy is, then, uniquely inclusive to theists and non-theists alike. We know how powerful our approach is

because people tell us: family members from other denominations who first encounter our movement through the B'nai Mitzvah of their relatives or grandkids regularly say, "I wish this was available when I was a kid/when I had kids."

Ultimately, the difference comes down to the institutional goals of B'nai Mitzvah education. Rather than having to train good "synagogue citizens" who can participate in a minyan and chant trope — knowing that only a tiny percent of liberal Jewish students will ever find that skillset relevant while potentially turning off many more to Judaism forever — the Cultural B Mitzvah curriculum is intended to be just as strong a Jewish identity-builder while also developing critical-thinking skills that provide our young people with a leg up in their future endeavors. How do I determine what is true? What is my connection to the larger world? By age 10 or 11, kids are ready to grapple with the big questions and learn how to create meaning in their lives.

Creative Flexibility

Because the congregations in our movement have broad autonomy, a variety of Cultural B Mitzvah curricula and ceremonies have emerged. Many emulate the program from The Birmingham Temple, the first congregation for Humanistic Judaism, in suburban Detroit, where students work with a mentor to explore a Jewish historical role model or

hero, examining their life, ideas, and deeds, and describing why the person was chosen and what they admire about the person. Other communities encourage the students to explore a Jewish topic of interest to them. The projects are diverse and the presentations are creative and include multimedia, art, and musical expressions.

A couple of Humanistic congregations use the Torah. With guidance, the students choose a portion that may or may not coincide with the portion of their birthday or Mitzvah celebration. The student reads the portion in Hebrew then provides a humanistic analysis in English. In other communities, a Hebrew poem is chosen and inserted into the presentation in lieu of reading from the Torah.

Most of our communities provide individual ceremonies; others hold group programs at the end of the Mitzvah year that incorporate an individual presentation by each student. Community-service projects, often related to a student's research topic, are regular parts of the Cultural B Mitzvah process, and many programs include an exploration of the student's own family history.

In a variety of formats over the past half-century, the Cultural B Mitzvah program has provided a meaningful coming-of-age ritual that solidifies a Jewish identity into adulthood, through engaging cultural education without religious indoctrination. ■

If Jewish children were being denied a basic human right, like free expression or assembly, there would be an outcry from Jewish religious, communal, and philanthropic organizations. We would not sit idly by.

Yet, for decades, tens of thousands of boys in Hasidic Jewish families have gone to school and learned virtually nothing to prepare them to be economically self-sufficient or to have access to the broader world. Education is a human right.

These boys, whose first language is Yiddish, learn some English and arithmetic in elementary school, but even that stops in high school. Once they are in their teens, there is no English, no math, no science, no history, no physical education.

This situation is not only a moral failing, but a legal one too. The failure to teach these children secular knowledge is in violation of state and city educational guidelines.

The larger Jewish community has kept quiet about this scandal because it respected the traditions of the Hasidim, thought there was something noble in their quest to maintain their way of life, and figured that somehow they coped. After all, don't they own B&H?

Politicians also kept quiet, but that had more to do with the political power of the Hasidim — they do, indeed, vote as a block. And they are growing at a rapid rate, especially in cities like New York.

But that is now changing, not because the Jewish leadership has awakened from its slumber, but because some of these children have grown up, moved away from the community, and become advocates for change.

Naftuli Moster, raised in the Belzer Hasidic community in Brooklyn, gives his own life as an example. “I grew up Hasidic and I have the scars to show for it, at least in terms of education.” His elementary-school education was typical of some 40,000 Hasidic boys in the New York area today. “We got 90 minutes of English and arithmetic four days a week,” he said. “And it came at the end of a long school day when no one took it seriously.”

Even that paltry amount of secular education came to a stop in high school, where religious studies took up the whole day, from 6:30 A.M. to 8 P.M. Moster didn't even know what he didn't know

until he found himself in a dead-end job doing manual labor in a warehouse and started at a college program to advance himself. Words like “semester” and “credits” were alien to him. He never heard of a molecule. He didn't know how to write an essay; he didn't even know what an essay was.

“I realized that I was the victim of educational neglect,” he said.

Moster, who eventually got a bachelors degree in psychology from the College of Staten Island, still feels that he is hampered by “major, major educational gaps.” But he has turned his anger into advocacy. In 2012, he founded an organization called YAFFED. It stands for Young Advocates for Fair Education and is working on two fronts: to get Hasidic schools to voluntarily provide secular education and to get the city and state to enforce its own educational regulations.

Moster has become something of an expert on state and city law. He quotes a New York State law that requires all non-public schools to provide an education “substantially equivalent” to that of public schools. The law specifies subjects such as English, math, reading, writing, music, art, geography, history, science, and physical education. None of these are offered in the boys' Hasidic high schools. (The girls' schools do, however, provide a limited amount of secular studies through high school.)

For his efforts, Moster, 32, and his organization have been demonized by the ultra-Orthodox community. In an article last year in *Hamodia*, an ultra-Orthodox newspaper, one rabbi, Avraham Y. Heschel, wrote about YAFFED: “Let there be no misunderstanding: The real goal and agenda of this group isn't to improve the skills of yeshiva students. What they are doing is using a backdoor attempt to drive our youth away from Yiddishkeit through infiltrating and corrupting our *chinuch* [educational] system.”

YAFFED and its supporters, Heschel suggested, are *rodfim*, a rabbinic term for murderers who must be stopped before they do harm.

Professor Samuel Heilman, a CUNY sociologist and supporter of YAFFED, said in an interview that he was not surprised by the strong language. The Hasidic world, he said, “will fight YAFFED to the

death because they know that once people learn that there are middle grounds, and that the outside culture has much to contribute to our lives that is good, their world will begin to crumble.”

YAFFED has tried to go around the

YAFFED

Fighting Educational Inequity

by ARI L. GOLDMAN

leadership of the Hasidic community and reach out directly to parents who, they hope, will in turn pressure the leadership. They've done this by placing large billboards in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods. One asks: “Is your son receiving instruction in English, math, science, history and geography? He should! Even if he is already in high school. Speak to his principal or school administrator today!”

Another billboard has a quote in Hebrew from the Talmud. It translates: “A man is required to teach his son a trade.” Then it says in English: “It is your mitzvah. It is the law.”

According to a census of Jewish schools released by the Avi Chai Foundation in 2013, there are nearly 80,000 children in Hasidic schools in New York City and its suburbs. Figuring that half of these are girls who get a secular education, the educational crisis affects some 40,000 boys.

In an interview, Moster noted that the ultra-Orthodox are “the fastest growing Jewish denomination” and then he quickly added, “the *only* growing Jewish denomination.” Projections based on a recent UJA-Federation survey data show that by 2030, roughly a third of school age children in Brooklyn will be Hasidic.

Giving those children an education, Moster said, is urgent. “Everything is at stake here,” he said. Moster comes from a large Hasidic family. He is the middle child in a family of 17. At the end of the interview, I asked him why he didn't just leave the community behind and move on with his life.

He responded: “I always wish that 32 years ago someone said ‘enough is enough.’ I would have the tools and skills to pursue my dreams. I've got a ton of siblings, nieces and nephews. I cannot disappoint the children now in the system. I am hoping that 30 years from now they will have a chance.” ■

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THREE PROFILES

In this issue, we visit three individuals charting original and iconoclastic pathways to Jewish community via music, history, and community.

by LIAM HOARE

ARYEH NUSSBAUM COHEN Song from Shul to Stage



Richard Tucker, who was a hazzan as well as an opera singer, talked about the musicality and artistic freedom you have as a hazzan — this material that you have to phrase and connect.”

“**M**et Opera Auditions Yield a Young Star,” declared an article in *The New York Times* that changed the opera singer Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen’s life and career. He was only 23-years-old when in March, 2017, the *Times*’s classical music editor Zachary Woolfe deemed Cohen — the “baby-faced countertenor from Brooklyn” — to be a “complete artist.” Cohen, Woolfe wrote, “already possesses a remarkable gift for intimate communication ... combined with a voice of velvety gentleness and a taste for adventure.”

“My life changed overnight,” said Cohen (the son of journalist Debra Nussbaum Cohen, who currently serves as Haaretz’s New York correspondent) of the glowing review. He had had a good season up until then, having been one of the winners of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, a program designed to discover promising young opera singers and assist in the development of their careers. But to have that kind of notice in the paper of record, Cohen added, “provided a level of exposure throughout the industry that you can’t buy — that you can only dream of.”

When CONTACT caught up with Cohen, it was over the phone from Cincinnati, where at the time he was preparing to take on the role of Ottone in Claudio Monteverdi’s *The Coronation of Poppea*. “It’s considered the first masterpiece ever written,” Cohen said. At the center of the opera is a love triangle involving the titular Poppea, the Emperor Nero, and the spurned Ottone. While a history major at Princeton, from which he graduated in 2015, Cohen sang in *The Coronation of Poppea*, playing the part of Nero. “It’s a show I’ve known intimately for a number of years and am delighted to be revisiting from another angle,” he said.

His remarkable rise and journey to the opera houses of Europe and the United States began in Brooklyn: in the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, which rehearsed a block away from the Hannah Senesh Community Day School he attended; and later, beginning at aged 13, as a trainee cantor at the Conservative East Midwood Jewish Center. Cohen concedes that it was “a lot of work” learning the High Holiday liturgy and doing the afternoon prayers every day, among his other duties, but that under the stewardship of Cantor Samuel Levine he “learned a lot artistically” that could be transferred from the *shul* to the stage.

“One of the greatest singers of the 20th Century was the tenor Richard Tucker, who was a *hazzan* as well

as an opera singer,” Cohen explained, “and he talked about the musicality and artistic freedom you have as a *hazzan* — this material that you have to phrase and connect.” During his seven years as a trainee cantor and afterwards, Cohen began to appreciate more and more the heritage and the lineage associated with the material he was singing — songs and melodies “passed down through the Jewish people over thousands of years. I found that very moving.”

Cohen has become distinguished for his countertenor voice. The countertenor has a higher range than a male tenor, comparable to a female contralto or mezzo-soprano. Since the mid-20th Century, there has been renewed interest in this particular singing voice, and modern composers are once again writing countertenor roles. “My favorite compliment that I sometimes get is, ‘I’ve always hated countertenors but I actually like your singing,’” Cohen laughed. It’s a backhanded compliment — “but I’ll take it! I strive for a warmth in my voice — the kind a mezzo-soprano would have — so it’s always fun when someone says that.”

The forthcoming season has much in store for Cohen. He will be based in San Francisco, continuing his training with the San Francisco Opera as an Adler Fellow. He also has a number of concert engagements and will be recording his first album. But perhaps the role he is most excited about is that of King David in the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra & Chorale’s new production of George Frideric Handel’s oratorio *Saul*, which they will be performing in San Francisco as well as at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

Saul begins just as David has killed Goliath. “It’s about David’s rise and Saul’s descent into madness, as the adulation of David takes over the Hebrews. What I think is so fascinating about the way Handel writes it,” Cohen explained, “is that it’s very much based on the Biblical text, but he delves into things that are more controversial by today’s standards,” such as David’s relationship with Jonathan. “The music Handel writes when the news comes to David that Jonathan has been killed is the most stunning lament. Musically, it is clear how much this means to David. The depth of emotion is extraordinary.”

Cohen feels he is fortunate in that a great many countertenor roles are to be found in oratorio, which typically drew on Biblical stories as their source material. David is “a character I have a strong Jewish connection to,” he concluded, “and it’s an amazing piece.” ■

Liam Hoare is a contributor to *Moment* and writes frequently for *The Forward*, *Tablet*, and *Slate*. He is based in the United Kingdom and is a graduate of University College London’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

SHARI RABIN

Frontiers of Jewish Life



“I felt like I was discovering a whole century of American Jewish life that was really rich and important that had barely been touched — the surface had barely been scratched.”

“When I was in graduate school, I thought I would be working on post-Second World War American Jewish history,” the historian and author Shari Rabin told me, when I asked about the origins of her award-winning debut book, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (NYU Press, 2017), about how Jews forged their own religious culture on the American frontier. “And then I took a class on religion in the American West, which focused a lot on the 19th Century. Working on a paper for that class, stumbling around in the library, I found Isaac Mayer Wise’s letters that he wrote from a trip to San Francisco in 1877.” And thus the journey began.

Isaac Mayer Wise, the eminent American rabbi of the 19th Century who founded not only the Reform Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873 but also Hebrew Union College in 1875, “is very well-known in American Jewish history,” Rabin said. But in these letters, Rabin explained she found another Wise. “It’s him speaking in a casual, upbeat voice — very different than what you see in his sermons and editorials. He’s describing going west, all the Jews he’s meeting along the way, and it just seemed to be something different than what I had read about.”

A lot of the work on 19th-Century Jewish history that Rabin had encountered up until that point “was just about the rise of Reform Judaism, and it was very synagogue-based. You didn’t get the texture of Jews living in these far-flung places” — for example, life on the American frontier, which is the subject of Rabin’s book. Breaking out of the Lower East Side-centric view of American Jewish history, Rabin thought there was something more to say. “It’s not just that everybody was in a synagogue, deciding whether or not to embrace Reform Judaism.” So Rabin asked herself: Who are these people that Mayer Wise is meeting? What’s going on with them? And how is Mayer Wise responding to these Jews he’s encountering?

Rabin grew up in Shorewood, Wisconsin, and Marietta, Georgia before majoring in religion at Boston University. She received her Ph.D. in religious studies from Yale University in 2015, thereafter joining the Yaschik/Arnold Jewish Studies Program at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. Today, she is Assistant Professor of Jewish studies there and Director of the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture. *Jews on the Frontier*, her first book, won the National Jewish Book Award in 2017 in the American Jewish Studies category, and was a finalist for the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature in 2018.

“I felt like I was discovering a whole century of American Jewish life that was really rich and important that had barely been touched — the surface had barely been scratched,” Rabin said. In *Jews on the Frontier*, she recounts the journey of Jews who ventured into the American West and South during the 19th Century. Communities began to emerge informally, constantly evolving and inherently unstable, and the book tracks the successes and obstacles Jews encountered as they sought to take advantage of new economic opportunities and the challenges and complications this migration imposed upon traditional Jewish life.

Central to *Jews on the Frontier* is the idea that mobility shaped Jewish life on the frontier. B’nai B’rith fraternal lodges and Jewish newspapers were arguably more important than synagogues as a means of connecting Jews transiting from town to town. “You could be the only Jew in your town [and] still subscribe to the Jewish newspaper,” Rabin explained. The work of Wise was in part about creating a national framework for Jews in the United States, “but their top-down efforts were limited in their success” in the West, Rabin said. On some level, “the Jews in those communities liked being able to create the Judaism that was suited to their particular congregation and location. They didn’t want some rabbi or institution telling them what to do.”

At the same time, the inherently Protestant idea of Manifest Destiny and the expansion across and conquest of the American West became one of the means by which Jews became integrated into the American story. Rabin found that Jews took on the language associated with Manifest Destiny, internalizing it in order to talk about American Judaism itself and its spread across the continent. Although there were cases of anti-Semitism here and there, “mobility and movement was one of the ways that Jews expressed their whiteness” in the 19th Century, Rabin said.

As in the period captured in *Jews on the Frontier*, today Jewish communities across the country are experiencing tremendous change, and therefore Rabin believes her book also has a contemporary relevance. “American Jewish life has always been pragmatic and eclectic,” Rabin concludes. “There’s a lot of anxiety now about post-denominationalism and [disaffiliation], but if we look at this pre-denominational moment in the 19th Century, we can see that on some level that was always the case. Jews have always pieced together their religious lives — it’s baked into American life. Jews seek out Jewish identities, practices, and ideas when they are meaningful and help them make sense of their lives.” ■

RABBI GEORGETTE KENNEBRAE

The Pastoral Chaplaincy



“I think of myself as a pastoral rabbi, in that the pastoral chaplaincy is core to everything that I do. I think people want to be seen and heard, supported and celebrated, and when I can do that — and do it well — then it allows people to flourish and be who they are and grow.”

This year, the Reconstructionist West End Synagogue on the Upper West Side welcomed a new spiritual leader: Rabbi Georgette Kennebrae, who graduated from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2017. She arrives at the West End Synagogue — having previously served as a rabbinic intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore on Long Island, and Bristol Jewish Center in Pennsylvania — at a time of tremendous change for the Reconstructionist Movement.

Kennebrae was born in Japan into a military family and had a transitory childhood, living in Turkey and France as well as various cities in the United States after her father left the air force and went to work for Boeing. She told me it was an experience she loved, and she believes there is a connection between her childhood of constantly meeting new people and becoming immersed in other languages and cultures and her life and work today at the West End Synagogue. “I feel very comfortable creating spaces of welcome and inclusion for other people because I’ve known what it’s like to have that and do not have that,” she contemplated. “It makes me grateful for the time a community has together.”

A graduate of the University of Oklahoma and Brandeis University, Kennebrae had chapters in her life as a stay-at-home mother, followed by a career in higher education at the University of Denver, before finding her way to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. In addition to being born into a military family, she was later a military spouse herself. Kennebrae told CONTACT that it was during this time that she discovered the importance of chaplaincy, which set her life on a new trajectory — one which led to the rabbinate. She had fallen in love with the practice of leading services, providing pastoral care, and being part of congregational life.

“I think of myself as a pastoral rabbi, in that the pastoral chaplaincy is core to everything that I do. I think people want to be seen and heard, supported and celebrated, and when I can do that — and do it well — then it allows people to flourish and be who they are and grow,” Kennebrae explained. “I love that, as a rabbi, I get to support my community in times of joy and periods of pain. I have a passion for death and dying — conversation, education, advocacy, awareness — and one of the reasons that I do is that I deeply believe that when one is willing to address one’s mortality and prepare for it, they can make space to live life more fully.”

It was in Colorado that Kennebrae became more involved with Reconstructionism, having discovered that the movement — with its civilizational approach that “honors the evolution of religion” and recognizes that “*halacha* has a vote but not a veto” — sat in alignment with her beliefs and practices. “One of the things I really love about Reconstructionism is that the umbrella is really large,” Kennebrae explained, “and people can show up fully, ask whichever questions they want, and find a way in their community to have meaningful Jewish practice.”

The movement itself has undertaken important changes in recent years, both structurally and philosophically. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Jewish Reconstructionist Communities rebranded earlier in the year as Reconstructing Judaism. In 2015, meanwhile, the rabbinical college voted to accept students who are in interfaith relationships, making Reconstructionist Judaism the first stream in the United States to officially allow rabbis in relationships with non-Jewish partners.

Kennebrae sees these changes as necessary to help individuals and communities remain engaged with Judaism in a way that “celebrates the diversity of the Jewish community.” Jewish and American civilizations are not static, she said, and the ability to remain fully Jewish while embracing other aspects of one’s identity is incredibly important. “A lot of harm has been done and there are people in a lot of pain who have felt rejected from Judaism because of lines in the sand that have ultimately hurt Jewish communities, families, and individuals’ ability to remain engaged,” Kennebrae concluded.

“There are a lot of spaces in the world in which one cannot bring one’s full self,” she said. “To make synagogues meaningful, people need to not be afraid to bring the things that they’re afraid of, the things they’re struggling with, or the things that are considered ‘taboo’ to talk about.” At the West End Synagogue, Kennebrae talks about this regularly from the *bimah*; these ideas of openness, inclusivity, and fearlessness are some of the values she believes her community embodies.

“I’m fully committed to celebrating the diversity of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood,” she said. “People come [to the West End Synagogue] and don’t have to worry about what I look like, what race am I, what is my sexuality, am I wealthy, am I poor. I want people to show up and know that they have gifts to offer.” ■

IF ALL THE SEAS WERE INK

Excerpt from *If All the Seas Were Ink* by Ilana Kurshan. Copyright © 2017 by the author and reprinted by permission of St. Martin's Press.

Ilana Kurshan teaches, translates, and writes about books in Jerusalem, where she lives with her husband and four children. She was awarded the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature for her memoir *If All the Seas Were Ink*, published by St. Martin's Press and excerpted here.

I loved greeting my twin daughters at the end of the day, but I dreaded having to decide whom to pick up first. Sometimes I would be lucky — I'd arrive at their daycare and Tagel would still be sleeping, so I'd pick up Liav and spend a few moments alone with her before bringing her with me to wake her sister in the back room lined with cribs where all the babies slept. But other days I'd show up to find the two of them sitting on the floor, each eagerly crying "Emma, Emma" (they could not yet pronounce long vowels, so they pronounced the Hebrew word for mother, Ima, like the Jane Austen heroine). If only I could swoop them both up simultaneously, but they were usually on opposite sides of the room. I wished that I could perform a feat worthy of King Solomon — not to divide one child for two mothers, but to divide one mother for two children.

Whenever I found myself forced to choose between the two girls, I thought of the rabbinic principle that "One does not pass over mitzvot." This principle, which appears in Pesachim (64b) and throughout the Talmud, means that if there is a commandment that is right in front of you, you should fulfill it before going to look for other commandments. Thus, when the priest walks over to the altar to sprinkle sacrificial blood on its four corners, he should start off with the corner that is closest to him, because "one does not pass over mitzvot." I recited a version of this principle in my head: "One does not pass over twins." Like the priest who may not walk past one corner of the altar to sprinkle blood on the next, I would not pass over one daughter to reach another. Inevitably that meant that her sister would burst into tears, and then I would have to set down one twin to retrieve the other, by which point they would both be crying.

Often when I described to my friends the challenges of parenting twins, I received expressions of sympathy and incredulity, of the "I-Don't-Know-How-She-Does-It" variety. Even the Talmud seems to be wary of things that come in pairs, as we learn from the tenth and final chapter of tractate Pesachim. Unlike the previous nine chapters, which deal with the Paschal sacrifice, this is the one chapter that covers the ritual of the Passover seder: the four cups of wine, the eating of matzah and bitter herbs, the recitation of the Hallel psalms, and the Afikomen at the end. All is explained in a clear and orderly fashion until the middle of the chapter, when the rabbis seem to get drunk on seder wine as they break from the halakhic discussion of the seder to engage in several pages about superstition, demonology, legend, and lore.

The rabbinic discussion of the danger of pairs begins with the Mishnah's statement that a person should not have less than four cups of wine at the Seder, even if he is so poor that he has to rely on communal funds. "Four cups of wine?" asks the anonymous voice of the Talmud. "How could the sages legislate something that is so dangerous? After all, we are taught that a person should never eat two of anything, or drink two of anything" (109b). The rabbinic discussion reflects a prevalent belief in destructive forces that we with our modern sensibilities would likely dismiss as superstitious. One such belief was the fear that doing things in pairs was hazardous. It was always safer to do something an odd number of times. But if so, how could we possibly be obligated to drink "two times two" cups of wine?

The sages offer various justifications. Rav Nahman suggests that since the Torah describes Pesach as "a night of vigil" (*Exodus 12:42*), we need not worry, because Pesach is guarded from demons and harmful spirits. Rava says that the third cup, used in the Grace after Meals, is a "cup of blessing" that serves as part of a mitzvah, and could never combine for evil purposes. And Ravina posits that since these cups are a symbol of freedom, they do not combine in pairs with one another, but each stands independently in its own right.

These explanations notwithstanding, the sages remain preoccupied with the danger of doing anything in pairs and go on to relate several stories about the lengths they would go

to avoid such behavior. Whenever Abayey would drink a cup of wine, for instance, his mother would immediately hold out two more cups, one in each hand, lest he inadvertently drink just one cup more and become susceptible to demonic forces. If a person inadvertently stops after two cups and finds himself besieged by demons, the Talmud instructs that he should hold his right thumb in his left hand, and hold his left thumb in his right hand, and say: "You, my two thumbs, and I make three!" But even so, there is no guarantee that he will be protected.

The very same day that I learned about the Talmud's fear of pairs, my friend Shira happened to forward me an article written by the parents of twins. The article, entitled "25 Tips About the Horrors of Raising Twins That You Will Never Learn From Movies and TV," reminded me of the beginning of *Anne of Green Gables*, when orphan Anne is told that she will be sent to taken care of Mrs. Blewett's two sets of twins. "Twins seem to be my lot in life," Anne miserably laments. The article warned that with twins, the pregnancy is harrowing, the early months of the babies' lives are more than twice the amount of work, and the first year is so exhausting that the parents don't even remember any of it.

As I wrote back to Shira, I must beg to differ. Yes, parenting twins is exhausting and all-consuming. But the rewards are not double, but exponential. Each night after the girls were born I watched them fall asleep in a single bassinet. I lay them down beside one another, each with her head facing away from her sister and toward one side of the crib. But invariably within the first few minutes of settling into sleep, they would each turn so that they were facing one another, their noses just centimeters apart. I thought about the cherubs in the Temple which would face one another whenever Israel was doing God's will, but turn away from each other when Israel had sinned. My angelic twins wanted all to be well with the world.

And then there was the reward of knowing they had one another. The article Shira sent recounted horror stories about mothers who could not go to the bathroom when they were home alone with their babies, or who went days without showering because they had no time alone. This never happened to me. When I needed time to myself, I lay the girls on their stomachs facing one another, with a few toys between them. Tagel amused herself by trying to catch Liav's eye and cracking up any time Liav looked in her direction; Liav mostly ignored Tagel because she was intent on moving all the toys onto her section of the mat. Every so often I had to separate them because Liav did not realize that the "toy" she was yanking on with all her might was actually Tagel's hair. But for the most part, they played together quite nicely, at least for long enough for me to run to the bathroom or jump in the shower.

As they got older, we were able to witness their increased interactions with one another. Tagel learned to crawl several months before Liav, so she scrambled around the house searching for books and toys to deliver to her sister. Once they learned to feed themselves, we sat them down in adjacent high chairs and they passed food to one another. Liav placed her sandwich on Tagel's tray, and Tagel reciprocated with her cucumber slices. Yes, on one of those occasions when I took advantage of their camaraderie to run to the bathroom, I returned to find the two of them painting each other's hair with strawberry yogurt. For a moment I began to wonder whether the Talmud was on to something in its association between pairs and demonic forces, but then I could only laugh as I took a wet washcloth and wiped the pink streaks out of their hair.

Throughout those early months Daniel and I were often beside ourselves with exhaustion, with food to cook, kids to bathe, diapers to change, and no time to work or sleep — let alone to enjoy a glass of wine. But the joy of observing our own pair grow and develop and interact with one another has been indescribable, and even if our cup is overflowing, we never doubt for a moment that it is a cup of blessing. ■



Opposite page top to bottom: Samson Three books, detail; We Were Grasshoppers In Their Eyes — The Spies, detail; The Rabbi And The Ugly Man, detail. This page top to bottom: Come My Beloved; Five Books Of David, detail; Haman In The Street, detail.

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