



Resilient Writers Fellowship Feature Articles

In Spring 2021, **The Resilient Writers Fellowship**, a pilot program between New Voices Magazine and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, offered an international group of college-age Jewish writers the opportunity to develop a personal set of tools and skills to both navigate the emotions of an ailing world and maintain their creative work in a way that is sustainable and Jewishly rooted.

In collaboration with the Editor of New Voices, Reena Yehuda Newman, and educators from the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, the cohort explored writing, media, and Jewish spiritual practices such as Torah study, trauma-informed yoga, and mindfulness over an eight-week period, culminating in written publication through New Voices inspired by their learning and interest in current events.

This Fellowship was made possible with the generous support of the Firehouse Fund.

Here are their final feature pieces.

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Peeling Back the Mythology of the Australian Jewish Left

Mika Benesh • May 25, 2021



Via @jewsagainstfash on Instagram:

"Under the heading 'Jews raid Nazi's home,' the Daily Telegraph reported that 'more than 100 people – most of them young Jews – stormed through a Melbourne Nazi leader's house today and ransacked it. They smashed every window and glass door, set fire to clothing and scattered literature and files everywhere. The kitchen stove was ripped out and left lying on its side. A bungalow at the rear of the house was also wrecked and a car parked in the drive had all its windows broken..."

"The Melbourne Herald reported that the demonstrators, 'most claiming to be Jews, hurled bricks, rocks, and metal through the windows. Some of the group carrying red flags, broke into the house and smashed everything inside. Bedding, furniture and a TV were hit first. Then an office with a padlocked door was broken into, files were thrown out and cabinets overturned. A stove was ripped out and a refrigerator tipped over in the kitchen..."

"A television team from Channel nine covered the attack throughout. Several members of the crowd appeared hysterical, most were shouting or screaming. (the only cry intelligible to the writer was 'Smash the Nazi cunts!')"

From 'everybody wants to be führer' on the attack of Nazi home in St Albans in 1972

I first encountered records of this political action through an [instagram post](#) made by Jews Against Fascism, a collective which shares anti-fascist news and media from a Jewish perspective. A photograph of the front page of the Telegraph reads "AUST. JEWS WRECK NAZI H.Q."

Dr. David Zyngier, a local representative for the Australian Greens Party, left a comment. "I was one of those young Jews there that day. Together with the Monash Labour Club, Workers Student Alliance and Wharfies and Builders Labourers Unions." Projecting my own desire

for a radical Jewish leftist community onto the past, I thought this must be a huge, hidden piece of Australian Jewish history I was about to uncover.

Speaking on the phone with Dr. Zyngier, he was quick to burst my bubble. He explained to me that the event was not mainly attended by Jews, as it was reported — in fact, as a member of the Radical Zionist Alliance, he helped organise the event across party lines in the far radical left, including socialist Zionists, and non-Jewish Maoists, Trotskyists, labour unions and worker-student alliances.

“This was less about antisemitism and more about anti-fascism. That’s my strong gut feeling about it. The view was, Nazis are fascists and fascists need to be defeated. While from a Jewish perspective of course we were concerned about the antisemitism, and I’m not trying to say that this wasn’t an issue for the non-Jewish left, but this was seen as part of the broader struggle against imperialism and fascism.”

Similar to actions taken against the Vietnam War and South African apartheid, the left saw this action against a neo-Nazi presence in Australia as broadly interconnected in a global network of resistance. It was particularly interesting to learn that at the time, Maoist and Trotskyist groups were willing to collaborate with socialist Zionists — the sort of alliance you wouldn’t find in any radical leftist movement today, as international outcry against [Israeli apartheid](#) reaches a fever pitch. Rather than further the myth that this attack on the Nazi HQ was a piece of singularly Jewish history, I began to see this event in all its contextual complexity. I needed to unravel this mythology of the Australian Jewish left which was building up not only in my mind, but in our collective memory also.

“What was most significant about the event was that we surrounded the HQ at St. Albans and put the Nazis inside to fright,” Dr. Zyngier said. “They fled, and we got hold of their files, which meant we had their membership lists, and that caused them to disappear. I recall seeing filing cabinets thrown out of a window, a most amazing event. We all felt at St. Albans like we had achieved an amazing victory. We were kidding ourselves of course, but we thought we had struck a blow against fascism that day.”

Some Jewish community leaders didn’t feel the same, with Laurence Einfeld from the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies condemning the attack, arguing that it had “[given] the Nazis thousands of dollars worth of free publicity.” Mr. Einfeld believed that [“\[there were\] better ways to handle a menace such as the Nazi Party.”](#)

“That enraged us even more,” Dr. Zyngier recalled. “And at the same time, we [the Radical Zionist Alliance] were demonstrating outside Israeli independence day celebrations at the Palais in St. Kilda, and getting attacked by the Jewish community. We were handing out leaflets calling for a 2 state solution and withdrawal from the West Bank, and we got attacked by Jews, punched and spat on.”

It’s not entirely surprising that socialist Zionists such as Dr. Zyngier have been met with such violence from Jewish communities here for being critical of the Israeli state. Though there are plenty of Jewish Israeli citizens who disapprove of their government, to speak even somewhat critically of the Israeli government in a Jewish-Australian context is often grounds for harassment and ostracisation — and it’s been like this for a while. How did our communities come to be this way?

Origin Stories

Dr. Max Kaiser, a researcher of Australian Jewish anti-fascism in the 1940’s and 50’s at the University of Melbourne, explained to me that Zionism wasn’t always a cornerstone of Jewish Australian institutions. Along with the Bund, which didn’t support Zionism, some Jews in Melbourne and Perth were particularly skeptical of Zionism from 1939 – 1948, due to their loyalty to the British empire.

In conversation with many of my other sources, we speculated a connection between Australia’s high intake of Holocaust refugees and the Jewish community’s conservative Zionism. There’s a collective assumption in Jewish communities that Holocaust survivors who came to Australia brought a staunch Zionism with them, a survival strategy in response to the trauma of the Holocaust. However, Dr. Kaiser’s research has led him to a different conclusion.

“There’s this way that Jewish Australian history is told, where the fact that there are so many Holocaust survivors here has some automatic relationship to being more conservative and more Zionist. A big finding in my research was that, no, Holocaust refugees and their allies were connecting Holocaust memory to a wider political, anti-fascist struggle.” In his research, Dr. Kaiser particularly investigates the [Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Antisemitism](#), a Melbourne organization present in the 40’s and 50’s that monitored and responded to antisemitism and fascism more broadly in the Australian context.

Rather than a result of an influx of Holocaust refugees, Dr. Kaiser believes that Zionism’s stronghold in the Australian Jewish community is, in significant part, a product of Cold War allegiances. “Another part of this was the Zionist Jewish right’s suspicion of having meetings

about the plight of Aboriginal people, because it was seen as a left-wing, communist cause. [They chose] a safer political option, which is a continuing theme in Australian Jewish politics. I think how the Jewish community thinks about its relationship to Indigenous people now, it's just become this complete mythology."

Zac Roberts, an Aboriginal Australian from Yuin Country and researcher of Indigenous / Jewish relations from 1788 at Macquarie University, certainly echoes this sentiment. "Most of what's been written about Indigenous / Jewish relations has been by Jewish people [...] I do think there's a significant relationship, but often this relationship is simplified and overstated from the Jewish perspective."

A significant piece of this simplified, overstated history concerns activist and Yorta Yorta Elder William Cooper, who led a deputation of Indigenous people to protest the persecution of Jews in Germany, one month after Kristallnacht in December 1938. While there were protests all around Australia following the Kristallnacht pogrom, Cooper's action is often discussed as being one of the ["only protests of its kind at the time"](#). Much of what's been published about him concerns this act of solidarity, and Cooper's protest has become a touchstone for Jewish Australians looking to cultivate relations of solidarity with Aboriginal communities and their justice movements.

Aboriginal scholar Professor Gary Foley argues that this was in fact a [strategic action](#) to draw attention to the similarities between what was happening in Nazi Germany, and the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Australia. Roberts explains to me that when Jewish Australians discuss Cooper's action at the German Consulate in 1938, they tend to gloss over his context as a Yorta Yorta Elder and activist.



“Cooper’s whole life was about Indigenous rights. He ran the Australian Aborigines League out of his dining room. As nice as it was that he was standing up for the Jewish people, looking at the trajectory of his life and work it was actually him going, ‘you’re all real mad about this, what about the black people?’” Roberts said.

Roberts also discussed whether this tendency to mythologize historical Jewish / Indigenous relations erases Jewish Australians’ complicity in colonialism. “You can’t erase the fact that first of all, Jewish people were on the First Fleet, they were part of the first settlers, and were accepted as part of the British people in that period. And that makes them a very specific kind of settler. Yes, Jewish people were some of the first non-Indigenous people to say this land was invaded. But you can’t then erase all of the racism that was done as well, which is also in the historical record. You can’t pick and choose.”

“In the early 1930’s, a Jewish man named Melech Ravitch did a massive road trip from Adelaide to the Northern Territory, through the Kimberleys and whatnot, for the purpose of figuring out if the Northern Territory of Australia [could be the Jewish homeland](#). It’s part of what was called the [Kimberley Plan](#).”

At a time when [all kinds of colonial proposals](#) were being made about where a Jewish nation-state could feasibly be built, it’s unsurprising that stolen, invaded Aboriginal lands in the Northern Territory were considered too. “This man [was] someone who’s been historically colonized, actively going out and searching for a place to colonize. And not really having any self awareness about the fact that that’s what he was doing.” said Roberts.

Ravitch’s son, an antifascist artist named Yosl Bergner, began painting urban Aboriginal peoples in Melbourne in the late 1930’s. “It was the [first time](#) that Indigenous people were depicted in non-Indigenous art as a colonised group of people who were experiencing genocide, rather than as a racist caricature.”

While Bergner’s paintings are often included in a narrative of a progressive, historical Jewish-Australian community, they continue this colonial relationship between Jewish and Aboriginal communities. I wonder who the unnamed Indigenous people Bergner painted were, and if they saw any royalties from his paintings? It calls to mind the orientalist, [Ashkenazi anthropologists](#) who travelled to SCWANA regions to document Jewish communities there.



Yosl Bergner, ‘Aboriginals in Fitzroy’, 1941

On Solidarity

Roberts believes that broadly, Jewish Australian communities have not reckoned with their position as settlers on these unceded lands. “They don’t have this self-reflection, and I think that speaks to the conservatism of Jewish communities,” he said.

In his own family, three or four generations of Yuin men have married Jewish women, and Roberts’ mother is also a patrilineal Jew. “The way that [Indigenous / Jewish] relationships have changed over time is that they’ve become less personal, and more about social justice. In the 19th century we saw a lot of marriages, friendships, and also professional relationships between Jewish and Aboriginal people, but now these relationships tend to remain within the bounds of activism. There’s less of a human element to it, and I think that’s potentially partially because of how Jewish communities speak about these relationships. They’re so intent on helping that they start to deny Aboriginal people’s agency. It becomes paternalistic.”

“Bringing back that human element, that personal element, could make it a much more reciprocal relationship. If that’s going to happen, the fact that non-Indigenous Jewish people are settlers in this country needs to be acknowledged. There needs to come a time where Jewish people do the listening. I think that’s going to be the hardest bit, and potentially the most rewarding.”

Roberts and I also discussed whether Jewish Australian communities’ refusal or inability to recognise Israeli occupation might be a barrier to growing these relationships. “Indigenous people relate a lot to the Palestinians! Whereas Australian Jews are very much drawing the comparison between themselves and Indigenous Australians. Indigenous people aren’t necessarily aligning themselves in the ways that [Zionist] Jewish institutions want them to.”

Relationships of solidarity between Aboriginal Australians and Palestinians emerged in the late 1970’s, with both communities recognizing shared threads in their experiences with state citizenship, dispossession from land, and incarceration. At the [2019 Black-Palestinian Solidarity Conference](#), attendees recognized the shared racism of Australian and Israeli nation-states, investigating the possibilities which alternative forms of identity and community offer for non-racist futures.

In 2020, the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) released a joint statement on antisemitism with the Australian Jewish Democratic Society (AJDS). In conversation with Nasser Mashni from APAN, Dr. Jordy Silverstein discussed the broader ideas which informed the launch of the [Joint Statement on Antisemitism](#). “It’s knowledge of what nation-states,

antisemitism and racism look like in its most awful forms that brings [us] into conversation [...] Our friends are those who are anti-racist wherever racism exists, wherever antisemitism exists, wherever anti-Palestinian sentiment exists.”

Dr. Silverstein, a historian at the University of Melbourne whose research explores sexuality, gender, racialization and nation-building, tells me over zoom that she was initially introduced to Palestinian rights advocacy through engaging with Indigneous knowledge and movements in this country. Her first year university class on ‘Indigenous Politics and the State’ with Dr. Wayne Atkinson, who is Yorta Yorta, prompted her to think critically about her position as a colonizer on unceded Aboriginal land, and by extension her understandings of and relationship with Israel. “There were a few moments and conversations from that class that have stayed with me 20 years on [...] it led me to doing so much reading and learning, and thinking and talking to people.”

Organizing Futures

Dr. Silverstein is one of several Jewish Australians interviewed by Kea Cranko for her recently released documentary, “[In Dialogue: Jews on the Borderlands](#).” The documentary explores ways in which Australian Jewish establishment structures mandate support for the state of Israel as an essential component of Jewish identity. Through engaging with non-Zionist Jews who have largely gone unnoticed by the mainstream, she hopes to spark dialogue within and beyond mainstream Jewish institutions, and work towards building Jewish spaces of plurality, diversity and tolerance.

Sitting down with Cranko at the Palestinian-owned Khamsa Cafe in Newtown, we jumped right into her relationship to Judaism. “I went to Emmanuel primary school, and felt dissociated from the Judaism and Jewish culture that was promoted there. I became quite removed from Judaism for a long time. One striking thing at Emmanuel was the three flags that fly in front of the school — the Australian flag, the Aboriginal flag, and then the Israeli flag. I now feel they’re quite at odds with each other.”

“It was discovering non-Zionist Jews in Palestine solidarity spaces that began my discovery of alternative iterations of Jewishness, which I’d never seen. But the vibrant socialist, communist, diasporic history of our communities is virtually imperceptible when I look at the current Jewish communal landscape, especially in so-called Sydney.”

Also interviewed in Cranko’s documentary is Vivienne Porszolt, from Jews Against Occupation NSW. She describes the organization to me as a secular, modernist humanist,

and elderly group, with her being one of the youngest members at age 80. While the organisation attends rallies, puts out media releases and interviews, and partners with larger organisations, Porszolt is currently interested in organising across the generational gap which has emerged in the Australian Jewish left. We also discuss this gap in terms of modernists versus post-modernists, older heterosexual men versus younger queer people, and secularism versus spirituality.

Some of these generational differences, as well as differing relationships to Zionism, may also account for a recent split in the Australian Jewish Democratic Society. After the organization announced its collapse in mid-2020, it re-emerged in 2021 with what Porszolt calls the “old-guard” leadership, with many younger members having left the organization. As a young person searching for like-minded peers and community, it certainly feels as though there’s an organizational vacuum in the Australian Jewish left right now.

Jews Against Fascism, the social media collective through which I initially encountered the 1972 Nazi HQ attack, shared with me that they launched in 2016 following the islamophobic [Reclaim Australia](#) rallies, which were “becoming a serious honey pot for neo-Nazis.”

When asked how they see the Australian Jewish community, & media landscape, they wrote: *“We are part of the Jewish community, but we definitely feel we are on its margins. It feels incredibly conservative, often reactionary, and profoundly Zionist, middle class, white and Ashkenazi. And the media landscape reflects this.”*



Protesters hold placards with Aboriginal protest slogans written in Yiddish — Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land!

From the Jews Against Fascism instagram.

At [Invasion Day](#) rallies and similar anticolonial actions, Jews Against Fascism can be found organizing a Jewish bloc of protesters. *“We are acutely aware of the political reality of white supremacy on stolen land: if there is an escape from white supremacy, it is through decolonisation, however that might be identified by Aboriginal communities. But also many of us grew up politically through the teaching, leadership, writing, and generosity of some of the most staunch and wonderful Indigenous activists. The lessons we learnt – the length and breadth of these lessons – are central to our activism.”*

Where do we go from here?

As I peeled back layers of collective mythology with every conversation, and started to grapple with much more complicated histories of Jewish antifascism, Zionism, and relations with Indigenous peoples, the work of building our shared futures came into view — and each community organizer and researcher I spoke with has an idea of what the future holds. David Zyngier tells me that anti-fascist activists in Melbourne will continue to come together as needed, outnumbering fascists 3:1. Zac Roberts believes that Jewish communities doing the listening, recognising our position as settlers and tending to our interpersonal relationships with Aboriginal people will enable us to cultivate more reciprocal relations. Having left the AJDS, Max Kaiser and Jordy Silverstein are working with others on starting a new Jewish group in Melbourne. As well as screening her documentary and sparking generative dialogue, Kea Cranko is working with Vivienne Porszolt to organise Jewish community in Sydney. Jews Against Fascism are starting to see Jewish lefties on the margins come together to build community, to fight, to create a Jewishness for ourselves that struggles against assimilation, to build relationships and solidarity in our communities. To which I say, chazak chazak v'nitzchazek.

Our personal, political and spiritual pasts are bound up in our futures; we can't talk about one without the other. We can never extract ourselves from the pasts we look to, but when we come together to tend to our imperfect histories, and unravel the myths we tell ourselves about how we got here, our shared futures begin to reveal themselves to us — and they're more compelling than anything I could have imagined on my own. I'll meet you there.

This piece was developed across the Wurundjeri lands of the Kulin Nation, and the Gadigal and Darug lands of the Eora Nation. As I expand my knowledge of my own cultures and histories, I pay respect to the knowledge embedded forever within Aboriginal custodianship of Country. [Though routers connect us to URLs and the world wide web, we too are tethered to the land, and the colonial present.](#) I acknowledge all sovereign nations this article may reach. Always was, always will be.



Mika Benesh is an artist / writer / Judaica designer working on unceded Darug Country in Sydney, Australia. Broadly speaking, they trace relationships between cultural institutions, spirituality & theology, archives, queer / trans lives & movements, and white supremacy. Across his practice, Mika is interested in catching a small hold of many Jewish futures.

Foraging for Jews

Maya Faerstein-Weiss • April 27, 2021

A few months ago, I succumbed to the temptation of a clickbait article involving a hidden obscenity in an episode of a popular children's show. The show was *Maya the Bee*, an animated series about a mop-topped bee who navigates the world of bugs with her insect friends. Scandal aside, I became engrossed in the episode in question, the plot of which taught me about something I'd never heard of before—honeydew. Honeydew is a sticky, sugary sap excreted by aphids, which is consumed by other insects such as ants, who engage in a symbiotic relationship with the aphids based on this need.

Later, in a very separate context, I was reading about manna, the heavenly substance which God provided to the Israelites for sustenance throughout their 40 year travels through the desert following the exodus. While manna does not necessarily have one fully agreed upon counterpart in a contemporary earthly setting, a common interpretation is that manna was a sort of honeydew.

The Jews of the Book of Exodus were essentially foragers, relying on edible offerings of the land for sustenance. Unlike agriculture, foraging forms a relationship with the land that is spontaneous, place-based, sensitive to change, and somewhat ephemeral in its nature, perfectly suited for the persons on the (*big*) move. My interest in foraging grew organically from the influence of my parents, two Jews from New York City and Romania respectively, who first met at a meeting of the New York Mycological Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to stoking public interest in the world of wild mushrooms through things like guided walks, lectures, and banquets.



In March, I returned to visit my parents in New York City for the first time after moving to Brattleboro, Vermont, my first major transition towards independence since I had left for college. I sat on my bed in the room I'd shared with my mother in our one-bedroom apartment from childhood to the age of 18, my parents sitting opposite to me on her bed. My mother, Leah Faerstein, reflected on her Jewish identity growing up in Romania, and her surprise and amusement at meeting my father through foraging.

"I remember when I lived in Romania, our whole family was assimilated. There was nothing about being Jewish—I mean I didn't even know I was Jewish until I turned 18. And after I found out, nothing much changed in my life. All my generation—cousins, sister, brother, they all married non-Jewish. So at some point when I came here, and after my divorce, I kind of had this idea, once I joined the mycological club I had this idea that maybe I meet someone, on those foraging trips. Which I did! And then I said 'oh lo and behold, out of all my generation in Romania, I am the only one who married a Jew! And found him in the woods!'"



The author and her parents on a foraging expedition

For my mother, the decision to join the New York Mycological Society was part of an effort to reintegrate herself into the world after a very difficult period of depression and isolation following her divorce. She was pinpointing things that had brought her happiness in a past life—literature, science fiction, picking mushrooms in the Romanian countryside—and using them to make her way back into her current life. While my mother does not see her own life as having changed much through the realization of her own Jewishness, my family's life has been quite profoundly shaped by their being Jewish; their intentional assimilation and obscurity

of their full identities was a direct result of the antisemitism they faced in their country. Knowing all this, it feels particularly significant to me that she met my Jewish father through the intentional recovery of another distant fragment of her identity.

My father, Victor Weiss, is a passionate forager of plants, fruits and mushrooms. Like myself, he was born and raised in New York City, and his urban foraging practices expose a side of the city that is often unnoticed or obscured. His interest in foraging grew alongside his dietary restrictions—he maintains a vegan diet and also abstains from processed sugar and gluten. Although he does not keep kosher, he commented that, were he to do so, he would be all set with his foraged greens.

When asked about connections between his foraging and his Jewish identity, my father mentioned applications for Passover. “When I’ve gone to a seder or two, I find some garlic mustard and I say ‘here’s some bitter herbs.’” I am particularly fond of this anecdote when I consider the array of modifications and additions that many Jewish people have made to the seder plate—based on availability, symbolisms, and personal values and expressions. My own plate this year, shared with a very small group of close friends, included candied [orange slices for the LGBTQ+ community](#), [a pinecone for the incarcerated](#), and a key for the homeless and housing insecure. To me, replacing horseradish from the grocery store with a sprig of a native wild edible found in a neighborhood park is an intermingling of spirituality and close relationship to an ever-changing landscape reminiscent of the Jews of Exodus and their gathering of Manna.

My father also discussed the caution exercised by some orthodox Jews to avoid the consumption of insects. “Some people that are very religious seem to be concerned with—of critters being in their vegetables and stuff. And I had a friend who was not that religious, but her son became orthodox, and he and his family won’t eat lettuce [because of bugs].” He referred lightly to his own caution which he executes to remove any insects from freshly foraged goods as opposed to some in the foraging community who will jokingly refer to the occasional stray critter as “a little extra protein”, musing on whether a latent Jewish instinct guides his habits.



The author, as a child, holds a foraged mushroom

I spoke with Steve Brill, another Jewish New Yorker, who makes a living [leading tours and educating children and adults about the world of wild edibles](#), often with the assistance of his teenage daughter, Violet Brill. When asked about connections he perceives between his foraging practices and Judaism, Brill spoke of an ethic within Jewish tradition which overlaps with his philosophy behind foraging and environmental education, regarding our responsibility towards the natural world. “We are supposed to take care of the earth, but a lot of other traditions have the same ethic,” he said. “I don’t know if you’d call that Jewish or universal.” After speaking about this more, we settled on “a non-uniquely *Jewish* ethic,” as a descriptor.

I also spoke with Chelsea Taxman, an herbalist whose Jewish identity actively informs her practice. The work of an herbalist overlaps with foraging, sharing an intimate relationship with natural ecosystems in all their specificities. Taxman identifies on her [website](#) as “a healer & plant medicine maker working toward liberation. Empowering us to take back

our power in health in the home and as sacred practice,” informed by her Ashkenazi Jewish ancestors. Taxman offers personal consultations and a variety of services for those interested in healing herbalism, and maintains a commitment towards providing accessible services for those who may otherwise face difficulties in accessing care within conventional and alternative medical services, including people of color, queer, and low income people.

In our conversation, Taxman spoke about discovering herbalism as a teenager as an empowering means of treating and healing her own problems, later considering herself to be part of a larger community and tradition of Jewish healers (or, as someone she participated in a workshop with playfully put it, “plant yentas”). “My own personal practice was just like, using herbs and thinking about herbs for myself for many years....I started making everything for myself. I found a remedy by *myself* for stomach aches, I found a remedy by myself for acne.”

For Taxman, this already empowering practice was enriched and expanded when she began to share it with somebody outside of herself. “I had this friend come to me and she was like ‘I also love doing that! And then we started experimenting like, going a little deeper, trying things I wouldn’t necessarily have tried on my own. We made a personal lubricant that we could use, a deodorant...kind of looking at the products we purchase and studying the plants together. That was really fun. Kind of like, in *chavruta*. She wasn’t Jewish but I think about how valuable that practice is of studying with somebody.”

Derived from the Aramaic word meaning “friendship” or “companionship,” being in *chavruta* refers to the Rabbinic Jewish tradition of studying the Talmud with a partner, a practice considered superior to studying alone. It is notably different from a teacher-student learning model, in that it is non-hierarchical and dependent on two individuals with a similar level of skill gaining knowledge through a mutual exchange of ideas. The bond of *chevruta* is generally considered to be a very deep and lasting one. Taxman’s *chavruta* with another herbalist was an important point in her journey from herbalism as a purely personal practice to one that spread outwards in many directions, including into own ancestral past as a Jew.

She reflected on the ways in which connecting to her Jewish ancestry has allowed her to access a deeper level of meaning and fulfillment in her work as an herbalist.

“Since I’ve leaned into the reality that I am Jewish, and I have these Jewish ancestors and this Jewish lineage and I have this Jewish inherited knowledge that I have to uncover because it wasn’t written down or it was erased...since I’ve just allowed myself to be open to that knowledge, so many things feel like they’ve opened up. My heart feels more open to this work and to community and to people.”

Taxman spoke on how the introduction of a Jewish spirituality has changed the nature of her work. “I’ve found meaningful work as an herbalist. Before, some of my work felt more capitalistic, where I was like making products and selling it at the farmers market, and creating a workshop and promoting it and marketing it and selling and selling....It took out some of the heart of it sometimes, when I was like, scrambling to find the right packaging. And since I’ve asked my Jewish ancestors for support, I’ve enjoyed more of the process.”

A year or so after their first meeting in the woods of New York City, my parents strapped their months-old baby into a sea-green and purple baby character that, many years later, will be used to carry our little dog through subways and buses so that she too can enjoy family foraging trips, dashing through fields and sniffing at soil and rolling in mud. This summertime walk produces a giant puffball mushroom, and a family photo of my tiny baby hand against the comically large fleshy white orb of fungus, mouth agape.

It goes without saying that Jewish identity is multitudinous and complex. For many who are assimilated or who go through significant changes in these identities, the process of coming to these identities may involve a sort of “going back” or returning, even if what one is returning to is not something one has experienced within their lifetime. I see foraging and herbalism similarly—while a newcomer to these practices may have never before cut through the stalk of a bolete mushroom with a pocket knife or harvested St John’s wort to help treat their depression, in doing so they are returning to a time of a more intimate communion with the Earth, a time when Jews survived their long voyage through the desert by gathering the land’s sacred food, sent by God.

Meditations on Blood

Maya Faerstein-Weiss • May 10, 2021

Apolitical Memory #1

After spending the night at my cousin's house in Israel¹, her grandmother makes us toast smeared with melted cheese and ketchup. They all drink a sugar-packed iced tea which I adore and smoke cigarettes without pause which I do not.² We are on the couch watching spongebob, which at home my parents adore as much as I do, we all watch it together in the evening, my father can do all the voices. Only here it is called "bospog" which is amazingly funny. The silliness of "spongebob" is glossed over by repeated use like a brand, but "bospog" is fresh and glistening with absurd hysteria. I am licking ketchup from the corners of my mouth and making a list of everyone back home who I will tell about bospog and shivering a little in the air conditioning which rages on always with a fury, battling against the desert air.

¹ Monopoly board in Hebrew horrible blur of newfound illiteracy dissolved into shrieking mad laughter joyous this fresh sort of vulnerability which somehow breaks open the seal between blushing stranger-cousins melting into family

² For months I inhaled the scent of my stuffed frog bubuluc who came along on the trip terrified he had absorbed irrevocably the smell of smoke, not considering he was first gifted to me by cousin Tanya (henna-orange hair, ceramic trolls), who refused to visit us in America because she could not tolerate all that time in a plane without a cigarette), I was too small and naive to consider his roots.



Apolitical Memory #2

In Israel, I watched a mouse in a pet store give birth.³ I drifted in the oily Dead Sea till my skin burned and dodged monstrous jellyfish in the Mediterranean and tousled in the public pool. In Israel, I pronounced “Israel” the wrong way⁴ and was told by my mother that this was the way Israel was spoken by its *enemies*. I had not realized that we had flown so many hours to a place with enemies. In Israel I rode a bike that was too big for me and picked lemons from a tree on the street.

³ The largest thing in the world I’d ever seen divide itself up like that, surpassed only years later by the two kittens born on my winter coat, one dead and one living, both blue-grey, unseeing things that left permanent patches of browning blood across my yellow jacket.

⁴ I could not, if I wished to, tell you how I’d said it, only that it was incorrect.

Apolitical Memory #3

In Israel my cousin who I loved exuberantly for one week wrote my name in Hebrew on a napkin in a restaurant which I kept with me for a while until I did not.⁵ We did not speak a word after the plane grazed the American ground and I hardly thought about her until much later when I was thinking about those things, when I saw the picture in the olive green uniform, dark glossy hair and olive skin⁶ and the comment “you Israel girls are hot in your uniforms” from some guy in Mammoth, Arizona. My mother brought the picture to my attention after I’d already seen it and I tensed and hardened because this was a branch of a subject that had by now become one of the tightest knots between us. I said *What do you want from me? Am I supposed to be happy about this? Like you would be happy if I told you I was going to join the military, to go blow people up in the Middle East and pose for pictures in camouflage?*

⁵ Although it is entirely possible that it exists still in the stacks and piles of detritus in my old bedroom, swollen trash and precious discards always on the cusp of bursting, it is equally possible that the matter and energy of that ink stained napkin is somewhere more obscure yet.

⁶ At the time it had seemed as though we’d swapped bodies from the time we had met, she’d lost her roundness and given it to me, none of which mattered except to the extent that it did, its mattering came at us both, probably, from all angles, oozing and zipping and percolating through the air we breathed.

⁷ Once I told my father of a rumor that we were going to have an army recruiter on my college campus and he blanched, made me promise not to say a word to them. I laughed at the notion that there was any chance at all of my being persuaded to join the army, I was neither ideologically inclined nor materially desperate enough to do such a thing, not to mention my defective mind and wholly unathletic body but he only shook his head. *“Those people have their ways.”*

Apolitical Memory #4

A few weeks before leaving for college, that summer I felt uncontainably large, high on ignorance of my own ill-preparedness for the rest of my life.⁸ My mother made vague, airy comments about how important it was that *I stay true to myself* when I went away. She'd been reading about some of these liberal arts colleges and their support for BDS. I barely knew what she was saying, probably the acronym made me think of BDSM, which, frankly, I'd had far more thoughts about at this point than I had about divestments and sanctions and Israeli war crimes. I did not ask her to elaborate, I chewed on a silence of the same tone as the one back when I was small and she'd spoken of Israel's enemies. *Our* enemies, effectively. And then I went away and a lot of things happened, one of which being that I fell madly in love with a group of older students who were more interesting to me than anyone else⁹, and I followed them around everywhere trying to soak up the essence of who they were until I followed them to a screening of a film called *5 Cameras*, on the couch in the common room where we had our best parties, the carpet still smelling of spilled wine, watching a Palestinian farmer trying to film his son growing up and filming in addition all of the breakings—breakings of cameras and olive groves and houses and bodies and spirits. And I cannot honestly tell you whether my thoughts that night were anything like “is that what she's doing now?” My cousin, beaming in her olive green suit. If I did not think it then I put the pieces together soon enough.

⁸ High, also on whatever drugs I managed to get my hands on (I knew nothing, I'd show up in the park and ask a boy I'd seen selling the day before what sort of pills he had and how many of them I could get for \$5).

⁹ I loved them for their intellect and wild articulations and political convictions and raucous, reckless capacity for fun.

Apolitical Memory #5

At six years old I marched with my mother and father against the war in Iraq, always with a sense of being ill at ease because I believed vaguely at the time that the idea of a march was to reach the finish line where the enemy awaited, ready for combat, that if we kept marching long enough we would run into George W. Bush or whoever it was we were marching against and then the real struggle would begin.¹⁰ It would later grow to seem irreconcilable to me, my mother's condemnation of our country's brutality and her defense of Israel's. She told me once that this was a matter of *blood*, a word which fuzzed at the edges for me. My cousin wasn't *blood*, she was a person. A person with whom I shared some DNA, loved for a week and then never spoke to again. Blood was the stuff from inside of the bony mother cat in Vermont that never came off of the yellow coat, which my mother stubbornly continued to wear, despite my protests that wearing clothing stained with placenta was simply too far beyond the pale. Blood is the stuff that moves with speedy efficiency through plastic tubes during the tests I undergo monthly since I've started taking a drug called Lithium, which relaxes my mind and muffles my own fixations with blood, on tearing the packaging of myself apart and bringing it out of me. Blood as my mother speaks of it is not meaningless to me, but it seems impossible that there could be enough of it to flood over 50+ years of occupation and all that it entails. Blood, like anything else, has its limits.

¹⁰ It never happened, we always went home too early to my relief; home where I could play my computer games and read my books with only a vague wringing of borderline comprehensible chants about dead children and bombs resonating in my ears.



Maya Faerstein-Weiss is a recent graduate of Marlboro College, where she studied philosophy and creative writing and wrote a thesis on (among other things) feelings and the political/personal applications of catharsis in art and literature. In addition to writing and learning more about Judaism, Maya enjoys plants, beasts, and fungi, reading, cooking, clothing, and doting over her bearded dragon, Little Edie.

The “Halakhically Curious” Phenomenon

Sofia Freudenstein • May 26, 2021

Halakhah (Jewish law) has often and problematically been taught as a set of dogmatic rules, only relevant to traditional streams of Judaism, but a new generation of Jews and Jewish educators are building a vision of halakhah that is mindful, meaningful, and able to inform the practice of all kinds of Jews.

“Halakhah-Goggles”

As an incoming rabbinical student enrolled at [Yeshivat Maharat](#), the first Modern Orthodox institution to ordain Jewish women, I’m often asked why I am doing what I am doing. When explaining my religious orientation to people, I sometimes use the term “*halakhah-goggles*,” which is meant to capture how *halakhah* or Jewish law encompasses my actions. I see *halakhah* as an opportunity to bring holiness into my life: whether it be through performing a specific *mitzvah*, to being in nature, connecting with other people and feeling the *Shekhinah* between us, reading an amazing book, or listening to music. *Halakhah* has something to say about how I relate to others, go to the bathroom, spend my time, and what I eat; instead of nit-picky, I feel this makes every action an opportunity to become something special. I have to look for the *kedushah*, the holiness in all of those actions and ask myself: Why is this important to me, and how do I make it affect me in my life? When I become aware of these reflections, I believe I am guiding my actions to becoming *kadosh*/holy, calibrating with God’s will and empowering me as an agent of the Divine in this world.

Many are surprised when they hear this is not only how I perceive my everyday routine, but my life mission. Most people initially perceive me as an observant woman in a web of patriarchal practice, and assume I’m trapped – or worse, practicing something outmoded. I receive even



more baffled reactions when I tell people I want to teach others about the beauty of the halakhic system. “Do you ever want to leave?” “You know, God won’t hate you if you stop.” “How can you perpetuate something that has caused so much pain over millennia?”

Yet, when I explain to others that seeing *halakhah* as providing framing and beauty to my life is what not only keeps me here but pushes me to share this view with others, Jews of all backgrounds are not only compelled, but genuinely shocked. Many young Jews perceive *halakhah* as hindering, as opposed to enriching, ranging from Orthodox to Reform and secular Jews – an interesting point of connected experience of mainstream Jewish practice. Only when I began entering Orthodox spaces full-time and interacting with non-Orthodox people in university, did I realize that the beauty and enhancement of *halakhah* in my life is actually the exception, as opposed to the norm.

The Concern of an Unintentional *Halakhah*

“I thought about *halakhah* as more of a rigid thing,” says Raffi Levi, who called me from his apartment in the Upper West Side. Levi comes from a Modern Orthodox background and day school education, and is now studying to be a rabbi through the progressive Modern Orthodox Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in Riverdale, New York.

Levi believes that this perceived rigidity of *halakhah* is connected to non-emotionally attuned theological teachings in the Modern Orthodox day school system. “We learned Maimonides’ views about God being incorporeal and above human understanding. But that is really impersonal.” He sees this impersonal connection to God as leading to rote practice. “I wanted a relationship with Judaism, I wanted to experience it. If Jewish law is taught as a set of God-given rules, how are we supposed to relate – and even worship – if we don’t have a relationship with the God we are supposed to be communicating with through these ritual actions?”

This disconnect from God and *halakhah* as a holy system can make religious worship that is often performative, where no one is talking about the substance of the *halakhah* itself, leading to building communities based on social norms that often turn exclusive and judgmental.

This understanding of *halakhah* is perpetuated by the Orthodox education system, yet also manifests in non-Orthodox settings in their treatment of *halakhah* as a fossil. Alona Weimer, a graduate student and community organizer, grew up in a Reform synagogue. She felt that community members looked down on the halakhic practice of their Orthodox neighbors, especially after a situation in which a local Chabad rabbi refused to shake her mother’s hand, citing a traditional halakhic understanding of separation between the sexes. “I

remember the community expressing annoyance at how ‘difficult’ and absurd it was to have to accommodate people who practiced Judaism in an ‘old-fashioned’ way,” she said.

In addition to disapproval of *halakhah*, there was also a lack of resources and knowledge of halakhic texts. Weimer became more traditionally observant after meeting open-minded Orthodox students on her college campus, yet still felt some foundational textual skills missing. “I had acculturated to the rituals and practices of Shabbat, but still was lacking a lot of halakhic knowledge,” she said.

Michaela Brown, a rabbinical student at Hebrew College in Boston, expressed similar frustrations with her Conservative Jewish community growing up. The Jewish education provided by her upbringing made any kind of religious practice fairly unappealing. “This whole ‘pick and choose your Judaism’ and not seeing *mitzvot* as critical to the system, actually turned me off of the system,” Brown said. It seems that by glossing over the minutiae of *halakhah* – the very actions that often become rote in Modern Orthodox settings – a richness of the Jewish tradition is lost.

A framework of rigidity, reward and punishment, minutiae and alienation often obscures halakhic practice for people with varying effects for different kinds of Jews. Orthodox Jews may feel lost when exposed to new social and cultural understandings that do not seem to match their practices at first glance, resulting in a lack of investment and connection in the halakhic system, and some leave the system altogether when doubts regarding *halakhah* begin to arise. When *halakhah* is perceived as a system of strict rights and wrongs, doubt sits uncomfortably in practice, creating a sense of bifurcation between ritual practice and experienced life. In non-Orthodox settings that paint *halakhah* as rigid and irrelevant, non-Orthodox Jews sometimes feel a sense of loss in their inability to speak the language of their tradition by not being well-versed in traditional texts and halakhic conceptions. Is it possible to balance maintaining the ‘bigger picture’ of what *halakhah* is trying to achieve while also being textually literate and knowledgeable of halakhic detail? On seemingly opposite ends of the religious spectrum, Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews are feeling confused as to how to relate to *halakhah*.

Discovering Mindfulness

Earlier this pandemic year, I began exploring [mindfulness techniques](#) as a way of regaining control over my context by acknowledging the lack of control. During my walking meditations, I began noticing a sense of focus on detail with intention: feeling the weight of my right foot when I let it land on the ground, focusing on my immediate surroundings, watching my mind

drift and then gently bring it back to the present moment. I’ve often experienced this deep attention when my religious practice has felt the most right; deep intention accompanying all of my actions. Often, when I’ve discussed halakhic disillusionment with my Modern Orthodox friends, their concerns stem from the obsession with minutiae without thinking about how the minutiae connects to the larger picture and purpose of practice. But when they have felt calibrated in their practice – whether it be a really melodic Kabbalat Shabbat service, or better understanding the blessings over produce because they’ve watched vegetables grow in their gardens, or even standing during Torah reading to invoke re-living the covenant of Sinai – my friends have found their halakhic experiences to be meaningful.

Maybe the problem isn’t *halakhah*, but the lack of intention and purpose to accompany it. While *halakhah* in practice often lacks overall mindfulness, perhaps *halakhah* is really meant to be a Jewish divine mindfulness in which one orients oneself to the rest of the world. *Halakhah* is not meant to hinder; if it is perceived as such, it might be a pedagogical problem as opposed to an inherent one.

When I asked his thoughts on the subject of creating an intentional *halakhah*, Rabbi Josh Feigelson smiled widely. Feigelson is a rabbi who previously worked in the world of academia at University of Chicago Divinity School, and is currently the Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

“As someone immersed in the Orthodox world, I’ve often seen ritual practice become more about social performance than intentionality,” he said. “But I’ve also found in non-Orthodox contexts that there is a lack of development of the language of *halakhah*. I felt that when I became a parent, some kind of forced reckoning occurred about our religious practice: What exactly are we doing? And then I stumbled upon an article that gave language to something I’ve been looking for for a long time: *halakhah* as embodied practice.”

Feigelson cited an article from the anthology *A New Hasidism: Branches*, by Rabbi Ariel Evan Mayse, a professor of religious studies at Stanford University, entitled, “Neo-Hasidism and *Halakhah*.” By combining the spiritual world of [Hadistic philosophy](#) with the legal technicalities of Jewish law, Mayse creates a halakhic practice that is intentional and goal-driven. He compares it to gaining a blackbelt in karate, which is not a simple discipline, but the difficulties are an invitation to an all-encompassing and immersive lifestyle. A *halakhic* lifestyle is dedicated to God, but to a God that represents goodness manifesting in all possible realms, an aspiration that many can begin hoping for in the name of relationship and connection. It entails a mindfulness in every halakhic act. Mayse’s intentional *halakhah* sees *halakhah* as a tool for meaning-making.

***Halakhah* as Meaning-Making**

After expressing the concerns about how *halakhah* is explained in Reform and Conservative Jewish contexts, Michaela Brown hopes to provide a different way to approach *halakhah* in her future rabbinate.

For Brown, *halakhah* creates a language of meaning towards an ideal. “Modern twenty-first century people are very selfish; we can eat what we want when we want, be where we want to go when we want. To feel the yoke of *mitzvot*, we accept responsibility to be thinking about how our actions are serving *Hashem*, making serving the world a really important practice. *Halakhah* is a way to analyze the choices we make, not just by how they affect ourselves, but affect the community we live in,” she said. “These everyday actions become a kind of spiritual relationship.”

Brown especially sees this when thinking about her place in American society; by answering to a higher calling, she can transcend cultural norms that trouble her. “For the Jew interested in *halakhah* as a framework for meaningful life, American culture isn’t a given. By thinking about *halakhah* as another mode of living, it helps me better question why American culture needs to be such a governing force in my life.”

Seeing *halakhah* as a meaning-making also entails a more personal connection and ownership of halakhic texts. Miriam Saperstein, a student at the University of Michigan who gathers students for religious experience, has found *halakhah* as a way to express their Jewish identity despite feeling previously alienated from Jewish practice. “I grew up in the Conservative movement as a white Ashkenazi Jew. As I grew up I was feeling especially alienated from the Jewish spaces I grew up in. My synagogue was not particularly accommodating to my trans identity, and going to day school started to feel like going to a country club with a *mezuzah* on it. I was feeling a real sense of dissonance between what I was praying for and the lived experience of the Conservative movement.”

As Saperstein attended university, they became more well-versed with Jewish texts in a way that led to ownership and confidence. Saperstein began to see how they could tap into *halakhah* as a resource from which to seek advice. Although it may not look like the halakhic observance of someone from a traditional Orthodox community, Saperstein’s Judaism is still informed by halakhic practice.

Even through the telephone, Saperstein beamed with joy when discussing the meaning these texts hold to them. “*Halakhah* becomes a tool to navigate the theoretical underpinnings of

how to exist in the world in our community. It’s not just laws – I am not concerned that God will be mad at me if I practice otherwise, but I might be frustrated by not being able to interact with my community if we don’t have a shared sense of vocabulary. It allows us all to sync up.” A mindful *halakhah* becomes an invitation to religious practice, as opposed to a dogmatic acceptance, and one that welcomes rather than isolates, as it requires thoughtfulness about how *halakhah* impacts its practitioners.

Addressing the “Halakhically Curious”

All those I interviewed felt that they have been trailblazers in their communities, but that ultimately, a completely different pedagogical approach regarding halakhic education is necessary in order to build an intentional *halakhah*. Creating a new approach to teaching *halakhah* may begin by doing away with “yes or no” binaries. Weimer noted that picking up religious observance through osmosis with fellow undergraduate peers built a healthier relationship to the halakhic system. “Because no one was ever mandating that I *must* do x, y, or z in order to participate in these Jewish spaces, I had room for my own curiosity to flourish. I am extremely grateful for this, and for my innate eagerness which allowed me to ask many many many halakhic questions without shame.”

Brown echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing that “must/should” understandings of *halakhah* often lead to more judgemental communities. “We don’t want to shy away the halakhically curious. People are often messy, so different levels of observance but interest in the system should be more well-accepted. Can we think about *halakhah* in an expansive enough way that people can feel included even when they are not engaged fully?”

It is interesting to note that this seeming tension between *halakhah* and intentionality experienced by those in different Jewish denominations is a primarily Ashkenazi phenomenon. When speaking with Mira Zylali, a Religion major at Holyoke, she expressed reservations about this exploration of a more intentional *halakhah* in order to feel more religiously at peace, as Zylali thinks it is not as pressing of an issue in the Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish communities. Ashkenazi communities affected by the Germanic Enlightenment split into denomination groups based on different conceptual understandings of the *halakhah*. But in Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, this division in religious praxis is non-existent.

“In the same congregation, there are people who don’t eat *kasher*, and people who do; there are people who won’t flip a light switch on Shabbat, and people who watch television. This diversity of thought and existence doesn’t delegitimize the holiness of the *neshamot*

of the people who are in that congregation. Rather, our differences enrich the different perspectives we bring to making the world a better place,” Zylali said. There seems to be fruitful insight in non-Ashkenazi practice for future educators and experiencers of *halakhah* to take from how Sephardic and Mizrahi communities already function.

Shift in Halakhic Pedagogy

In order to implement this new understanding of halakhic pedagogy, more creative and interactive learning experiences are necessary. “It’s about massaging it into our nervous system – that’s the embodiment *halakhah* should provide.” says Rabbi Sam Feinsmith, Program Director at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, who previously taught in the pluralistic Jewish day school system. In his time as a day school teacher, he noticed sincere curiosity from his students, who at young ages were searching for connections to something larger than themselves. He began educating his students by talking about *halakhah* as a spiritual practice, one that entails responsibility as opposed to obligation. He explained it to them as an ethical sensibility or even a kind of character refinement that cultivates consciousness of how we show up and engage with the world. It is an opportunity to invoke our meta-values in our everyday actions.

Feinsmith adds a helpful understanding of the halakhic mechanics of change when viewing *halakhah* as dynamic: when certain conceptions or minutiae of *halakhah* harm the meta-values, that’s when they need to be re-considered. “If meta-values are timeless, then the way they are enacted breathes and changes from one generation to the next. They should change. This appears with re-assessing gender roles in order to equalize access and power in the *halakhah* or even regarding the planet when we see it as a divine creation that must be protected.” Feinsmith sees mindfulness as the way to assess what these meta-values are that guide *halakhah*. “Mindfulness is a check-in on our inner life. It helps us see what is getting in the way of our innate goodness.”

Halakhah’s Halikhah

Rabbi Ariel Evan Mayse’s article on the future of Neo-Hasidism and *halakhah* invokes a similar understanding of *halakhah* as its translation: “walking.” But Mayse adds that *halakhah* is walking continuously – a journey that is not over, and ongoing for the rest of one’s life. A revolution about halakhic thinking to me seems to be beginning its *halikhah*, its “walk” as well. Pedagogical shifts are occurring in teaching the observance of a set of rules given by a God that seeks for good to be permeated through everyday actions. The status of the

halakhic corpus in the observant Jew’s life is being taught to be an informant as opposed to an inhibitor, as an opportunity to be a microcosm of something bigger, providing exciting and empowering shifts of thinking for the future. A new generation of Jews, young and old, are creating a *halakhah* that is not gate-kept by the Orthodox community, but has the possibility to touch the lives of all kinds of Jews, making *halakhah* a journey any Jew can take part of, blurring the distinction between the Orthodox and the halakhically curious.

This new generation of Jews are leaders who understand the pain of a rigid halakhic system but see that the shift is about a change in mindset rather than doing away with the entire system. These leaders are slowly re-weaving together Torah and experience, creating new patches in a tapestry of Jewish tradition. As I embark on my own rabbinic journey, I hope to join them in bringing about this shift in Jewish collective consciousness.



Sofia Freudenstein is a recent graduate of the University of Toronto in Jewish Studies and Philosophy, and she will be attending Orthodox rabbinical school this year at Yeshivat Maharat. She also did a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education in hospital chaplaincy this past year, which was revelatory for her.

The Tzimtzum of a Jewish Journal

Lila Goldstein • May 27, 2021

The feeling is almost routine to me now. I sit at my cluttered desk, overwhelmed by the assignments looming over me, causing me to dread even opening my laptop. So I don't. I open my desk drawer and reach into my tote bag, rifling around my room and pulling out handfuls of paper scraps – old to-do lists, flash cards, cheat sheets, and more in all colors and sizes; yellows and lime greens, lined and unlined sheets marked up with red and black ink, in cursive and print, block letters and sloping calligraphy. I collect these bits of detritus and arrange them like a jigsaw puzzle within the pages of my spiral notebook, using jagged pieces of tape and the sticky ends of Post-It notes to hold everything together. This combined act of rummaging, collaging, and writing demands my undivided concentration. Once I find a comfortable place to stop, I notice that hours have passed me by. My workload remains, trapped inside the computer I refused to open, but my head is clearer, my body less tense, my breath more even.

Since long before the pandemic, but especially in recent months, I've started holding on to the meaningless bits of paper that pass through my hands from day to day. Instead of throwing away these bits of stationery after they become useful, I keep them as a physical reminder of my days otherwise spent in a virtual world. I fill my notebooks with them, making a wallpaper on which I mount words with deeper intention, words that I deem more valuable than reminders to wash my dishes or turn in my essay before midnight. I cannot handle these objects the same way anymore; I can't discard them, or find a truly meaningful place to put them. What is the point of paper in this digital world? Why write anything down when it can be recorded on my phone, and beyond that, why keep the scraps? In the new Jewish friendships I've formed over the past year, I've found that so many of us turn to journaling in some capacity to answer these questions; journaling is a way to organize the chaotic, fill up the emptiness, and find beauty in our everyday lives.

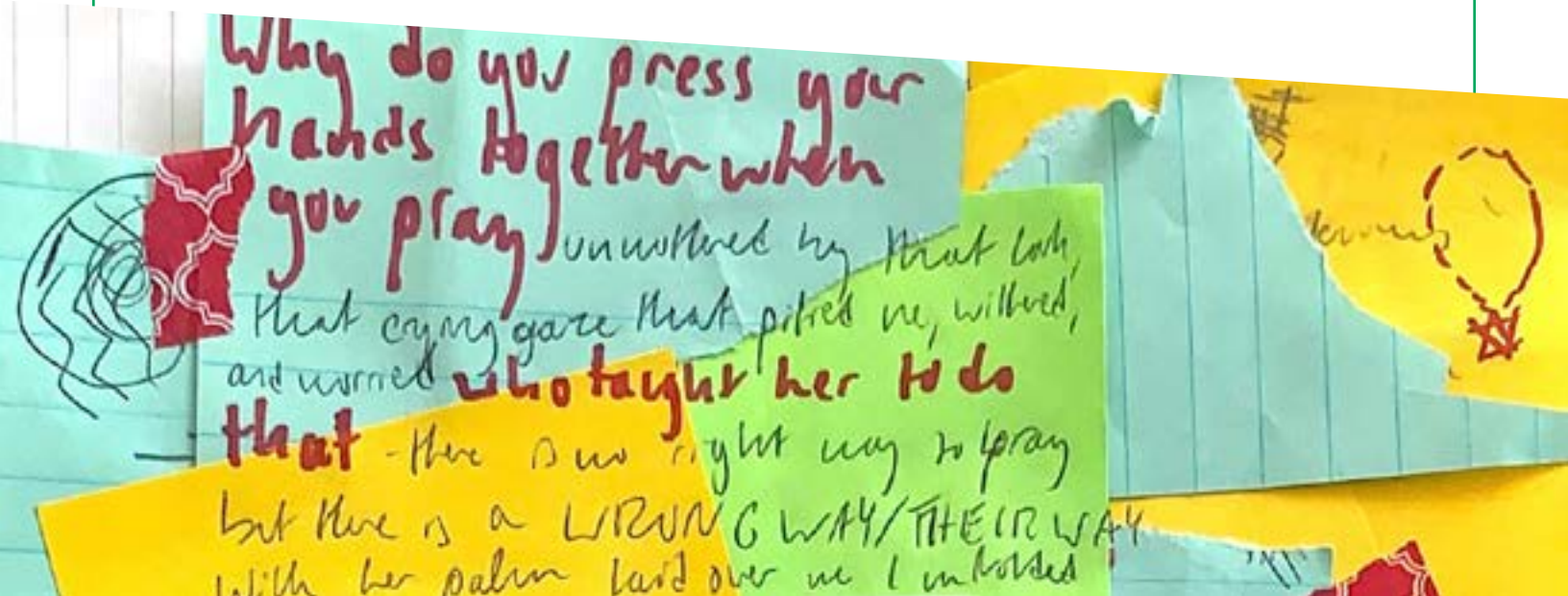




Photo from the author's journals.

There's a concept in Judaism called *tzimtzum*. It expresses the notion of a divine contraction, a turning inward that God did when They created the universe. For all of time there was nothing, and then, after retreating to an internal space, there was the energy to create everything. Judaism, to me, is something that fills up the emptiness, something that makes sense of what is senseless, a lens through which confusion turns into peace. In times of transition and stress I become reinvigorated as a Jew, taking renewed pride in the rituals I was raised on and finding joy in the rituals I get to create myself. The in-person, institutional Jewish communities in which I've always positioned myself – summer camp, synagogue, etc. – have become unavailable to me as I've aged and as the world has attempted to navigate COVID-19. Now for the first time in my life I am taking my Jewish journey alone. The notion of contracting inward is something that initially frightens me, even now, more than a year into quarantine and social distancing. I've learned, however, through practices like journaling that demand mindful solitude, that our internal worlds are as full of life as our communities, and the potential we have to worship, create, and live on our own is limitless.

I first began journaling at Jewish summer camp as a child. I remember feeling so surrounded and elevated by the love of my peers and mentors to the point that poetry began pouring out of me, and that's how my writing career began. There's a reason that a Jewish space played a direct role in my creative life; the notion of divinity existing within both group spaces and the individual self is a distinctly Jewish thought that comes to mind every time I sit with the intention of creation. The paying of careful attention, the small details and references that matter only to the creator, the acknowledgement and acceptance of the flaws, conflicts, and passions that fill up the artist's head and page; this is the making of personal artwork, journals, diaries, and more. Journaling, collage, and creative writing have combined in our notebooks to provide the ultimate outlet, one where our Jewish identity is free to expand and condense.

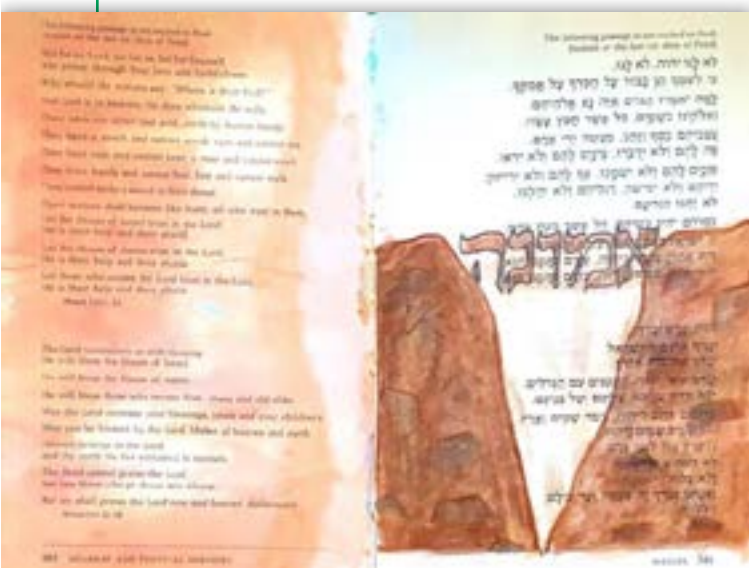
Judaism, like journaling, is a combination of the spiritual, the creative, the practical, and the personal. Lena Ben-Gideon, a first-year student at Brandeis University, uses her notebooks to contain the multitudes of her responsibilities, her thoughts, and her goals. Academic organization and an artistic outlet combine in her bullet journal, but her illustrated siddur is a unique project that combines her love for journaling and ongoing Jewish thought.

Ben-Gideon began her illustrated siddur project last year in the middle of the pandemic. The idea began when Ben-Gideon drew inside of a siddur as a gift for a friend. “I loved doing it so much, and it was therapeutic for me,” she said, and decided to create one for herself. Based on her interpretations of the prayers and blessings she’s known for her whole life, Ben-Gideon conceptualizes and creates drawings in the physical siddur that reflect the messages she takes away from the text.

[One of her spreads](#) contains the words to the Barchu, which Ben-Gideon visualized as the “the connection between day and night.” She drew two hands connecting, one representing light and the other darkness. Other spreads show geometric patterns along with traditional Jewish images, like the eternal light and the parted Red Sea.



From the journal of Lena Ben-Gideon



From the illustrated siddur of Lena Ben-Gideon

The goal of this project is not to create finite associations between prayers and images; Ben-Gideon also writes questions that inspire meditation and thought on the sides of the pages, hoping to spark a continued relationship with this text that changes form upon every rereading. Like journaling, illustrating this siddur provides an opportunity to create artwork that can grow and change along with the creator. The process of filling a whole siddur with images is daunting on purpose. “It’s a constant work in progress,” Ben-Gideon said. “It’s not finished. I don’t think it’ll ever be finished. But that’s something that’s constantly inspired me.”

Many of the other Jewish journalers I know, whether their work relates to their identity or not, find solace and a meditative power in practicing this artform. Their projects are a representation of the whole world through their eyes, a tangible object that makes distant memories and looming anxieties accessible through art and writing. For many journalers, the idea of scheduling regular time to journal feels limiting.

“I’ve always liked the idea of a journal,” said Tali Meisel, another first-year student at Brandeis University. She remembers receiving a journal for her Bat Mitzvah and beginning to write in it while reading Anne Frank’s diary. “I was at a new school and it was a hard adjustment for me. I spent significant time over the next few weeks after [my Bat Mitzvah] trying to write down every single detail in my journal.” The attempt to recall every detail of the event was eventually futile, and Meisel found that experience to be indicative of her relationship with journaling in general. “When I would try to write in my journal often or a certain number of times, that kind of pressure made me not want to do it.”

Recent exploration of her Jewish identity has brought writing practice back into Meisel’s life, especially around the High Holidays. “The last few years, I’ve been journaling on Yom Kippur,” she said. Meisel began this practice the fall of her senior year of high school. “It was a very uncomfortable experience at the moment, and I think it was really cool to have had the opportunity to do that because I basically just wrote down my thoughts. I didn’t force myself to keep going. I [produced] a lot of stream-of-consciousness writing, and I tried to make a list of things I was grateful for. That was a time where I wasn’t journaling to remember things later, it was to get me through the moment and to figure out what I would discover about myself. I haven’t done anything quite like that since then. This year on Yom Kippur, I did journal. I felt like I was in this removed state from normal life, and that was really special.”



Journaling for Meisel is a unique and inspired practice, one that has the capacity to contain the internal self rather than simply record one's thoughts. "I have not gone back and looked at what I wrote since [Yom Kippur], but I felt a big sense of relief after doing that, like I did something that I needed to do for myself."

Not every Jew is drawn to journaling, writing, or visual art. Everyone, however, has their own unique practices that allow them to embrace their creativity and introspect. Relating to the notion of *tzimtzum*, we can empower our internal selves through activities like journaling that encourage us to explore our own thoughts and experiences, creating something of beauty for ourselves. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged my Jewish identity and caused me to create new methods of private worship and practice. Although I've always found strength and comfort in journaling, I now bring a consciously Jewish perspective to this art, using Jewish themes and questions to inform and challenge my work. Through this solitary act of creation, whether the artist writes, draws, or uses a completely different medium, we find ourselves grounded in a Jewish practice that helps us explore and grow our internal selves.

Featured image from the author's own Jewish journal.



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Not All Time Is For Sale:

Keeping Shabbat Under Capitalism

Ezra Lebovitz • April 29, 2021

On Shabbat, I do not turn on the lights. This is a recent development: I tell my mother it is because I want to experience time diurnally and, because she is my mother, she understands immediately. Some Friday nights, I sit by the window and read as the sunlight gradually fades, the words becoming harder and harder to make out. I commit myself to it: today, I tell myself, I do not work. It is a difficult promise. It is one I am trying to keep.

When Abraham Joshua Heschel talks about Shabbat in *The Sabbath*, he calls it a “palace in time”: a sacred Jewish architecture that celebrates holiness in time, giving us a taste of eternity. Where the week is focused on the world of things and commerce, Shabbat abides in the world of time; where the week is mundane, Shabbat is sacred.

When the sun rises on Saturday mornings, I am at once anxious and relieved — today, I do not have a to-do list or any emails to return. It is Shabbat and time is boundless. I lie outside in the sun for hours; I call my parents; I read a book for nothing but the pleasure of it. I build, brick by brick, stone by stone, a palace in time.

We haven’t always used clocks. In Europe, it started in part with the monasteries, who would ring the bell at set times of day to call the monks to prayer. The first fully mechanical clocks emerged in the thirteenth century; in the fourteenth century, springs were introduced, then pendulums. In the nineteenth century, time became increasingly standard, uniform and synchronized—trains ran along previously unimagined distances and required intensive scheduling. The industrial revolution was here and with it, a complete transformation in how the West ordered and conceptualized time.



Suddenly, clock-time became critical: more and more often, workers were paid by the clock, with wages based on how many hours they had worked, as opposed to a task-oriented piece wage. In a Marxist theory of economics, a commodity's value is a representation of the congealed labor, as measured in hours, associated with its production. Under nineteenth century systems of manufacture, workers' wages were determined by time worked and are designed to maximize profit at the expense of workers. Capitalists obtained surplus value through the exploitation of worker time. At the same time that this shift in manufacture was occurring, clocks and watches were becoming increasingly accurate and being produced en masse. Public, synchronized clock-time was a fact of life and a colonial tool to ensure cohesion with imperial capitalism.

In this system of industry, it matters that a worker shows up at a particular time; it means something to be ten minutes late. As Raj Patel and Jason Moore argue in their 2018 book, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, "policing time was [and is] central to capitalism's ecology".

This new mode of time discipline created a universal schedule that was defined by industrial capitalism. Clock-time regulates behavior, particularly in the workplace: for the sake of production, time now has to be uniform, synchronized, exact. Everyone has to know what you mean when you say eight o'clock, or nine. The clock becomes "a disciplining device" that legislates productivity and punctuality.

In 1967, E.P. Thompson published "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism". This seminal article popularized the notion of "time discipline", the social and cultural rules that legislate the measurement of time. Thompson argues that this new clock time was a direct result of the industrial revolution, imposing capitalist interests onto the populace in place of previous more communal perceptions of time. Under time discipline, time becomes a commodity, a currency—as Thompson says, "time is money".

But not all time is for sale. Even under industrial capitalism, there is still Shabbat. There are still 25 hours of the week where time holds still, makes room for something quiet and eternal. It is, by its very nature, a world designed to exist outside of capital. In Heschel's words, "He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil... He must say farewell to manual work". Shabbat time and industrial time discipline are therefore entirely distinct; they cannot exist simultaneously. Still, Jews live under both of them.

What, then, does it mean to live in a world dictated by the rhythms of industrial time discipline while remaining faithful to the rhythms of Shabbat time? How do we negotiate these two overlapping timescapes, step delicately between the days?

Shabbat is a weekly reminder that there is a world beyond, outside of, and surpassing the world of industrial capitalism. There is a place where time is made holy and eternal by the refusal to work: “Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth,” writes Heschel. “On the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.” Shabbat establishes difference between us and the capitalist timescape: it “[overrides] all other existing calendars”. While industrial time discipline treats time as a commodity to be exchanged, Shabbat sanctifies time. The day is no longer a collection of hours to be negotiated or traded away, but a temple worth dwelling inside.

Theoretically, we have weekends off. This is a direct result of years of struggle by labor organizers and movements for worker’s rights.

For most of the 18th century, Sunday—Christianity’s “Lord’s Day”—was the only day of the week that workers would have off. Most workers in the US and England spent this day revelling, gambling, and enjoying themselves. This led to a phenomenon called “Saint Mondayism”: the then-common practice of ditching work on Mondays after acquiring late-nights and hangovers the day before. To remedy this practice, and provide more time for Christian prayer on Sundays, employers began granting time off Saturday afternoons. It is here, in the late 19th century, that the modern concept of the “weekend” emerged.

However, this early form of the weekend offered no answers for Jewish factory workers. This era was marked by significant anti-union violence and repeated violations of workers’ rights—victories on the part of labor were hard-fought and hard-won. An answer for question of Shabbat wouldn’t come until 1908, when a New England mill implemented a five-day work week. It was the first recorded American factory to do so. This two-day weekend, stretching from Friday night through Sunday, was designed to allow Jewish workers to observe Shabbat without having to make up any time on Sundays. Two-day weekends caught on in other mills and factories, gaining substantial popularity among workers. In 1929, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America Union—a union headed by Jewish immigrant Sidney Hillman and known for championing social unionist and progressive political causes—became the first union to successfully demand a national five-day workweek. The practice continued to grow across the country and was nationally established by a provision of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, which required a maximum 40-hour workweek with a two-day weekend.

Supposedly, then, the workweek shouldn't interfere with Shabbat. But the reality is that today only American employees work an average of nearly six hours on weekend days, while only 42% of American employees work 40-hour weeks. Many workers far exceed the standard workweek, taking on multiple jobs or gigs in order to make ends meet. Most stores and restaurants are open on Saturday, and often Sundays too, meaning that the average service industry or shift worker is scheduled to work on Shabbat. In the absence of a written contract stating otherwise, an employer can require any employee to work weekends; refusal can be deemed insubordination and grounds for termination.

At businesses that provide an hourly wage, each hour is a commodity; it represents a tangible amount. To forgo a shift on a Saturday is to give up a literal sum of money that many can't afford to lose. Meanwhile, more and more people are working on independent schedules or working from home, causing work to spill over into the weekend. The digital economy means that workers are often expected to be available at any time, constantly partially on the clock. So, practically speaking, a lot of people do end up expected to work on Shabbat: to celebrate Shabbat in this modern context is, therefore, to extricate yourself from the workplace, to visibly mark the difference between yourself and capitalist economy.

But even if no one worked weekends, Shabbat would still construct difference between Jews and the timescape of industrial capitalism. The rules of time discipline means that industrial capitalism is meant to dictate time even outside of the workplace—even on days off, we rely on the same clock that tells us when we're late, the same clock that dictates when a shift is over.

Shabbat is different. Time is marked by the sunset, by the presence of three stars in the sky. You can, theoretically, go the whole twenty five hours without looking at a clock. By mandating abstention from work, Shabbat pulls us out of the world of industrial time discipline and into a space wholly new.

Contemporary Jews continue to struggle with how to make sense of Shabbat under capitalism. When I talk to my friend Kaia Berman-Peters, a sophomore at the New England Conservatory, she isn't sure where to start.

"It's hard to relate Shabbos and capitalism at all because they're part of two such different worlds," she says. "It's hard to conceptualize Judaism and capitalism in even the same category."

Ana Levy-Lyons, the senior minister of the First Unitarian Congregational Society in Brooklyn and the author of *No Other G-ds: The Politics of the Ten Commandments*, recounts

a persistent feeling of anxiety around Shabbat—it is, for her, an “anxiety [that] never really goes away... it always feels like we don’t really have time.”

“[Keeping Shabbat] seems like a dangerous thing to do in our culture,” she says, adding, “Can you really stop? is it okay to stop?” Levy-Lyons remembers feeling “a battle in [her] own heart—who does this time really belong to? [Is it] really owned by my boss and my peers?”

“Technology has created even more pressure,” she adds. She recalls the first electric tractor. It had, she tells me, lights, enabling farmers to work after dark. “You have to just keep going.”

21st century technology is no exception. Workers are expected to be constantly available; emails and Slack messages are meant to be returned, even when one is off the clock. Productivity is assumed to be near-constant, eroding the barrier between work-time and free-time.

For Levy-Lyons, one way to deal with this anxiety around workplace productivity is by thinking of Shabbat as “G-d’s time”—something that is outside the bounds of human control.

Rabbi Aryeh Bernstein, a national educator with the Jewish social justice nonprofit Avodah, agrees: “One of the main functions of Shabbat is the human relinquishing of control over time,” he says. “Industrialism has tried to homogenize all time and all weather... [but Shabbat] is stable, it is external, it is prior to human intervention. It changes with the seasons and you have to adjust your schedule.”

“There is something really profound, something freeing, about that relinquishing,” he adds. “We are not in control.”

Levy-Lyons describes Shabbat in fundamental opposition to capitalism. Where capitalism is based around the idea that “you never have enough” and marked by a “bottomless need, Shabbat dictates that whatever you have is sufficient.”

“If you want to be free from that—if you want to even have the slightest hope of getting free—” she says, “you have to make the decision.”



In her forward to “The Sabbath”, Susannah Heschel writes, “For [these American Jews], the Sabbath interfered with jobs, socializing, shopping, and simply being American.”

But this interference is a feature, not a bug. When we abstain from our own work, from the commerce that relies on the work of others, we step outside of the world of American

capitalism. Shabbat places us in an alternate timescape from the rest of America and, therefore, it marks us as Other: we may inhabit the world of industrial capitalism during the week, but it does not have to be what we are. Shabbat, then, is a means of defiance. It reminds us that we can be separate from the machinery of empire. We are loyal to our communities and to G-d, rather than the missions of capitalism and imperialism.

Shabbat forcibly wrenches us from the timescape of capital and accumulation. In doing so, it allows us to escape from industrial time discipline and create alternatives to it. We get, for one day, *mei'ein olam habah*, a taste of the world to come: a radical possible future that is not limited by industrial capitalism or greed.

If Shabbat is a palace in time, it is a palace that offers refuge from the rhythms of the workweek, from exploitation, from systems of capitalist hierarchy. It is a palace with no clock. It is a palace where, together, we are able to create entirely new ways of being.

Industrial time discipline transforms time from a subjective experience to a limited object: as Dale Southerton writes in “The Rise of the Clock: Time Discipline and Consumer Culture”,

“As an objective unit, time became commodified—a resource to be valued and exchanged or negotiated over.” Hours are a “conceivable object of commerce”. They have a set, material value and a clear commercial worth.

But what capitalism makes commodity, Shabbat makes holy. “Judaism,” writes Heschel, “is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time... to the Bible it is holiness in time, the Sabbath, which comes first.” Shabbat allows us to rejoice in the holiness of time, recognizing the eternal in each moment. It’s an opportunity to re-sanctify and renew.



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A Closer Look at WashJew

Micah Sandman • June 7, 2021

Jews are seemingly never more secure than at a place like Washington University in St. Louis, where approximately 25% of the undergraduate population is Jewish. Along with being one of the most Jewishly populated universities in the country, WashU is also one of the [wealthiest](#). The combination of significant collective voice, resources, and institutional support make WashU a home to thriving Jewish life.

At the same time, the concern for Jewish safety feels, to many, as critical as ever. The conspicuous density of Jews at a wealthy, predominantly white institution are grounds for the messy conflation of Jewishness, class privilege, and outsized power. Attempts to investigate or quantify the “reality” of Jewish influence at WashU are difficult because the elusive, paradoxical nature of antisemitism makes distinguishing between “actual” and “perceived” Jewish power and safety a hazy, fraught task. Additionally, Jewish trauma and internalized antisemitism make these discernments all the more challenging and emotional.

So, how do we talk about Jewish safety with specificity, context, and empathy? This is the question I pose in examining a particular case study of Jewish establishment: my own college campus.

A Supported Jewish Presence

A sizable Jewish student population at Washington University in St. Louis has existed for a long time, and has grown tremendously over the decades. In its earlier history, WashU was known mostly as a commuter school. As the university’s academic reputation became renowned, it began to attract a more national (and international) pool of applicants with a greater Jewish contingent. Jackie Levey, Executive Director of WashU Hillel and alumna of the university, remembers an already significant Jewish population during her tenure as an undergrad in the mid-90s, with many students hailing from the Midwest and Northeast.



“As the reputation built upon itself and the university became known as a really strong, vibrant community, more and more families saw it as an option,” said Levey, referring to both the academic reputation– and the Jewish one.

These days, WashU continues to pull students from geographically specific, wealthy zip codes in New York, Boston, Los Angeles/Bay Area, Chicago –hubs of Jewish population concentration.

Observant and secular Jews alike come to WashU because it has infrastructure to support flourishing Jewish life on campus. While all Jewish students might love and appreciate a widespread celebration of Jewishness, observant students depend most on an institution to facilitate halakhic lifestyles. WashU is certainly up to snuff on this account. Dining Services has operated a kosher kitchen in a main dining hall since 2010. The Residential Life program is familiar with conversations about “shabbos keys” for Shabbat-observant students who require non-technological access to their rooms on weekends. There is a Jewish, Islamic, and Middle Eastern Studies department for students who wish to pursue Jewish studies in their academic coursework. Last spring, the administration rescheduled the dates for fall course registration *for the entire student body* after being made aware that the original timing conflicted with Pesach. Jewish life doesn’t merely exist on campus; it is actively supported by the institution.

As a non-sectarian university, WashU provides a welcome and receptive vessel for Jewishness. Jewish religious life mostly occurs in two *off-campus* organizations: WashU Hillel and Chabad on Campus. Chabad and Hillel foster ritual and community and work with the university to advocate for Jewish students. Without their partnership, much of the official university infrastructure for Jewish living would not exist.

In February, Assistant Director of WashU Hillel Tony Westbrook spoke to me about Hillel’s influence on campus culture and its unique positionality to affect change at the institution. “Jewish students are roughly one quarter of the total undergraduate population and as a result, we have collective power and voice that other minority groups don’t necessarily possess,” Westbrook wrote in an email. “We have a seat at the table and use that position to advocate for the needs of Jewish students, for example, expanding Kosher dining options across campus.”

This unusual strength in numbers makes Washington University an environment where Jewish life thrives distinctively. At the same time, “The fact that there is a big Jewish community doesn’t protect me from worrying about antisemitism on campus,” said Stephanie Berger, ‘22.

How can both of these statements be true? To approach the paradoxical subject of Jewish safety, we must understand more about the nature of antisemitism, or anti-Jewish oppression.

More Visible, More Vulnerable

Antisemitism is a chameleon. It can be difficult to identify because it necessarily works differently from other oppressions. As Ben Lorber [recently described](#), unlike “the grinding daily reality of structural race and class oppression the Left is used to understanding,” anti-Jewish oppression flourishes with subtlety. According to the leftist pamphlet [The Past Didn't Go Anywhere](#) by April Rosenblum, “the point of anti-Jewish oppression is to keep Jewish face in front,” allowing Jews to be criticized and targeted for exploitations perpetuated by the (non-Jewish) ruling classes. Antisemitism thrives when Jews *appear* to wield power, making it precarious when Jews actually *do* hold some amount of power. Antisemitic narratives depend on Jews appearing to wield conspiratorial control. Therefore, success (capitalistic, hierarchical success) and visibility for Jews is a double-edged sword.

The fact that Jewish success is simultaneously antithetical to Jewish survival makes it more challenging to take the temperature of anti-Jewish sentiment in society. After all, *The Past* reminds its readers that Jews were thought to be most safe and “well-integrated” in their societies on the brink of historic episodes of violence, expulsion, and genocide. Because antisemitism necessarily affords Jews some social/economic mobility, it can seem as though antisemitism is “over,” or at least dormant. Antisemitism performs the best ‘disappearing trick’ of all, constantly convincing the members of a given society— including Jews themselves— that persecution has faded, that Jews are secure.

Because of this, Jews are constantly engaged in the inherently flawed task of evaluating their own safety, of trying to discern “actual” from “perceived” threat. Jews constantly question what may be helpful or harmful to Jewish perception and reputation. It’s for these reasons that the conflation of wealth and Jewishness can be particularly harmful, and why Jews may be both appreciative and skeptical of conspicuous Jewish presence or power.

I am cognizant of using Rosenblum’s words in *The Past* to communicate an understanding of antisemitism that emphasizes the middle agent theory, which Rosenblum [recently affirmed](#) is *not* most central to her work, and can be misquoted in approaches that are not intersectional or uphold class bias. My intention here is not to let unchecked classism lie, but to investigate how theories about Jewishness, class privilege, and power play out on a specific college campus.

Conspicuous Jewish wealth

“A lot of what I might define as Jewish culture at WashU might just be white upper-middle class culture,” reflected Jesse Strod ‘21 on the phone in December.

If you’re walking around on campus on a sunny afternoon, you might see a dozen students wearing Blundstones walk by. There will likely be a frisbee game happening on Mudd Field. Are these things Jewish? Are they rich white people things? Both?

A culture of wealth, a culture of whiteness, and a healthy dose of Jewish culture(s) all coexist at WashU. Of course, assuming all Jewish students are wealthy is a falsehood. As both co-director of Chabad Chana Novack and recent graduate Max Klapow ‘21 reminded me in our respective conversations, the intra-Jewish presumption of class privilege is particularly alienating for working class and low-income Jews. Neither are all Jews white— at WashU or anywhere in the world; we know that lumping diverse Jewish existences in with a white, Ashkenazic narrative is a demon for American Jewry. Given the pervasiveness of both whiteness and wealth among the general student body though, and the high proportion of Jews among those students, it is fair to say that the Venn Diagram of these three factors has significant overlap.

The collision of Jewishness, whiteness, and wealth often surfaces in conversations about geography. Jokes about how many students are from Westchester, or New Jersey, or outside of Boston, or about New Yorkers who show up to lecture wearing expensive winter coats; these are WashU archetypes that hint at the nexus of Jewishness and wealth.

“There is a certain sense that Jewish population is a ‘majority minority’ on campus and people are very aware of that minority. The Jewish voice outperforms its size, and a lot of Jewish people are wealthy,” said Strod.

I discussed the relationship between Jewishness and socioeconomic elitism at WashU with Julia Robbins ‘24, who affirmed that class plays a noticeable role in the broader perception of the Jewish community on campus.

“There are definitely a lot of free things that are given out at Hillel and Chabad— a lot of free food, Shabbat dinners, gifts like picnic blankets,” said Robbins.

The most familiar way in which the wealth of the Jewish community is accessible to WashU students are weekly Shabbat dinners. Jewish underclassmen— and many of their non-Jewish friends— typically flock to Chabad and Hillel here for the excitement of a free meal with friends.

“People at WashU definitely know that Shabbat exists,” Strod joked. Having funding enough to provide free meals to students allows Hillel and Chabad to be welcoming organizations and build community. At the same time, *free* is a conspicuous indicator of wealth.

“It definitely makes me a bit uncomfortable when my non-Jewish friends are seeing the amount of wealth that [Hillel and Chabad] seem to have,” Robbins said.

Robbins remarked that this kind of critique of the wealth of WashU Jewish organizations might be acceptable in Jewish circles, but could have dangerous implications when picked up by the wider, non-Jewish WashU context.

“It’s one thing if someone’s been in a Jewish community their whole life and this isn’t their first exposure. But then it’s another if their first exposure to Jewish community is, like, the immense amount of wealth that Jewish clubs on campus seem to have,” she repeated.

Last year in an anthropology course, I conducted a project on the kosher food program at WashU. As I was embarking on my research, my professor gently prodded me to think about what the existence, visibility, and cost of upkeep might signal about the voice of the Jews in campus life.

At the time, this comment startled me. There was no ill intent behind this suggestion. My professor was merely hoping that I dig a little deeper, because the kosher station is not an obvious investment. After all, it serves fewer students at a higher price, as kosher ingredients cost more. WashU *chooses* to invest in this specific subset of its undergrad population because there is institutional support for Jewish infrastructure (however, according to Chana Novack, most of the cost of the kosher program is “passed on to the students” through higher prices, which observant Jewish students agree to pay because kosher food is necessary).

Even though I know my professor meant nothing by this comment, as a Jew, my alarms tend to go off when even a breeze connects the words *money*, *power*, and *Jewish*. I remember feeling flushed, on-edge.

To Robbins’ point, who gets to make these criticisms and where the line falls between truth and stereotype can feel extremely blurry. Although this suggestion about Jewish influence made me nervous coming from a non-Jewish professor, I have heard similar comments from *inside* the Jewish community itself. Chana Novack said that despite its higher cost, “the University realizes that the kosher meal plan is more valuable than the dollar amount,” because of the message of Jewish safety it sends to “parents and grandparents” who will potentially enroll

their students, or donate to WashU. Such a comment implies that the promise of Jewish intergenerational wealth was baked into the calculus of the kosher plan's existence.

I have talked *around* Jewish safety for a while now, but it's time to name the reason why Jewish safety is such a critical concern: [Jewish trauma](#), the cultural and emotional force shaping most conversations about Jewish life.

Jewish safety, trauma, and internalized antisemitism

Jewish trauma –including internalized antisemitism– is the elephant in the room wherever Jewishness is concerned. Any conversation about Jewish existence must include the knowledge that many Jewish perspectives are informed by a constant concern for Jewish safety. Our many Jewish histories, liturgies, and traditions, as well as our very bodies and epigenetics, reinforce vigilance and remind us of a constant theme of thousands of years of persecution.

In every interview I conducted with a Jewish student, I noticed manifestations of internalized antisemitism. Most often, these tendencies appeared in the form of cynical generalizations about Jews and wealth, concerns with how Jews might be irresponsibly stewarding their image of wealth or be perceived by non-Jews, and a desire to “check” outsized Jewish voice at the university.

I myself was motivated to write this article by my own internalized antisemitism. I needed to reconcile the simultaneous joy of living Jewishly with my discomfort about the “bloated” influence and resources of the Jewish communities at WashU. I felt (and sometimes still feel) that perhaps we don't deserve to flourish or thrive in a place so explicitly, so *obviously*, as Jews.

When I felt flushed and nervous at hearing my professor's comment, that was part of an unconscious, *embodied trauma response* to perceived antisemitism. Afterwards, I felt embarrassed, ashamed at myself for overreacting and reading in to a comment which didn't hold any antisemitic water. This vicious cycle of overreaction and self-flagellation is a cycle that is perpetuated when *we don't apply the language of trauma*.

If Jewish trauma is present in our bodies, it is most certainly present in our institutions. Many Jewish campus organizations, including Jewish Greek Life and Hillels, were created because of antisemitic exclusion and with the intention of fomenting Jewish life in future generations. Without this understanding, we miss a crucial aspect of how these Jewish organizations understand their own roles in sustaining Jewish communities.

Each year, WashU Hillel hosts an annual “welcome” Shabbat dinner for new students and their families before the start of orientation. Since the start of Jackie Levey’s 12-year tenure as Executive Director of Hillel, the Chancellor of the university has spoken annually at this Shabbat dinner. For a Chancellor to speak at a private Jewish event is highly unusual, even for other universities with large Jewish populations.

“Having the Chancellor speak at our Shabbat dinner sends the message that Jewish students are welcomed, valued, and are a part of the larger WashU campus community,” affirmed Tony Westbrook in an email.

Other prominent Jewish (and non-Jewish) board members, administrators, and deans come to this Shabbat dinner, whose attendance is “an important part of reflecting that we’re a part of the fabric of the university and the undergraduate experience,” said Levey.

“We ensure that certain members of our board, various administrators or staff or faculty at the university are there that evening to help cement for these families that the students have this community. You know, if God forbid something happens, or they need a resource, Hillel will always be there for them,” Levey told me.

Gathering all these important university figures together for a big Shabbat dinner is as much an act of celebration as it is a protective display of strength and a move laden with concern for safety. As Levey wrote to me, WashU Hillel was established in 1946 as a place of refuge and community for Jewish students who faced explicit and implicit antisemitism. Over 70 years later, this protective mentality still exists.

Even in the most seemingly secure of circumstances, Jewish trauma and concern for safety always have us looking over our shoulders. How do we reconcile these very real concerns (antisemitism *does* exist) with the realities of resources and institutional support?

Zooming Out

For a minority facing hate because of conspiracies about money and power, critiques about Jewish student visibility and institutional support can feel uncomfortable, blurring the line between valid criticism and antisemitic canard.

Yet these critiques *must* be leveled because they contribute to a culture of critical thinking about who has a voice on campus, how, and why: other minorities on campus without such a critical mass or reputation of wealth do not operate with the same level of institutional support.

One of the most vibrant religious student communities at WashU is the Muslim Students Association (MSA). The MSA is an on-campus student group, led by a student exec board and funded entirely by the Student Union. Chabad and Hillel also have student clubs funded by SU (Chabad Student Association and Hillel Leadership Council among others), but these groups are also supported by external organizations with off-campus facilities. This past academic year, the debilitating restrictions on student activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic magnified these differences.

At the beginning of the year, WashU prohibited in-person student group meetings and the Student Union cut off funding to all student groups. These actions left the MSA high and dry, banned from convening in any official capacity and barred from the resources needed to plan events and build community in their usual ways. Co-president of the MSA Samra Haseeb '23 described how disappointing and “unfortunate” it felt not to be able to provide programming for new students in particular. Without funding, Haseeb said the MSA couldn't even do usual, simple things like designing MSA stickers, let alone hold celebrations or communal events.

Meanwhile, as off-campus organizations with outside funding, Chabad and Hillel provided programming for Jewish first-year students and returning students all year long, including outdoor meals at their respective buildings on Forsyth Blvd, as well as a variety of events and free items, like Julia Robbins described. This did not go unnoticed by new students in the MSA, said Haseeb. “Some first-years were like ‘Oh, Hillel had these things for their new students’ and we were like, ‘Oh, we can't because we don't have the funding.’”

Even in pre-pandemic times, Haseeb said that adequate funding can be difficult to secure. “I know there have been challenges in the past with getting enough funding for events we need to get approved because we really have to explain ourselves. People don't really understand why the money is needed, and so more time and effort has to be spent to explain why we need the money that we do,” she described.

There is no specific faculty representative nor Muslim campus chaplain to advocate for the MSA, to barter with the university and explain the significance of certain Muslim celebrations or events. This job currently falls to the Reverend Callista Isabelle, head of the newly-established Office for Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life (ORSEL), created in 2019 in part to help to advocate for religious minorities on campus. (Full discretion: I work for Reverend Callista and ORSEL). “Reverend Callista helped organize nightly prayers during Ramadan and she was super helpful in all those regards,” said Haseeb. “It's just that Callista isn't specifically a Muslim chaplain or religiously trained in Islam, and so to there is only so much she can do for us.”

The phrase ‘only so much you can do’ surfaced several times in my conversation with Haseeb, who also used it in reference to the accommodations that Dining Services tried to make during Ramadan. This year’s Ramadan was especially tough on many students, falling during final exam season when people were far from home and isolated from their friends. WashU expressed that they wanted to help Muslim students, “but I know when the month started students didn’t really feel supported,” said Haseeb.

Haseeb remarked that in spite of the previous MSA presidents meeting with Dining Services, administrators made “empty promises”. Campus eateries that were supposed to be open later for fasting students remained closed; more “grab and go” options seemingly were not added. Dining Services was apparently particularly excited to offer Moonlight Breakfast (a late-night WashU tradition) during Ramadan, but its hours fell at an inconvenient time for the actual fasting cycle. “It was well intentioned, but it’s still hard because they can only do so much,” said Haseeb. Without a Muslim campus advocate, the well-meaning blunders of WashU officials felt frustrating but inevitable.

During Ramadan, WashU Hillel hosted a joint Iftar/Havdalah. Haseeb affirmed that she had a lot of fun at the event and that “Hillel hosted us very graciously.” Haseeb did also express that it surfaced some frustrations. Hillel, with its beautiful building, big backyard, and ample staff, hosted events for Jewish students all year. The MSA, impeded by COVID restrictions, had to convince WashU for the use of its important spaces, including Lopata Basement, a prayer/hangout spot where Jumma is held. “It just kind of felt like, I wish we had a space like that for community and to be able to give younger students a good experience during a pandemic year,” said Haseeb.

When the primary associations with conspicuous Jewishness in a university context are wealth and power, it can feel difficult to discern truthful comments from harmful stereotypes. Yet it is crucial that class-conscious conversations about Jewishness, wealth, race, and power happen because there are truths about class privilege and voice that are critical to confront for any campus community that professes to value equity.

Moving Forward

WashU should be honored as a thriving home for Jewish life. If I haven’t said it explicitly enough: it’s truly wonderful that the hardworking folks at Chabad and Hillel support Jewish student life at WashU with so much care and intentionality. It’s amazing that Chabad has a chicken soup hotline for when students get sick, that Hillel brings sufganiyot and bagels to

students living off campus during a pandemic. Both organizations care profoundly about helping students at both an individual level and a community-wide one. Both organizations and their incredible teams work tirelessly with the university to make the case for Jewish living and provide a home for so many students.

For me personally, coming from a hometown with a very small Jewish population, it feels affirming and exciting on a daily basis to be surrounded by Jews and feel myself represented in a way I had never experienced prior to college. I echo Julia Robbins when she said, “I am living more Jewishly at WashU than ever before. I feel very grateful to be Jewish on this campus.”

It’s not wrong that Jews at WashU have resources and support here. What’s needed is that other identity-specific groups on campus receive institutional attention and advocacy to ensure the same kind of student flourishing. We can celebrate the resources and support that WashU offers Jewish students while being reflective of the space and institutional authority a Jewish voice finds here relative to other groups.

There are people at WashU who are committed to having conversations about religion, race, ethnicity, class, and power. The Office for Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life was established after students like Ishak Hossain expressed the need for administration for religious minorities to have an institutional channel. Within the Jewish community, Tony Westbrook affirmed that part of Hillel’s role is to advocate for other marginalized and minority groups on campus. “We don’t limit ourselves to only serving the Jewish population on campus but work really hard to create an intentional space in which every person, regardless of race, creed, religion, etc feels welcomed,” wrote Westbrook. “Years ago we established a Black and Jewish dialogue group that actively worked together to address issues of racism and antisemitism on campus. Currently, we are organizing students to be in relationship with each other to address issues of antisemitism and hatred on campus.”

We must be able to speak calmly and knowledgeably about Jewish power— and name the fact that Jewish vigilance and internalized oppression is a part of the equation when reacting and speaking about Jewish visibility and antisemitism— in order to have productive conversations about who has influence and how resources are distributed.

It is possible for Jews to have institutional support, numbers, and cultural cachet on campus and still grapple with Jewish safety. In fact, right now we are having a national and international conversation, from the left to the far right, about grappling with Jewish safety.

This has felt like an especially dizzying time to be publishing an article related to antisemitism discourse. From a Leftist perspective, the urge is never stronger to de-center this sort of discussion than it is right now. I've been writing this piece for months, and publishing it now feels both utterly untimely and never timelier.

Right now, we are weighing how we qualify, [talk about](#), and notice antisemitism. Antisemitism is real and ongoing, with a reported rise in antisemitic rhetoric. The fire rages to “call out” antisemitism in ways that I find infuriating and counterproductive, like when the concept of antisemitism is used in bad faith to sow fear and distract from the most critical conversations about apartheid and ethnic cleansing in Palestine. There are also people doing good, critical work; a [recent Jewish Currents article](#) both recognizes truth and advises caution with how the recent increase in antisemitic activity is being reported. In some ways, this current moment proves my thesis that when Jews do hold power, the distinction between valid criticism and antisemitic speech is murkiest.

Now more than ever we need to continue uncomfortable conversations about oppressions and investigate the truths about who holds power and who doesn't.

This moment should invite us to consider and contextualize antisemitism in our local, national, and historical contexts with *specificity*. There is an opportunity for our wealthy Jewish institutions and gatherings to have trauma-informed, class-conscious conversations about systems of power. An understanding that immense Jewish cultural trauma—on both collective and individual scales—is a player in these conversations should impel us not to turn away, but to lean in.

Above all, we must continue to leverage honest critiques about Jewish wealth and influence, about who has voice, with attention to internalized trauma as a player in this discourse. We must be aware that some of these conversations will actually toe the line of antisemitism and slip into it. This should not discourage Jews from continuing these conversations— in fact, this should be an invitation to take a deep breath, and continue to be curious.



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Most Decorated Women

Mirushe Zylali • May 14, 2021

The first article of a two-part series on SCWANA and Balkan Jewish stories of adornment.

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר כָּלוּ הַגַּמְלִים לִשְׁתּוֹת וַיִּקַּח הָאִישׁ גָּזָם וְזָבָב מִשְׁקָלוֹ וְשָׁנָה צִמְדִּים
עַל־יָדָיו עֶשְׂרֵה וְזָבָב מִשְׁקָלָם:

Wayhi ka-asher kilu haggmalim lishtot, wayaḳiḥ ha-ish zāhāv beḳ’a
mishḳālo ushnei ṣmiḏim ‘al-yadeihā ‘asārāh zāhāv mishḳālām:

When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two gold bands for her arms, ten shekels in weight. (B’reishit 24:23)

“I can tell you a story,” said Rabbi Tsipporah “Tsipi” Gabbai.

Nearly a hundred years ago, Ḥaninah walked through the market in Boujad, a small city at the feet of the Atlas Mountains. At fifteen years old, she was pretty, kind, and especially loved by her brother, David. She also caught the eye of a Muslim man in the market, who admired her beauty. She repeatedly refused his propositions. A few days later, on a subsequent visit to the market, a car pulled up beside Ḥaninah. A man grabbed her and pulled her inside. Before anyone could help her, the car disappeared into the distance.

Boujad in the earlier half of the 20th century was home to 30,000 Jews, Muslims, and a few Christians; it was unique in that it did not have a melah, the segregated Jewish quarter that was a fixture in most Moroccan cities. People of all faiths and tribes lived in Boujad shoulder-to-shoulder. Just as different-faith communities living side by side was ordinary, so were frequent kidnappings of Jewish women by Muslim men – including Rabbi Gabai’s aunt, Ḥaninah.



“Her brother David was devastated. He spent eight years looking for her. He thought he could find her, because she couldn’t have children – so maybe that would make the guy more willing to let her go,” said Rabbi Gabai. Eight years after Ḥaninah’s kidnapping, David had not only become a rabbi, but a businessman as well. After years of searching for her, he paid a Muslim man to reunite with Ḥaninah. They met in a cemetery after dark. When Ḥaninah lifted her burqah, Rabbi David could see that she was crying. He could also see that her face was covered in tattoos. “One of the first things they did to Jewish women when they took them in Morocco, even if they wanted to become Muslims, they tattooed their faces, like to say ‘For life, you are not a Jew anymore.’” Because Ḥaninah was unable to have children, her captors begrudgingly released her to Rabbi David. Ḥaninah returned home around the time that Rabbi Gabai’s mother was born.

“Some of my early memories, I can remember her screaming. She was trying to burn off the tattoos with acid. I remember it as a little girl because it was, like, supposed to be a shame. If someone were to take a picture of her, back then, they would say ‘Oh, this is a Jewish woman.’ But they wouldn’t know her story.”

French men, Jewish and gentile, traipsed through the Maghreb in the early 20th century, photographing Orientalized subjects. A century later, their minimally-labeled photos remain enshrined in museums, the voices of women and girls, including tattooed ones, insufficiently captured by them. Women like Ḥaninah were being shot, but not with a gun.

My interest in tattooing and piercing in Jewish cultures originates in my childhood. My biggest takeaway from my fleeting interactions with my Jewish family’s religious practice was that the body re-enters the earth the way it “came out” of it, precluding tattoos and – so I

thought – piercings. As I connected with Judaism, my desire to understand halakhah surrounding adornment increased. I became interested in the communities that seemed to fuse both of my family’s cultures, my father’s side being Muslim: Jews from South, Central, and West Asia; North Africa; and the Balkans.

I was drawn to the digital archives of the Israel Museum and the Jewish Museum. There I found [pictures](#) of “tattooed” women, [nose rings](#) from South Asia, and heavy earrings from



Courtesy of the Israel Museum

[Morocco](#) and [Afghanistan](#), among other beautifully preserved objects that comprise global Jewish visual cultures. I also looked into writing by Walter Fischel, an Ashkenazi visitor to 1940s Jewish Kurdistan:

"I had never seen a more picturesque or impressive mourning assembly. Such Jews! Men virile and wild-looking; women wearing embroidered turbans, earrings, bracelets, even nose-rings, and with symbols tattooed into their faces—our brethren and sisters!"

I was not only frustrated by Fischel's failure to consult the Kurdish women about which he wrote, but inconsistencies in the museums' online labels. Any picture of [a woman with facial markings](#) did not mention whether she was Jewish. [A woman](#) wearing earrings that Rabbi Gabai called *khora k'bash* (rams' horns) was not marked as Jewish, but a similar style of earring featured in a [reconstruction](#) of the wedding ensemble of urban Jewish brides in Morocco.

I didn't have access to the writings of Jean Besancenot, the French man who had taken all of the pictures in the Israel Museum's archives. I wondered whether he, unlike Fischel, had taken the time to listen to women's explanations about their clothing and customs. On other sites mentioning the photographer, he was described as an essential piece of historical understanding of Moroccan Jewish traditions. The word used for the black markings seen on the skin of women is "harqus," spelled by French-speakers as "harkous." Rabbi Gabai told me that, to her knowledge, Jews in the Maghreb did not use it. Rabbi Gabai is the first female Moroccan rabbi. She is a spiritual leader, storyteller, and community activist, allying herself closely with issues of LGBT+ rights. I was honored that she was sharing with me.

"I have no idea," said Rabbi Gabai. "I know, in North Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, I know for sure that it was very forbidden to have tattoos. Not even for decorations – like when you did henna on the forehead for henna decorations, maybe, but eh, so I don't know." Rabbi Gabai also told me that, while nose rings were rarely, if ever, worn by Moroccan Jewish women, they have never been forbidden by Jewish law. "Halakhically, you can see the example of Eli'ezer, the servant of Avraham, who is given earrings to find a wife for Yitzhak, in the whole Levant, or for Jacob who gives it to Rachel. We have examples of women wearing the nezemim [Heb. nose rings, masc. pl.], no prohibition in doing that. In my opinion, nothing is forbidden about putting earrings in your ears," she said.

Rabbi Gabai compared the piercing of her daughters' ears at a young age to a b'rit millah. "We are connecting," she explained, "everyone to our history – to our ancestor, to Judaism, all that." I smiled at the thought of my ears – pierced at Claire's as my dad held back tears –

as a type of b'rit, and ancestral connection with women who came before me. The earrings were not a gash, and the tattooing – whether subdermal or under the skin should not have excluded a Jewish woman from her community.

“It was never her fault,” affirmed Rabbi Gabai of her aunt Haninah’s kidnapping. “She was a child. Living in these countries, there was some good, and some bad. Some good people, some bad people.”

Seeking more clarity about harqus and tattooing, I came across the blog “[Eshkol Hakofer](#)” written by Dr. Noam Sienna. While no longer active, it is a blog about Jewish henna and other body markings in Jewish (and sometimes non-Jewish) communities. Sienna is the author of *A Rainbow Thread*, an anthology about LGBTQ+ Jews in history. I found this quote from his article about harqus, and another about body art in the Maghreb and Kurdistan (also known as Ezidistan; Shabakistan; Assyria; Mesopotamia):



Still from video “*Body Inscriptions*”,
courtesy of Zuhail Canyon

“But how can we tell if a given design is done in harqus or a tattoo? While there are plenty of beautiful patterns, there is almost no way of knowing for sure whether it is a tattoo... Except in one circumstance, of course: photographs of Jews!” (2015)

While Kurdish Jews did not tattoo themselves, they did use indigo (nila) and turmeric (zaira) to create temporary body art, especially for ceremonial occasions such as a child’s birth (Brauer 1947: 137), another custom also practiced by other Jewish communities in Central and South Asia. (2014)

“People like Fischel are seeing a few things,” Sienna explained via video chat. “They’re seeing body decorations, but the only body decorations they’re familiar with are tattooing. They don’t bother to, or can’t, ask the people they’re observing. So intentionally and unintentionally, they’re traveling to these places and creating and working within narratives shaped by Orientalism. For these visitors in these regions – it may seem logical to conflate all types of body decoration. But they’re not interchangeable.” What had piqued my interest was that Fischel had specifically referred to tattoos *into* the skin of Jewish women. Now I knew they were not subdermal.

Dr. Sienna stated that Jewish communities' ornaments are always painted, and always in conversation with their Muslim and non-Muslim neighbors. They often dressed very similarly. "In some cases, there is a real distinctiveness that separates Jewish and non-Jewish communities visually. In other contexts, it's just that we don't need to worry. It's obvious [that they're Jews]." Dr. Sienna felt that the past is equally as important for understanding Jewish visual signaling. "There's an inherited set of norms, whether that's etiquette, where you live, or who you're with. Within these contexts, there's no worry or confusion that they [Jews] are gonna look like Muslims. Everyone knows who's Muslim and who's Jewish."

"I met a really old man in a moshav in Israel, who was from a Kurdish village called Sindur," said Dr. Sienna. "He was from a community of Kurdish Jews who were Arabic-speaking. He brought a keffiyeh with him from Kurdistan, and I saw a picture of him in it. He folded it up into a neat square and kept it in his closet for decades. The risk of being conflated with the 'enemy' was too high," he concluded, referring to Israel's numerous wars with neighboring, Arab-majority countries.

וְשָׂרֵט לֹנֶפֶשׁ לֹא תִתְּנוּ בְּבָשָׂרְכֶם וְכָתַבְתָּ קֶשֶׁלֶע לֹא תִתְּנוּ בָבָם אֲנִי יְהוָה:

Wisereṭ lānefesh lo ṭitnu bivsarkhem ukhtoveṭ k'aḳ'a lo ṭitnu bākhem ani
ADONAI:

You shall not make gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourselves: I am the LORD. (Wayikra 19:28)

Seeking to better understand the halakhic ideas I internalized from the Jewish spaces in which I grew up, I contacted Binya Koatz. Poet, leader, and activist, Koatz is one of the founders of [Trans Girl Talmud](#). She shared with me that the hazy concept I remembered from my childhood – non-Jews mistaking Jewish behaviors as contradictory to Jewish laws and texts – called "marit 'ayin" (appearance to the eye).

"These are all bubbe meises," she said. "This idea that your body has to go into the earth the exact way it came out. If you have a life saving surgery and an organ removed, your body isn't re-entering the same way. If you get your ears pierced, eventually, that's a permanent hole." Those words – going out of this world as you came into it – were ones I heard before.



*Nose Ring from India, 20th Century,
Courtesy of the Israel Museum*

“Marit ‘ayin is like tzniut. It’s something that some people, some classes within Jewishness, are allowed to ignore for convenience while it’s simultaneously, more often, used to control women.” Šniut (here in a spelling used by some Sefaradi, Mizrahi, and Balkan Jewish communities), more commonly spelled tzniut or tznus, refers to ideals of modesty, and is associated especially with Orthodox Jewish communities.

The rule of not mixing poultry with dairy came about because Jewish religious authorities were concerned that poultry was being mistaken for meat by non-Jews; a concern for marit ‘ayin. The same logic may be the origin of the prohibition on tattooing: a Jewish person being mistaken for a member of a non-Jewish tribe, or a pagan group.

“You just can’t do these things [tattooing] in the name of other Gods. It comes about within a context of ‘avodah zarah.” ‘Avodah zarah, or “foreign servitude/work”, refers to the worship of gods that were not the Israelite God. ‘Avodah zarah also refers to worshipping God in unsanctioned ways.

I thought about Jewish people from South, Central, and West Asia, North Africa, and the Balkans who had moved to Israel. Some were from cultures like Rabbi Gabai’s, in which henna and earrings are normalized; others, from Kurdistan and South Asia, in which nose rings were common. With Koatz, I speculated that these adornments had a racializing impact on these Jewish groups. Instead of henna and piercings being recognized as Jewish adornments with Jewish textual histories, they were seen by the Israeli government, overwhelmingly dominated by Ashkenazi Jews, as evidence of these Jewish communities belonging to other nations. An intra-communal ethnocentric canard about SCWANA (South, Central, West Asian, North African) and Balkan Jewish people having dual loyalties developed.

I asked Koatz what she thought reclaiming these adornments might mean. “We would have to fill in the cracks of our own cultures instead of replacing our cultures with the vacantness of Euro-American consumerist cultures,” replied Koatz. “Not expressing ourselves based on what we like to consume, but what we want to create – what we do. Not the brand name of what we drink or wear.” On a practical level, this would mean uncomfortable moments in which our own aesthetic tastes would butt up against expectations of respectability, assimilation, and professionalism. My mom has often told me not to normalize my henna usage because an American employer might find it inappropriate for work.

In [Wayikra](#), women and their children, regardless of gender, wore earrings.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶחָדָן פָּרָקוּ נָא מִן הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵיכֶם וּבְנֵי בָתְּרֵיכֶם וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלַי:

Wayomer Elohim Aharon parku nizmei hazāhāv asher b-āznei n'shikhem
bneikhem uvneoteikhem w'hāviu eilāi:

[Aharon] said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” (Shemot 32:20)

“As for tattoos,” continued Koatz, “there’s a history of Jewish people, even in our texts, getting tattoos – etching Yod Hei Vav Hei – into their skin. I think it’s not only okay, but holy if it’s done out of love for our God. The tattoo just has to be really Jewish.” The prohibition on tattooing comes from Wayikra 19.28 (Parashat Kēdushim), which is printed above. With regards to the concept of marit ‘ayin, “It [marit ‘ayin] really bars queer Jews from Jewishness in the eyes, sometimes, of other Jews and the world. It bars Sefaradi Jews from Jewishness in many contexts. It’s just not Jewish, from any angle, to judge someone from the external.”

“We don’t act or dress for non-Jewish people so that they will think we’re Jewish, we live for the Torah and Hashem.” Koatz imagined a different future for what it means to be a visible Jew. “You can tell someone’s Jewish because of how they act, and also because of how they look. I want people to be visibly Jewish as well – but with more signifiers than the normative ones that have been created.”

Marit ‘ayin can bar people from certain Jewish spaces, but those same people can also adhere to and take marit ‘ayin into consideration in their own communities. For example, some of the behaviors of Masorti (traditional; in the US ‘conservative’) Sefaradi Jews could be perceived as violating halakhah in the view of masorti Ashkenazi Jews (soft matzah or riding bicycles on Yom Tov). In this case, concerns about marit ‘ayin look different for Sefaradi and Ashkenazi Jews on an intra-communal and extra-communal level. However, Sefaradi Jews should not be beholden to that Ashkenazi gaze, just as Ashkenazi Jews aren’t beholden to a non-Jewish gaze.

The refusal of Tanakhic women to hand over their own adornments and the adornments of their children was a refusal to give up their principles – their newfound Jewishness and nationhood – in the face of assimilating into a wider culture of worshipping idols. Women and their children of every gender stood firm in their belief in Jews as an emerging nation. Refusing to give up beauty, art, love, and adornment, especially in the name of God, is, in fact, a declaration of loyalty and trust. In this case, the women of Israel both looked Jewish and behaved Jewishly.



In the understandings and memories of Rabbi Gabai and Koatz, there is also no firm divide between the adornment practices before the Ten Commandments and after. The gash described the Ten Commandments never applied to earrings and nose rings, and would never apply to our matriarchs Rivkah and Raḥel, as I had also mistakenly thought.

I reflected on what people suffered through or left behind as they existed in the world as themselves, or tried to take on new identities – American, Israeli, French, Moroccan. My father’s side of the family are Balkan Muslims. Facial ornaments, today attached most often via eyelash glue, were more common over twenty years ago. My mom often talks about how my Muslim grandmother’s attempts to include more traditional clothing items (facial jewelry [sequins, coins, floral pieces], hair tinsel) into wedding-clothes were rebuffed. They were brushed off as “primitive” – better left in the village. By the time my mother had jeweled the skin above her eyebrow, Americanized cousins told her to remove the silver leaves. Burning in me was the desire to wear all of my cultural clothes. They were embarrassing and an inconvenience

to Americanness, so they were left behind. Now, they are reappearing steadily on Instagram accounts devoted to Balkan and Turkish wedding fashion.

My mind also went to Jewish South Asia, where women wore beautiful, bejeweled nose rings in daily life. When Jews (namely Bene Israel and Cochin communities) moved to the cities, their nose rings fell out of use. I wondered why, but did not yet have anyone to ask. Whether or not traditions develop or exist depends on the choices of the people to whom those traditions belong. South Asian Jewish [marriage pendants](#) were created under the auspices of Hindu smiths, to be worn as one of [many necklaces](#) on the bride’s wedding day. I relished that someone chose to document these pieces of information, included as a part of the provenance of each piece. Really, the provenance of anything is the long memory of the bequeather.

I deeply valued the inclusion of narratives that defied ideas about what it means to be a Jewish person which, globally, tends to signify a white, Ashkenazi person. Caring about the narratives of the entire Jewish world means caring about stories often perceived as shameful or that contradict ideas about how Jews dress; what they eat; what they speak. While we are a large nation, we are far more diverse than any of us knows, and there is nothing about our rich tapestry of visual cultures that should be left behind for the sake of a streamlined narrative.

Since childhood, I had a hazy concept of the prohibition on tattooing being related to signifying whether or not one was Jewish – for example, able to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. I also believed that, in Jewish law, ear piercing and tattooing were equivalent as permanent gashes. Along the way, I had picked up the idea that a Jewish person existed in only one cultural context in which they wouldn't be mistaken for non-Jews. In the charged political atmosphere after both 9/11 and the Second Intifada, I had internalized that my father's culture was, and must be, mutually exclusive with my mother's, and vice versa, lest I be mistaken...for whom?

My own enemy?

That is not my birthright. Real or perceived, any enemy can also become a friend, neighbor, and shared community member. We are, in fact, a constellation of communities all bleeding into one another, in the same way that the ocean floor runs into the sand of the shore. In this new world, we must all be each other's keepers – of safety, memory, and tradition. While I was now well on my way to learning as much as I could about the adornments of Jewish women around the world in history, I had new questions to answer. I knew exactly who I would ask, and braced myself, like a time traveler, for my rapid catch-up to my peoples' present.

I Put a Ring in Your Nose

Mirushe Zylali • May 24, 2021

The second article of a two-part series on SCWANA and Balkan Jewish stories of adornment.

In every corner of Jewish collective memory, I found earrings. In some grandmothers' cabinets, I found bowls lightly stained by henna. Under their sleeves and on their faces, I saw scars from where they tried to burn off their tattoos with acid. Most of all, I saw them adorned by their yahadut – their Jewishness. I wanted to know everything about them and their decorated lives, from the mechanics of glittering brooches to the names of the patterns in a Bukharian bride's headscarf.

I also wanted to hear more perspectives on tattooing, including stricter ones, to understand the prohibition. I reached out to Luna Skye, Sefaradi scholar and cellist. She took a Socratic approach to understanding the contexts and histories of the adornments mentioned in my previous article.

Skye wrote that tattoos are definitely a prohibition, and taken seriously in Jewish histories and presents. "Tattoos in modern Western culture around us largely don't reflect those same associations of religious worship, but there's still a prohibition. Mišwot aren't predicated on the ṭa'am [taste, feeling]; the ṭa'am is what you're potentially supposed to get out of doing it. What it's meant to transmit or inculcate." Skye clarified that "The ṭa'am [with regards to tattooing prohibition] relates to 'avodah zarah and the sanctity of one's body." Skye also felt strongly about marit 'ayin and how it is used to intra- and extra-communally police followers of Sefaradic thought.

"Also on the flip side, while tattoos are clearly assur [prohibited] – it's the act of getting one that's assur. Once it's there, it's there – and I think it's important not to shun people for it (which definitely happens, sadly)," wrote Skye. This evoked past concerns of forcibly tattooed Shoah survivors who were anxious about whether or not they would be permitted a Jewish burial.



“There are specific things prohibited on the basis of *marit ha’ayin*. But nowhere does it say ‘it’s assur to do something that might be *marit ha’ayin*,’” concluded Skye. Kurdish temporary tattoos were in; non-tattooed *harqus*, on hands or face, was fine. In the cases of Frenchmen wandering through the Maghreb and Walter Fischel bumbling into Kurdistan, ‘appearance to the eye’ meant almost nothing at all. French men visiting the Maghreb rarely asked for enough information from their Jewish women subjects, and Fischel missed golden opportunities to ask Kurdish Jewish women for clarification on their temporary tattoos, albeit in his shaky Aramaic. Jewish stories, it seems, tend to contain far more than the external – even if that’s where our ornamentation stops.

In the days during and following the above interviews, people began reaching out to share their stories. I also contacted people I knew personally. One of them was Bat-Anat, an Amazigh-Sefaradi Jewish friend.

Portugal, Algeria, and Morocco are all a part of Bat-Anat’s family story. Her great grandfather migrated from North Africa to the United States in the early 1900s and was taken in by a white family. His son, Bat-Anat’s grandfather, was resentful of his father for not passing on his Jewish and North African heritage to his children. He felt that the process of assimilation had cheated him out of his heritage – and he was sad because he couldn’t pass on that heritage to his own children. In his later years, he and Bat-Anat grew close, and he told her everything he knew. I loved the pictures of Bat-Anat in which she wears her street clothes with traditional jewellery.



Bride dressed in a green sari, her finger smeared with henna paste from the Bene Israel community, Lod. Courtesy of the Israel Museum.

It was her grandfather who encouraged her to dig in and learn more. She feels that revitalizing and reclaiming her heritages is tremendously important. “I’m very big on de-assimilation and assertion of cultural identity in the face of colonial and homogenized society. It’s a difficult process because it can be hard to find resources or traditional practitioners of certain things.”



Cosmetics pouch for a bride from Herat, Afghanistan. Courtesy of the Israel Museum.

“I didn’t grow up with henna or harqus directly practiced, but I recall mention of some of my ancestors and relatives in the 19th century using henna as hair dye,” she said. Bat-Anat’s henna and harqus practices exist in her family as temporary dyes in the context of both daily and celebratory ornamentation. She reconnects with them as a way of embodying her ancestors. She takes pieces of herself and her histories back from a dominant culture that seeks to replace them with absence.

Bat-Anat is also an out, intersex lesbian. She identifies with Sarah Imeinu as a historical, intersex Jewish woman. In particular, she cited Yevamot 64b:2:

אמר רב נחמן אמר רבה בר אבוח שרה אמנו אילנית דיתה שנאמר (בראשית יא, ל) ותדי שרי עקרה אין לה ולד אפלי בית ולד אין לה

Rav Naḥman said that Rabba bar Avuh said:

"Our mother Sarah was initially a sexually underdeveloped woman [aylonit], as it is stated: “And Sarah was barren; she had no child” (Genesis 11:30). The superfluous words: “She had no child,” indicate that she did not have even a place, i.e., a womb, for a child."

“Jews have always lived on the fringe of what is considered mainstream,” she said. “We’ve always questioned what’s considered universal. When I practice, I embrace that variance. I remember that HaZaL [Ḥakhameinu Zikhronam Livrakhah, “Our Sages, May their Memory Be Blessed”], even in ancient times, recognized my identity as more valid than European or American society ever has.” In other words, while Sarah Imeinu briefly did not have a place for a child, HaZaL always had a place for a woman like Bat-Anat: – intersex, henna-wearing, and irrefutably Jewish.

Esther, a Tunisian Jewish woman currently residing in France, shared the stories of the women in her family with me. “My grandmother always loved henna and used it,” she wrote. “Either on her hair or hands. She always taught me that we should rejoice for Shabbat, and henna is an expression of that joy.

“So every Friday morning, just like she used to do, I put some henna on my hand. Nothing fancy, just a small circle in my left hand as a reminder and symbol of joy.”

Esther sent me a picture of herself at her graduation. She looks beautiful. Her hand, decorated with a winding, jet-black floral motif, peeks out of her robe’s sleeve. “The black thing along my hand – that’s harqus,” she writes. “In Sfax, we call it naqsh.”

She told me more about her memories of her family, especially her grandmother, in Tunisia. “The house never closed. Women used to open the door and stay in the kitchen, and talk all day long. And every Friday morning, we go to the hammam [bathhouse in Islamic majority lands].”



Sequined wedding shawl from Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Courtesy of the Israel Museum.

I had seen old pictures of women in my Balkan family who used henna in multiple styles. For daily wear, it was used as nail polish; or, the finger was dyed with henna until the second knuckle; and often, but especially for important events, a circle was made in the center of the palm. It felt good to know I wasn’t the only young woman who wanted to normalize wearing it, including in professional contexts. There was something about the circle that was complete, holy, and round.

I have dreamed of a weekly henna practice in relation to Shabbat for a long time. There was something even more powerful about it being in the center of the palm as well as on the fingers, which I associated with life cycle events such as weddings and engagement parties. At these events, a coin is often tied on top of the henna with a red ribbon. I wanted to marry Shabbat every week, and use henna to mark the occasion. Two brides, wedded for life: Shabbat, and me.

וְאָתָּן נֶזֶם עַל-אַפֶּיךָ וְעִגְלִים עַל-אָזְנוֹךָ וְעֹטֶת תְּפִאֲרֶת בְּרֹאשְׁךָ:

Wā-etein nezem ‘al-apeikh wa-’agilim ‘al-āznākh wa’aṭeret tiferet brosheikh:

I put a ring in your nose, and earrings in your ears, and a splendid crown on your head. (Yeḥezkel 16:12)

The customs, halakhic rulings, and visual cultures of SCWANA and Balkan Jews are deemed to be insufficient and disorganized by Ashkenazim and the non-Jewish world. In Ashkenazi

contexts, a Jewish person has to be Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox – and even within these broader categories, there are smaller and increasingly specific movements to align oneself with. In classical SCWANA and Balkan Jewish communities, one space holds both secular and religious Jews. In some ways, the plurality of SCWANA, Balkan, and Ethiopian Jewish communities is also perceived as a threat to the potential for Jewish “unity” and a justification for Orientalizing antisemitism that gentile Europeans directed at Ashkenazi Jews.

Via my research, I was also able to finally release the baggage I carried with me for so long regarding my own cultural decorations. Many of my fathers’ familial traditions had been dismissed by outsiders as overly indulgent and materialistic, but I find our visual culture far from shallow, especially in modern contexts. For my LGBTQ+ Jewish friends, many of whom “[flag](#)” by wearing nose rings and earrings, I pulled together the textual threads of Leviticus to weave a new picture. For example, piercing one ear to flag is not at all outside of the scope of Jewish behavior, including for a man.

I was continually intrigued by the gendered dimensions of permissible piercing. English-language Jewish sources distinguished “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” sites of piercing, namely describing Rivkah’s nose piercing as “[the custom at that time](#)”; describing piercing as [woman-exclusive](#) when Jewish textual sources did not distinguish either piercing as gendered, nor nose-rings as un-Jewish; or [likening them to a rite of passage](#). I pictured my sixth-birthday ear piercing again, remembering my joy and nervous excitement. I wanted that for every Jewish person.

I continue to seek out the narratives and memories people have of their material cultures. Understandings of Judaism, love, and holiness are forged in the adornments we wear. We are linked together by a chain of memories, experiences, and relationships that tether our communities to one another – and to communities that are not Jewish, by tenuous strands of fibrous tissue that continue to grow. The sooner we all consider our stories as interrelated, bound up in all of one another’s, the sooner we may come to terms with their truths and pains, working toward a world of peace, justice, and truth.



*Jewish Woman of Iraqi Kurdish origin wearing a tasseled kerchief.
Courtesy of the Israel Museum.*

Here is a brief reading list, courtesy of Dr. Noam Sienna.

The use of indigo and turmeric as a body adornment was described by Erich Brauer in his 1947 ethnographic study of Kurdish Jews (published posthumously), *Yehudei Kurdistan: mehqar etnologi*. This book was also republished in English translation in 1993 by WSU Press. The reference to indigo and turmeric is on page 137 of the Hebrew original. It is describing a ceremony for welcoming a newborn child, often called *sheshe* (from Hebrew *shishi*, “the sixth [night]”) which was practiced by a number of Jewish communities across Central Asia. In Iraq and Iran, they used saffron rather than turmeric, and in India they used henna.

The references for those are:

David Sassoon, *A History of the Jews in Baghdad* (1949), pg. 182

Mavis Hyman, *Jews of the Raj* (1995), pg. 110

Leah Baer, “Life’s Events: Birth, Bar Mitzvah, Weddings, and Burial Customs,” in *Esther’s Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jewry* (2002), 314-315 — and cf. the essay by Haideh Sahim on personal adornment, “Seven Steps to Beauty,” in the same anthology

Shirley Berry Isenberg, *India’s Bene Israel*, 129

The featured photo is a collage with imagery courtesy of the Israel Museum.



Mirushe Zylali is a writer and artist. She anticipates her Bachelor of Arts in Religion and Studio Art from Mount Holyoke College in May of 2021. Her love for the global mosaic of Jewish and Muslim peoples knows no bounds, informing all of her work and her future hopes for a just world.



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