the BLACK HAT

Spring 2008

The Black Hat, in its second year of existence, would like to thank all of the people that continue to offer their help and support for this project. We are grateful for the number of sumbissions we received; so many more than last year that we couldn't fit them all in. Many of the pieces we have this year deal with Jewish identity – in particular family histories and relationships with Israel. To further explore this we have invited some of our writers to include small, self-reflective pieces about their writing: a little bit of commentary, in the Jewish style. We look forward to giving the Jewish community at Vassar a voice in these pages in the future. Please send any submissions, questions or comments to:

vassarblackhat@gmail.com.

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Cover photo: An unintended Star of David formed by blocks of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial. Leah Varsano

Contents

Golan Moskowitz

Dates and Contradictions

I started this piece with a single idea: the idea of feeling Israeli in the U.S. and American in Israel. I hoped to convey my ambivalence and uncertainty related to this and the mixed feelings that come with entering adulthood from a traditional Jewish background.

I finalized this during my semester abroad in Haifa, Israel, where I spent time alone with my Savta and Saba for what seemed like the first time. Sitting with them at their small kitchen table, over which the photograph I refer to still hangs, I struggled to make sense of the space between their lives and mine. I listened to stories of my mother's childhood, stories of Israel's childhood, and we even spoke about the photo, the mention of which made my Savta glow a little.

A June 12th in the Garden

He heard the familiar voice, the shriek, before he saw his mother's face. It was the sight of a tiny snake in the daisy weeds out in the front yard. He must have been six or seven at the time and lacked any strong feelings towards snakes one way or another. But the performance put on by his mother that afternoon, jolting as though from a resurfaced nightmare, left its mark on him. Her grimace of revulsion, all pinched up, hostile, afraid: that image stayed with him.

She'd told him that once, as a girl, his Savta and Saba sent her on a bicycle to buy eggs from a neighbor's chicken coop. Savta and Saba lived a simple life; their home overflowed with real warmth and affection, but also real concerns about feeding three children on a modest salary. Memories of living in hiding in the late 40s, potato peels for dinners, held to them like oil stains. On a bright mid-morning when a snake emerged from straw alongside a dirt path, circling up their daughter's bicycle tire, his mother's tire, she'd startled so that her mother's precious coins were lost in the thick brush.

Sometimes he forgets she's different, that she didn't grow up here, that she never tasted peanut butter or saw snow until she was old enough to get married. Her scent is foreign and familiar, warm and forgotten. When she speaks to him or holds him, he feels a part of something more important than what is around him. He can withdraw from cars, from

supermarkets, from songs on the radio. She is for him a portal into something distant, alive, and real. But this something, whatever it is, is always just beyond his reach, always behind the blinds of her fading memory. He tries to grasp at it, sometimes dreamily and sometimes with a sort of pained fervency, but he always retreats, eyes lowered, when she holds back.

A July 4th in his Childhood Diaspora

Barbecued air in the night of mosquitoes tingles in his nostrils, reminding him of fat blondes in thin Wal-Mart tanks, men who've become rowdy from beer and the game. He hates them. He's not one of them. He prides himself in his mother's birth, in his connection to a faraway, Mediterranean haven of sand and serious stuff, like war, religious conflict, explosion.

Sky fire and drunken awe sparkle over lawn chairs, disintegrating like sprinkles in dark chocolate frosting. One, two, three, four. Mean boys talking loud and burping coca cola behind.

Israel has become something of a fantastical escape, a mental retreat from the mundane, godless people of suburban New York. A sort of culturally relevant Palm Springs getaway, but with grandparents that bake chocolate crumb cakes and drive him and his sisters to the beaches in a rusty blue truck, the three of them huddled like stolen cargo in the back, the sun-hot palms breathing up through their lashes, pulling tears in the rough, salty air. For about two weeks a year, he gets to taste the highlights of an Israeli childhood. Pita, falafel, stray kittens, eucalyptus tree playgrounds, and a whole lot of sand. For the other fifty weeks a year, he can live in ideals. He prides himself in being the Israeli kid, in his mother's olive skin and in the way she pronounces "ball" and "bowl" the same, the way she confuses A's with E's. He's better than the others. Exotic. Authentic.

He sits with his sisters, the three lined and cross-legged on the picnic blanket like cupcakes on display underneath the sparkling shower, sugar and fire in the thick barbecued air.

A May 15th on a Day of Remembrance

He wears a yellow felt star on his chest on the day of Holocaust remembrance. All are in black, passing the stale hallways to the auditorium like funeral-goers. It is dark, and he sinks contently into important sorrow, dramatic notions of doom and loss. He understands what it means to exterminate a people, to feel a thing stronger in its absence. His rowdy classmates couldn't care less, though. All they know is soccer and secrets and summer, and they elicit cruel stares from wrinkled teachers, whose eyes are mean behind their glasses. They whine. They beg for at least half of their recess period back. He looks at them, all restless, most of them small like him, and he wants to blame them for all forms of sadness, for the frigid nights his Savta spent eating garbage in the war, for the image of her that he carries, three years old, hiding inside the earth as bombs dropped above her like rain.

A September 20th upon his First Essay

A 300-word essay is assigned as his first formal writing exercise. Gaining mastery over however is a milestone for him. He bites his lip, holding in the head rush that comes with challenging things as they are for the first time, filching authority from statements penned in cursive. He throws it around a lot.

However. It makes him powerful and even a bit snooty. He spends too much time making his sentences perfect, slowly peeling words, and then tearing them down, howevering them.

A March 20th after a Purim Party

He realizes for the first time this year, from the backseat as they pick up his older sister from a costume party, that she is in fact a separate person, a book only partially open for his reading interest. Her pages also hold jokes that don't pertain to him, names of boys she can't tell. In a velvet dress the color of Christmas, she climbs into his parents' car, freckled and smiley, her black hair and red lipstick telling him something about himself and about the space between them.

Once he'd slammed the kitchen door, trying to prove that he was important, that he could run away from home, that he was worth missing. However, he'd only laid himself in the ditch of the ravine behind the house, watching the crunchy leaves fall like loose leaf paper down the dusty hill where deer had left their marks. The leaves dropped slow, like his careful first 300 essay words, sweeping wildly last second to contradiction across dry earth. His heart had pounded, angry, because he felt his family snickering back inside, where it was warm.

A February 14th on College Turf

He drinks, he cuddles, he winds his hips and turns his head. He uses his imagination. With girls who are drunker than he is, he goes out dancing. He tries to slow or escape his obsessive, breathless mind. He lets men run their hands up his back in the dark, lets them pull him against them. He presses his head on their shoulders, forlorn and wishful, passive and warm, the pulsing bass like his blood pleading out loud.

On a cold, concrete wall of his dorm room, a black and white photo is assigned the responsibility of keeping perspective. It's a digital print of an old photograph; he took it at his Savta and Saba's house a couple years back – the two of them, young and attractive, celebrating their first Shabbat as a married couple. Savta, a woman who'd lost everything and everyone at age three; Saba a self-satisfied pioneer, six years her senior, offering her a fatherly sort of care. They stand by the lit candles, Savta's dark wavy hair pulled in a handkerchief, her perfect face puckered to blow out the match. Saba's lips are puckered too, bending

towards the flame, which Savta holds up to be extinguished by them both. Saba, shaven and dapper with his thick smoothed hair, looks not at his perky wife, who wears a patterned dress, leaning sultry towards the match – he looks at the flame. Let's put it out together. Let's you and me turn this fire to smoke.

Elizabeth London

Exodus

This story has undergone several changes to reach its present form. At first I only had the idea of matzah being magically transformed into bread, and the story evolved from there. I also wanted to include the family drama, especially with a focus on three generations of women. Though this is not based on true events, the complicated position of women in Judaism is of particular interest to me.

"Preparing the meal and the Seder I can manage. It's preparing for your mother that's driving me crazy!" I heard my mother's resounding voice behind their bedroom door, inattentively left ajar. "And you know it's not me, Rich. I tried, but she just never wanted to give me a chance."

"Joan, you are absolutely out-of-line with this and I just… I really can't stand you when you get this way. The two of you, like children. It's just so silly."

"The two of us? 'Worse than a *shikse*,' Rich. Her words, not mine. She'd probably excommunicate me from the Jewish faith if she had the authority. Except the only authority she has is over you."

"Excuse me?"

My mother lowered her voice so I edged out of the living room to get closer. Even with my ear in the crevice, I only heard hurried grumblings. I figured my mother was winning the argument. She always meted out the punishments and had us discuss the moral and karmic repercussions of our actions while my father simply nodded, wearing his serious face. With my grandmother, however, they were evenly matched. An eye for an eye, a bite for a bite.

When I heard the buzzer, I jumped up and rushed to Danny's room. I ordered him to stop banging his dinosaurs against each other and help me throw his toys in the closet in case Grandma came to inspect. A messy room would be another chance for Grandma to blame Mom, like the time when my chapter books were on the floor. I hadn't finished putting them back on the bookshelf but Grandma said to Mom, "So this is the way you treat literature here."

After checking that Danny and I were presentable, I rushed to get the door and greet Grandma and Grandpa. My black velvet dress was itchy and my panty-

hose kept sinking below my stomach. Grandma's hair was tied back, her nails perfectly manicured with a light pink coat. She wore a tan skirt and jacket and a modest Jewish star necklace to complement her simple, silver studs. I first cuddled into Grandpa's arms and then stepped away to give Grandma a moment to observe my outfit. Her eyes shone with approval and her red-painted lips broke into a big smile. "Now there's my Abby looking like a grown-up young lady." I gave her a soft hug and she flattened my collar a little bit as I stepped back. Dad darted out of his room in a tie and button-down shirt, pressing down his hair.

"Hi Mom, hi Dad, you got here alright?"

"No, it's fine Richie, we're fine. This is quite an… exotic area of the city, you know, but we're here, aren't we?"

Dad nodded and led them into the living room, with his hand cradling Grandma's back. I eagerly followed, excited to see if Grandma had brought us books or chocolate or something, when I saw her stop suddenly a few steps in, right in front of the kitchen. Grandma eyed my mother while Mom whisked and pretended not to notice. She was wearing her loose, linen jumper that hung off her like a smock. It was gold and purple with printed designs of elephants and weird symbols that looked like a magical language.

"Hello, Joan," my grandmother said. "Good to see you again."

My mother turned as if she had just noticed Grandma's arrival. With a grin, she said, "Oh hey Ruth, Morris! I hope you're ready for a fantastic meal."

Grandma scanned the kitchen counter warily. "Can I help you finish some work here, so you have a moment to change?"

Mom chuckled. "Oh Ruth, no need, I'm all changed. This is an Indian dinner we'll be having so I thought I'd keep with the theme."

Grandma tightened her face.

"Now, don't worry, we've still got the Seder plate but I thought we'd try out something more adventurous this year," Mom said.

Grandpa gave my mother a light kiss on the cheek, and then hurried to catch up with Grandma, who was striding furiously to the couch. I spun around to see Dad murmuring to Mom under his breath and shaking his head as he left her mixing.

While we waited, I spewed questions for Grandma about her mother's job as a chicken plucker in Brooklyn and if she ate chicken a lot and who does that job now. She responded emphatically to my prompts, as Grandpa dozed off, but I

could see a blank in her eyes. Mom was humming from the kitchen and I could smell cinnamon and cardamom.

"Dinner is served," Mom called out.

Grandma squeezed Grandpa's hands firmly as she walked to the dining table and then took a seat. I sat down straight across from her, hoping to divert a possible disaster. Grandma observed the Seder plate in the center, raising an eyebrow but observing now inadequacies. Danny zoomed in, almost slipping on his socks, but catching himself and plopping into a seat.

"I'm starved!" he said.

"Then you, sweet pea, are in for quite a treat." Mom proudly carried out the matzah covering, a blue velvet pocket with Hebrew sewn on the top. As she placed it directly in front of Grandma's plate, I noticed that it looked thicker than usual. Grandma glanced up at it and was also alarmed by the odd shape. She propped up the top with her fingers and peered in.

"What is this?" she said, pulling out a round loaf of regular white bread in place of the thin, crisp matzah.

"Real bread!" Danny said.

"What the – what in the world do you mean by this?" Grandma said.

Though his mouth had dropped open, my father could not speak. Danny was still celebrating and I was anxiously awaiting Mom's response.

She smiled girlishly and looked at Danny and me with eyes sparkling with glee.

"It was a miracle, guys. I went to bake the matzah in the oven and I didn't put in yeast or anything to make it rise. And then I opened the oven door and this is what I saw."

"Really? Coooool," Danny said.

"Wow," I said.

"This is Pesach," Grandma began.

Dad finally piped up meagerly.

"Joan, just please, will you get the matzah? Please just get it from the box."

Mom's eyes remained locked on Danny and me.

"You know, I think God was freeing us from years of an awful tradition," she said. "We may have been slaves in Egypt but why should we suffer like them? It's a sign and why should I argue with God, especially on a holiday?"

"Joan, you may do certain things with your children, but this is Pesach and

this is something very important."

"With all due respect, Ruth, I get that. But I don't understand why God would want us to keep eating this crap. Let it go. I mean such a great miracle happened but now that we are not slaves why shouldn't we enjoy our happiness and prosperity and enjoy our regular bread like everyone else?"

"WE ARE NOT LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. This is what God says and we do this 'awful' thing to remember the labor, the pain, the bitterness that we went through in Egypt under Pharaoh's yoke. No, you don't care. Okay well – if not for what happened there you would not be here now."

"And I'm sure that would make you plenty happy, wouldn't it?"

"You know what would make me happy: for you to stop masquerading like a Jew when you are clearly not one of us. You don't know what it means and you have disrespected not just me, but the whole Jewish community."

Danny sank in his chair and Dad, wide-eyed, was unable to resolve the conflict. The women had forgotten about my brother and me; no one else seemed present.

I knew I could end it. If I said anything, even made any sort of noise, they would remember where they were and hold off for the time being. The truth was, I needed to hear what my mother had to say because she made me believe in the miracle and believe in the story of Passover as I never had before. Never before had the dusty words of the Haggadah come out of my mother's mouth in earnest. "The great miracle happened," she had said. But it was her deviant act that made me believe in the magic of the holiday: that sticks might turn into snakes and God could work wonders.

My grandmother had ruined all that.

My mother took a breath and calmly turned to my father. "Now I'm glad we got that out there, aren't you?"

My grandmother let her eyes drop and I watched her carefully. She curled over, eyes down, and then very unsteadily reached for her pocketbook and pushed her chair out.

"Come on, Morris, let's go."

Grandpa was surprised but unprepared to do anything other than obey. They rose to exit and I noticed Grandpa look at Danny, his face worried. Danny didn't seem to notice.

My father leapt from his seat, "Ma, please don't go like that," he called after

her, but she was moving towards the door and refused to turn back.

I could have thought of something to do. I could have taken Danny back to his room or I could have hugged my mother or thought up something better then just sitting and watching the catastrophe unfold. And though most of that night I remember, crystal clear, this part is still a mystery. I don't know why I didn't do any of the things I could have done.

Dad tried to stop them from leaving. As the door slammed shut, my mother rose in this dignified way, like a queen. And she pierced my father with her eyes and stood as a statue while he gaped back. Then she walked over and collected Danny and me, her hands sturdily gripping each of ours and she led us away. And it was at that moment, the sea began to part.

Mezes in in Daliyat al-Karmel, Israel *Toby Fox*

Panel Discussion

Last year, The Black Hat *interviewed a Jewish Studies professor and published the transcript in the magazine. This year, Leah Varsano and Toby Fox thought it would be interesting to sit down with several professors and engage them in conversation. We hoped to discuss the complexities arising from Jewish Studies as a topic of study that interests both Jews and non-Jews. Our panel included Maria Hoehn, Associate Professor of History; Agi Veto, Adjunct Professor of Jewish Studies and Main House Fellow; and Lisa Kaul, a House Fellow in Davison with a PhD in Anthropology.*

Toby Fox: To begin, we were wondering exactly how you each came to teaching Jewish Studies, the Holocaust, or any other Jewish-related topic. How did you all arrive here?

Lisa Kaul: Completely by default; I still do not consider myself a Jewish Studies person. I consider myself an anthropologist, because that's what I have my degree in. [As a Catholic] I was always fascinated by the Jews-- do not ask me why! And the first opportunity I had to travel, I decided to go to Israel. I was twenty-two, I think, and I took a course on Religion, Civilization, and Zionism. The professor started talking, and he mentioned *galut* [exile of the Jewish people from Israel], and he expected everybody to understand what he was talking about, and I was the only kid in the class who raised her hand, and said, "What does that mean?" And this is what he said to me: "Where have you been?"

I started studying the settler movement, because I saw a lot of parallels between religious nationalism in Israel and in India [my home country] at that time. And somehow I just got hooked onto it for no good reason, and thereafter, moved on to studying anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodox Jews, who are sort of the other end of the spectrum. So it's basically an interest I've had: the role that religion plays in nation-states and why we have it at all, notions of community building and identity and the power it has, and what comes of the rubric of religion. I am fascinated by the movements, and by the forms of ecological protests – sort of New Age protests – against the destruction of the environment, and the similarities between them. So even though my feet are grounded ethnographically in the Jewish world, my

interests, or the lens that I train on this world, comes from elsewhere. That's me! And I'm not converted yet!

[Laughter.]

Agi Veto: We need people like you, we really do.

LK: Even though it's my Jewish soul that's enjoying it!

Maria Hoehn: We have three non-Americanists here. We all just sort of landed here, right?

AV: I was born non-Jewish [according to the Orthodox definition]; my dad is Jewish, my mom is not. So I was very much intrigued by the Jewish thing, and I decided when I was twenty that I really should convert, though I didn't convert for ten years. I guess my intellectual interests came because I felt that I was close to a world that I was not in, or had one leg in… And that made me very curious about it. I didn't mean to approach the Talmud or Rabbinics in a religious way. I was curious about religion, but not being religious. And so I guess that's why I ended up in Jewish Studies.

TF: So that came before you converted, then? The intellectual interest?

AV: Yeah.

MH: I'm another one, who comes from the Old Country! I come from Germany so for me, of course, that's been one of the central questions growing up – what happened in my country? But when I decided to go to graduate school, I was going to do everything but Nazi Germany and the Holocaust! I just did not want to deal with it. At the same time, it was amazing for me because living in Germany; of course it was very difficult to encounter Jews. In the 1950's and 60's, it was a very, very small community. Coming to America and meeting so many Jews was a new experience…and having more normal relationships with Jews, people who I knew, and who were friends. Because I was born in 1955, right after the war, nobody talked about it, and it was just – the Jews are gone.

And I had to literally come to America to discover the Jews of Germany, and it was very interesting for me. Of course I've become sort of obsessed. I remember coming here and reading about settlers, and orthodox, and Ultra-Orthodox, and I thought, "Oh Jews are academics! And they all live in New York!"

Leah Varsano: Do you feel that it's more difficult to teach Jewish Studies for someone who isn't Jewish, or who doesn't have a yeshiva background? Is that an extra obstacle to overcome?

LK: It is a lot of catching up to do! It's not just about learning the language!

AV: If you don't have the yeshiva background, you have to learn a lot.

LK: It's another twelve, fifteen years of learning if you don't have that. It's just so much catching up, it's just unbelievable. But on the other hand, you see things that somebody who is there will never see. Because this is all new to you, and you are coming to it at an age when you're already exposed to other things, so you can see these things, and see comparisons, and you can locate things in a way that people who have grown up in it can never do.

LV: I think that's very interesting, because that's suggesting that those scholars who are relatively new to Jewish Studies do have something significant to contribute in dialogue. Do you see that kind of dialogue happening? Or is it more a case of, "I must educate you, because you must not know."

LK: I don't know, I think there will be more scholars who are not coming from this background… First of all you have a whole slew of people – women scholars – writing about issues that were previously the domain of men. There are more and more women who are being trained in that yeshiva training, and so are able to write. And so you already have, within the field of Jewish people itself, this whole new voice, as it were. And I think there will be more and more people who have none of this background, who are coming from somewhere else, who have no desire to convert, and see this purely as an academic exercise, being able to contribute, and bringing the contribution not just from another discipline, but

maybe from another cultural background too. I think we're at a very interesting juncture. It's sort of like everybody's teenagers, going through a real identity crisis!

TF: Are there complexities that arise when diverse groups of students are taking Jewish Studies classes? Does that change the way that you teach the class? Should a class be taught differently if the students are all Jewish compared to if the students aren't [all Jewish]?

AV: No.

MH: Absolutely not.

LK: Actually, for me – *[laughs]* I'm interested in Jewish Studies as an anthropologist. In graduate school, I was interested in it because I saw similarities to it in the country that I was coming from. But I find that when teaching Jewish Studies, or at conferences, I always have people who will come up to me and try to teach me what the deal is! Because I'm not Jewish, there is a sense of, "Oh, you couldn't know it," or there's this constant sense of astonishment, this "Why are you interested?" And that's what anthropologists do, or have done for a long time – they go study other people! There is definitely a power hierarchy involved, and I feel that when teaching Jewish students, I have my work cut out for me much more than teaching non-Jewish students because there's all this stuff that needs to be deconstructed, very much like – I'm sure, Agi, you find – teaching Christian students who come to learn the Bible, because they know their Bible back and forth already, and this is how it is! But as an academic, you're having to re-learn all this matter from a very different perspective. So I think it depends on the cultural baggage you come with. I think that does make a bit of a difference. That doesn't mean that I completely change my class, but maybe I will adjust the tone…

MH: But you can't do that if you have a mixed audience, do you know what I mean?

LK: I think very often you can draw upon students' common backgrounds to give anecdotal evidence.

MH: I would be very concerned if I only had Jewish kids in the class. The class I'm teaching now is "Holocaust and Memory in Germany and America," and maybe half the class is not Jewish, and I think that's really good. You know, I would be very concerned if there was only interest from Jews about a topic like that. I think these things are really really problematic, and you need to be so careful. I don't think you can teach completely neutrally, but I don't think I actually think about it. I mean, for me as a German of course, there are moments… I remember my first time ever teaching. I was a TA at Penn, I was a research assistant, and this young woman sat in front of me in class, and she just stared at me the whole time! This went on for two or three weeks, and so finally I said to her after class, "Are you okay? Are you enjoying the class?" And she said, "Oh my God. You're German." I'm very aware of that, and I always ask students to fill out a little card so I know their background. I want to know if they're from a survivor family, or something like that. So that is important for me, that I know that there are students whose grandparents may have come from Germany. But I don't think I'm going to teach differently because I know that.

LV: Do you find that what you teach impacts Jewish students and non-Jewish students differently? Especially you, Maria, because you are teaching the Holocaust, a very emotional and very difficult topic – do you find that it affects your students differently?

MH: I think Jewish students might have the sense that they know it all already because they have heard it, but you can give them a very different angle because of the angle I teach from. I just think that the response to something is much more who you are as a human being. When I take my classes to museums, maybe for some of the students, it's one of the first Holocaust museums they have seen, where maybe the Jewish students have seen many more, and they're going "Okay, one more, let's just move on here." But like I said, I don't see that difference, I just see these human beings in front of me, who come with similar questions.

AV: And I think it would be good if somehow the program could convey to the students, Jewish and non-Jewish, that Jewish Studies is not about being Jewish,

and I think that the Holocaust would be a very good example to convey this idea. Because at the end of the day, if you do say it is about being Jewish, you negate the intellectual content of it. And I think people don't think it through, and many people think that a German shouldn't teach Jewish Studies.

TF: **There is a certain sense of ownership of the Holocaust amongst the Jewish community**, **which may or may not be justified**, **but do you think that complicates the teaching of it? The fact that one group feels they have more ownership of the Holocaust?**

MH: Well I find it very problematic that the Jews own the Holocaust. I teach my Holocaust course from the perspective of the Jews as much as I could as a gentile! But the focus was more on the experience of the people as they go into this tragedy, where of course when I teach it from the German history perspective, it's much more about what's happening at the top, and what's happening at the bottom, from the perpetrator's perspective, which is a very very different perspective. That's what I try to get across to the students, that in that sense, the focus shifts. When I teach in Jewish Studies, of course, I'm much much more concerned about the experience of the Jews in the ghettos, for example. When I teach from the German perspective, I teach about how do these policies with ghettos devolve or how do they come about, who was involved in planning this, which is just a very different perspective.

A full transcript of the hour long discussion, touching on many other topics, is available online, along with an audio recording, at:
http://vspace.vassar.edu/tofox/blackhatpanel.html

Natania Gazek

Being "Religious"

Labels are tricky. Before I spent a semester studying abroad in Israel, I'd never thought twice about answering affirmatively when asked, "Are you religious?" But in Israeli culture, I found that a "religious" person is someone who Americans would describe as an Ultra-Orthodox Jew. As a Reform Jew in Israel, I am considered "secular." At Vassar, it's much less clear what a "religious" person is, but it's fairly obvious that it's not someone you expect to find on campus. At Vassar, I am "religious" because I'm active in the Vassar Jewish Union/Hillel and attend Shabbat services on a regular basis.

The Princeton Review claims that students at Vassar "ignore God on a regular basis." While I find this label misleading, I understand. In my opinion, Vassar students do not ignore God. Rather, we are disturbed and angered by the things that many people do in the name of an entity that they refer to as "God." If the description stops here, I seem to fit in pretty well with the rest of the student body in terms of my thoughts about God. But I think we may generalize our negative opinions about certain religious sects into negative opinions about most monotheistic religions. These sentiments make me feel alienated on campus because I do believe in God and practice a monotheistic religion.

I think the phenomenon of ignoring or rejecting God and religion results from a very narrow definition of what "God" and "religion" is. Ask a Jewish Vassar student if he or she is Jewish, and the likely answer is, "Yeah, but I'm not *religious*." They could mean that they don't follow the Commandments, don't believe in God, or have had negative experiences at their home synagogue. But the one thing they almost surely mean is that they don't want to be identified with anyone who bases political decisions on what religious leaders tell them to do. It appears that being "religious," for many Vassar students, means blindly following a higher power whose existence cannot be proven. While a Vassar student might find it intriguing to study religion as a primitive framework for explaining the world, and as one of the many forces that have shaped society as we know it today, it is very clear to a large number of students that there is no room for a Judeo-Christian "religious" perspective in our understanding of the

universe.

When I arrived at Vassar as a freshman, I found that I got asked if I was "religious" a lot. This might have been because I was actively involved in the VJU/Hillel, wanted to become a rabbi, or because I'm pretty vocal about the fact that I'm Jewish. Before I went to Israel, I was often inclined to answer "yes" because I actively incorporate Jewish tradition and ritual into my life, feel a deep connection to the Jewish community, and believe in God. But I've never wanted to be categorized as someone I'm not, and I often find that when people ask this question they have a preconceived idea about what it means to be "religious." So, if the person asking has the time and patience, I try to explain myself.

According to the paradigms of modern-day Israeli culture, there are two kinds of Jews: religious and secular. The thing about being a secular Jew in a Jewish state, though, is that it's relatively easy to do things "Jewishly" without much effort. For example, keeping kosher in Israel is pretty easy because most

Cushing Parlor Candle Lighting *Golan Moskowitz*

restaurants are certified kosher (if they weren't, they'd lose a lot of business). The week is structured according to the Jewish Sabbath: the weekend is during Friday and Saturday, and the work and school weeks start on Sunday. Most people have family "Shabbat" dinners on Friday nights. Jewish holidays are national holidays. Stores and movies are closed and public transportation doesn't run on Shabbat. Hebrew is the national language. Trendy jewelry comes in the shapes of Stars of David and often has a biblical or kabbalistic verse engraved in it. So a secular Jew in Israel is very often someone who rarely eats pork or shellfish, has Shabbat dinner with his or her family on a regular basis, refrains from work on the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays, speaks Hebrew, and wears a biblical verse around his or her neck. In my experience, an American who fits this profile would not be described as "secular" even if he or she neither believed in God nor belonged to a synagogue.

One of the most difficult things I had to come to terms with in Israel was the consensus among both secular and religious Jews that there is a "correct" way to practice Judaism. The progressive sects of Judaism (Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, etc.) are literally laughed at; they are considered "fake" or "wrong." A religious Jew, in Israel, is someone who practices Judaism *correctly*. These Jews observe all the commandments from the Torah as they interpret them. For example, men cover their heads, wear *tefillin* and study Torah. Women keep their skin covered (married women also cover their hair with wigs or headscarves) and wear ankle-length skirts, never pants. When religious Jews pray in synagogue, women's voices are unheard, their bodies unseen. They cannot touch or read from the Torah or lead *kiddush* or *hamotzi* before a meal (I tried to once but was glared at by a male friend).

I try very hard not to judge this way of life. I have no desire to be a part of it, but I'm not about to call it "incorrect" or suggest that it be eliminated. The biggest problem that I have with "religious" Jews in Israel is that the ones that I met seemed convinced that it was their job to make me one of them by showing me that their way of life is *correct*.

During a visit to the Western Wall, I was approached by a woman who was very eager to find out whether or not I had said the *Shema* yet that day. I said "yes" (I had just done so, actually, though it's not a daily habit for me). She seemed relieved, and then asked whether or not I was married. When I said no, she handed me a piece of paper with a prayer for finding a husband on it. It took

all I had not to break into a loud speech about how problematic her assumptions were. What if I were a lesbian? What if I didn't want to get married?

The rest of my experiences at the Wall were also difficult. I had long been anticipating the time that I would spend absorbing the presence of the remains toward which I had been facing my entire life while praying in synagogue. But I was angered by what I found there. The women's side of the wall has a small room with crumbling walls off to the side where some women sit to pray. When my Dad came to visit, he took a video camera with him inside the equivalent space on the men's side. This vast space has numerous Torah scrolls kept in beautiful arcs, and countless rooms for the men to gather. The women's side is significantly smaller than the men's side, and as a result the women are often crowded against the wall while the men have ample space to sway back and forth while they pray. Women leaned over barriers to watch the activity taking place on the men's side of the wall, unable to participate in the Bar Mitzvah ceremonies of their sons or stand next to their husbands and fathers to experience the holy site together.

I do not identify with these restrictions or the Jewish sects that enforce them, and so my sense of Jewish community was significantly altered when I encountered these inequalities. I no longer feel connected to all Jews across the world and I don't want to be identified as a "religious" Jew if it means that I will be associated with this extreme way of practicing Judaism. In Israel, I learned that it was very important to distinguish myself as a Reform Jew, even if it meant getting laughed at.

In Israel, the way that Reform Jews practice Judaism is not considered "correct" by the majority and thus I am considered "secular;" at Vassar I'm considered "religious" because I'm active in the Jewish community. Either way I feel alienated in some form: in Israel my identity as a practicing Jew is questioned, and at Vassar my identity as a Vassar student is seen to clash with my practice of Judaism. Perhaps this alienation – a theme that seems attached to my Jewish identity – is why I feel that being Jewish is both about having a community with which I am connected through a shared body of texts and about feeling connected to all of humanity through a spark of God within each of us.

Caitlin Burke

Caitlin Burke

Leah Varsano

Bene Israel

Do these look like Jews to you?

Jewish Encyclopedia c. 1900

In fact they are members of the Bene Israel, a large Jewish community that has lived in and around Bombay, India, for over 2,000 years. According to Bene Israel tradition, their community was founded by seven men and seven women who survived a shipwreck in the Arabian Sea and swam to shore. Some say these men and women were fleeing persecution in Galilee in 200 BCE. Others say they were remnants of one of the Lost Tribes from around 800 BCE. Interestingly, a local Hindu myth of origin also involves fourteen shipwreck survivors. Like so many of their other customs, it would appear that the Bene Israel adapted their origin story to match that of the local community, and their true origins

may always remain a mystery.

To outsiders centuries ago, the Bene Israel were hard to distinguish from their Hindu counterparts in the region of Maharashtra. They wore traditional Maratha dress, spoke Marathi amongst themselves, and even incorporated some Hindu concepts into their lives, such as not eating beef. However, they did follow the laws of *kashrut*, circumcision, and Shabbat. Their holidays, although they resembled traditional Jewish festivals, bore Marathi names and involved some rituals unique to the Bene Israel. They possessed no texts and knew no Hebrew, but they did retain the *Shema*, which was repeated numerous times during rituals and important life events. They were known in Maharashtra as the "*Shanvar Telis*" (literally "Saturday Oil-Pressers"), a reference to their occupation as a caste and their practice of refraining from work on Saturdays. They were unaware of the word "Jew."

In the mid 18th century, the Bene Israel came into contact with one David Yechezkel Rahabi, a man from the Jewish community of Cochin, a city further down the west coast of India. This meeting is commonly projected backwards in time by the Bene Israel as occuring in the 12th century, where David Rahabi is thought to be Maimonides' seafaring merchant brother. While Maimonides did have a brother named David who died in a shipwreck en route to India in 1176, it is widely agreed that David Yechezkel Rahabi did not encounter the Bene Israel until the 1700's.

Although the Bene Israel spoke no Hebrew and did not refer to themselves as Jews, Rahabi felt that their peculiar traditions might in fact be Jewish ones. As a supposed test, he gave the women of the community certain kinds of seafood. They dutifully separated the kosher from the non-kosher, explaining what they would and would not eat. Rahabi endeavored to make connections between many of the Bene Israel customs and holidays and Jewish ones, but he discovered that the community was ignorant of certain holidays like Hannukah and Tisha b'Av – holidays developed after the destruction of the second Temple.

Rahabi realized that the Bene Israel had been practicing a form of Judaism from before the destruction of the second Temple, and before the rabbinical development of a more "portable" Judaism, one more suited for post-Temple diaspora life. They had remained so isolated from other Jewish communities that they had been unaware of any of these new developments. Rahabi made it his mission to educate the community on *halakha* and the mainstream practice of

Judaism.

In the late 18th century, Samuel Ezekial Divekar, a Cochin Jew who worked in the East India Company, founded the first Bene Israel Synagogue in Bombay, and much of the community migrated from the countryside to the city. Because of Divekar's connections, many Bene Israel became employed by the East India Company and quickly settled into comfortable, middle-class lives. By the beginning of the 20th century, the community was very successful, mainly because of its involvement with the British. Many of the Bene Israel members had become doctors, lawyers, and engineers, all through the British education system. By the 1940's, the Bene Israel numbered 20,000-30,000 people.

Upon Indian independence in 1947, many Bene Israel were unhappy at the loss of their British colleagues and protectors. With the independence of Israel in 1948, a mass migration of the Bene Israel began. However, they did not arrive in Israel to universal welcome; many rabbis refused to recognize the Bene Israel as true Jews. It was not until the Bene Israel publicly protested their treatment in 1962 that Chief Rabbi Itzhak Nissim investigated the situation, drawing on rabbinic texts, interviews with Bene Israel elders, and consultations with other rabbis. Eventually he declared, "The Jews of Bene Israel are Jews like all other Jews, and there is no basis for disqualifying them." Despite this, the Bene Israel still suffer from discrimination; ten years ago, an Israeli rabbi refused to marry an Ashkenazic man and a Bene Israel woman.

The 5,000 Bene Israel still in India are viewed as Jews; the 50,000 Bene Israel now in Israel are viewed as Indians. It may be some time before their identities will be able to coalesce in one location. In the meantime, the Bene Israel should serve as an example to all Jews of perseverance and devotion to the Jewish faith, and as a reminder of the diversity of Jews in this world.

Mariel Boyarsky

Poughkeepsie, New York
Haifa, Israel

I've been abroad in Israel this entire year. It was the natural place to go to; my parents had instilled in me Zionist values and a love of Judaism. I could hardly have been more excited or secure as I boarded the plane, a full year of Hebrew, falafel, and the Mediterranean ahead of me. But being here for so long, lines have grown fuzzy and beliefs complicated. I still harbor a passion for this country, but it is now the love of something tangible, real, while the feelings I came here with were cloudy sentiments towards an idea, an unrealistic ideal. This has as much to do with my home back in the U.S. as it does with my home here in Israel. This poem is about feeling torn between these two places to which I belong.

The bird belongs to two lands.

She tells herself this as seasons begin
to change, and she prepares for the flight
south. I will be back, she says,
when the flowers are again in bloom.

I've migrated from Vassar College.
Students mill about the quadrangle…
One girl sprawls on the grass
beneath an oak, and
bites into a red apple.
The sun is perfectly angled
so that the stained-glass library
windows pulse with color.

I flew east from a land I love,
and landed in love
with this desert.
My days are swollen with playing shesh-besh
by the pool, smoking nargilah,
and tracking the path of the sun.

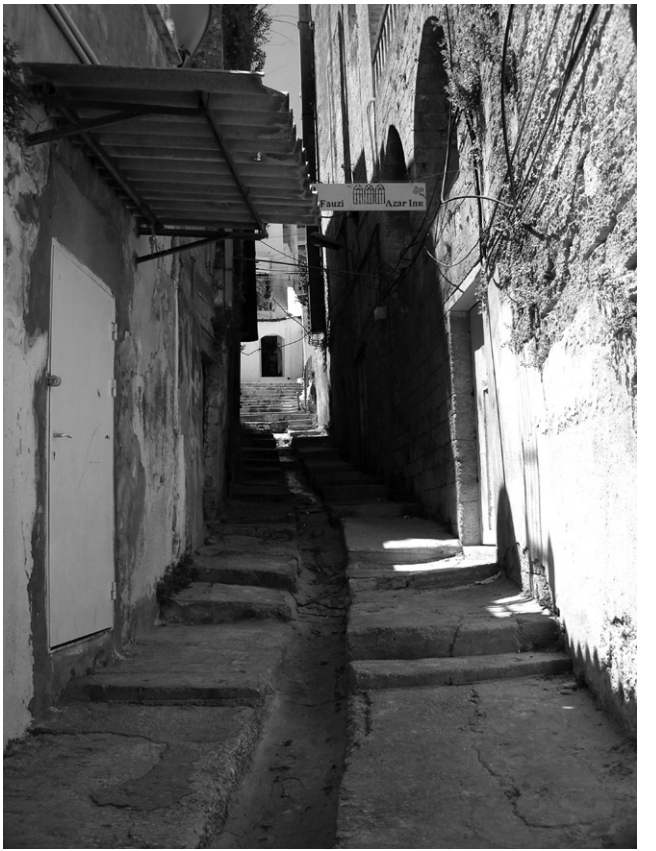
Last Sunday, we took the 46
down to the beach and there it was
suddenly before us
as the bus swung away from clustered buildings

the sea so wide
the e x p a n s e of sky so great
it brought to mind God

who spreads two arms
a great, far distance
and envelops the entire world.

No matter how wide I spread my own arms,
I am still on one continent
when I want to be on two.

Haifa



Nazareth

Toby Fox

Jessica Belasco

Wrestling with Narrative and Context in Deuteronomy

Although it contains a heavy legal component, the Torah is primarily a book of stories. The laws and rituals are presented in a narrative that describes the relationship between God and the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy – at the tail end of a storyline that extends from the creation of the world in Genesis, through accounts of slavery, redemption, and forty years in the wilderness – the Israelites are poised to enter the land of Canaan. But before we reach the tale of the Israelites' conquest of that land, we encounter Moses' sermons. Most of Deuteronomy consists of speeches by Moses recounting the events that have taken place in the previous four books and exhorting the Israelites not to stray from the path that God has laid out for them. In recounting these past events, Deuteronomy presents the Israelites with a coherent narrative about their relationship with God, as well as with a prediction of how that narrative will continue to play out in the future. However, the narrative of Deuteronomy differs substantially from the original account found in Exodus: it has been modified in order to impose a specific moral context and to inform the Israelites of exactly what they should take away from this story. This raises the issue of where to put the line between a meaningful religious narrative and a stifling one: how much should the complexities of real life be smoothed over in order to make a moral point?

In the Torah, telling stories about God's greatness is one of the chief ways of motivating religious belief and religious action. The power of storytelling is evident as early as the book of Exodus, when Moses tells the story of God's deliverance of the Israelites to his father-in-law, Jethro, a non-Israelite. Upon hearing the story, Jethro proclaims, "Blessed be the Lord, who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh… Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods." Moses's story instills faith in Jethro, even though Jethro did not witness the Exodus firsthand.

In Deuteronomy, Moses urges the Israelites repeatedly not only to follow God's laws, but – critically – to continue telling the story of the miracles that God performed for them. Again, this narrative is portrayed as uniquely compelling; as

Moses tells the Israelites, no other story can compare to its glory:

> You have but to inquire about bygone ages that came before you, ever since God created man on earth, from one end of heaven to the other: has anything as grand as this ever happened, or has its like ever been known? (Deut. 4:32)

To further emphasize the importance of storytelling, the Israelites are commanded multiple times to tell the story of the Exodus to their children. In a sense, the very purpose of following the commandments is to prompt people to ask about their origin, thus creating opportunities to recount God's wondrous acts:

> When, in time to come, your children ask you, "What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that the LORD our God has enjoined upon you?" you shall say to your children, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the LORD freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our fathers. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these laws, to revere the LORD our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is now the case. It will be therefore to our merit before the LORD our God to observe faithfully this whole Instruction, as He has commanded us." (Deut. 6:20-25)

Storytelling is clearly important in creating and perpetuating the Israelites' religious system. Unsurprisingly, Deuteronomy presents the Israelites with a story: a specific narrative about their history and relationship with God. This story is an enhanced and modified version of events that are recounted earlier in the Torah itself, in the Book of Exodus. The story presented in Deuteronomy is, essentially: God rescued the Israelites from Egypt in order to demonstrate his power and compassion. The Israelites again experienced God's greatness when he appeared to them at Mt. Sinai and gave them the Torah. Having witnessed God's miracles, the Israelites have every reason to obey the Torah, which is the most perfect book of law ever written. Projecting into the future, if the Israelites do continue to follow God's commandments as delineated in the Torah, God will give them the land of Canaan to inhabit, and they will prosper there. If the Israelites stray from God's commandments, he will turn his back and punish them, but he will always return to them if they return to him. This story, as told in Deuteronomy, is coherent and unified; it contains few gray areas and little room for moral doubt. It emphasizes God's might and kindness, as well as his unique

relationship with the Israelites and the special duties they have as a result.

However, when we compare the Deuteronomy narrative to the original account of the events found in Exodus, we can see that the later portrayal is more of a moralizing tale than an straightforward history. Deuteronomy doesn't just retell the story – it spins the story in a certain way in order to get across a certain point. The most obvious difference, perhaps, between the narratives of Exodus and Deuteronomy is the discrepancy between the two versions of the Ten Commandments. In Deuteronomy, Moses reiterates the Ten Commandments that God delivered at Sinai and that are recorded previously in Exodus. However, while the Exodus version uses God's resting on the seventh day of Creation as the justification for Shabbat, Deuteronomy invokes God's deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians as the reason for the observance. This alternate explanation contributes nicely to Deuteronomy's overall narrative aim, which is to emphasize the connection between the Israelites' redemption from Egypt and

Camel on the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem *Toby Fox*

their obligation to keep God's laws.

Although this alteration of the Ten Commandments may be the most obvious example of the differences between the Exodus and Deuteronomy narratives, it is not the only one. While the Exodus narrative is fairly candid, telling the story without extensive commentary, Deuteronomy is narrated in such a way as to emphasize the lesson that the Israelites are supposed to learn. Moses punctuates his speech with side comments about God's glory, such as:

> For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the LORD our God whenever we call upon Him? Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day? (Deut. 4:7-8)

In addition to these glaring hints about the story's "take-home message," Deuteronomy also glosses over many of the more morally ambiguous episodes found in Exodus. In stressing God's redemption of the Israelites, Deuteronomy ignores many difficult issues, such as the long suffering endured by the Israelites before they are freed from slavery, and the troubling episode with the Ten Plagues and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Deuteronomy also embellishes certain episodes and dialogue found in Exodus, again with didactic intent. For instance, in Exodus, when God delivers the Ten Commandments, the Israelites become fearful and say to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will obey, but let not God speak to us, lest we die" (Exod. 20:16). But when Moses recounts this interchange in Deuteronomy, he makes the Israelites' response much more detailed:

> You [the Israelites] said, "The LORD our God has just shown us His majestic Presence, and we have heard His voice out of the fire; we have seen this day that man may live though God has spoken to him. Let us not die, then, for this fearsome fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, we shall die. For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living God speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived? You go closer and hear all that the LORD our God says, and then you tell us everything that the LORD our God tells you, and we will willingly do it." (Deut. 5:21-24)

The Israelites' reaction to God's speech seems, in Exodus, like one of raw fear and shock: they hear a voice from the fiery mountain, they "fall back" in terror, and they insist, in a panicked cry, that Moses speak to them rather than God. However, in the Deuteronomy version, the Israelites don't just fall back and cower; rather, they proclaim that they have seen God's "majestic Presence," that they have learned that "man may live though God has spoken to him," that

they are the only mortals who are so privileged to have seen God and lived, and that they will "willingly do" what God commands. Thus, in his retelling of the original story, the author of Deuteronomy tries to teach a lesson. Moses's words contextualize the Israelites' fear and tell them how they should understand their experience at Sinai, even if it isn't the way they understood it at the time it happened. This is the story that the author of Deuteronomy wants the Israelites to remember and to tell their children – not how they were slaves, and how they were afraid, but how God redeemed them, and how they had the unique opportunity to behold his majestic presence. Thus Deuteronomy emphasizes the people's recognition of God's power and presents both the people and God in a more perfect light than elsewhere in the Torah.

In a section of her commentary on Exodus "The Particulars of Rapture," Avivah Zornberg examines the tension between what she calls the "master narrative" (of God's omnipotence) and the skeptical "counter-narratives" (of the doubting Israelites and Egyptians). She begins with a discussion of the moral problem of God's causing extended suffering to the Egyptian people by repeatedly hardening Pharaoh's heart. She notes, and dismisses, an argument by Meir Sternberg that these counter-narratives ultimately serve to strengthen the master narrative because the skeptics are proven wrong in the end. Zornberg dislikes Sternberg's explanation (as do I); she calls it "much too totally harmonized." I share Zornberg's focus on the importance of individual narrative, in which revelation, even national revelation such as that which occurs at Sinai, necessarily involves what Zornberg calls a "personal construction of meaning, [an] internal process by which ideas are incorporated." She proposes that the Torah, and particularly the Book of Exodus, provides "narrative opportunities for heretics," chances for them to construct stories that oppose the master narrative of God's goodness and omnipotence. Yet this opportunity for individual narrative and the construction of personal meaning is precisely what Deuteronomy removes when it modifies the Exodus story to force interpretation in a certain direction.

This is what I think makes Deuteronomy the least satisfying of the Five Books of the Torah. The harmonization and the streamlining of the storyline take away from the opportunities to wrestle with the text and to construct heretical counter-narratives. To me, full engagement with ambiguities in text and in life is the only way to construct a meaningful religious worldview. Zornberg expresses a similar idea about dialogue and dissonance when she compares religious experi-

ence to music. She writes that a *niggun* must be "a rhythm that links the jagged edges of experience," and that it must embody "the tension of the struggle between life and death, between falling and rising." I believe that when music (and by extension, religion) truly captivates us, it is because it contains just the right mixture of dissonance and harmony, and therefore it affirms the discontinuities of our lives even as it attempts to draw them together into a coherent whole.

Golan Moskowitz

Rachel Glicksman

Judaism Abroad

Growing up in New York I was always among a community of Jews. All my schools were filled with Jews, Yiddish words were incorporated into everyday speech, and all of my non-Jewish friends were well versed in the Jewish holidays and especially the food. However, when I went to Ecuador, I was asked for the first time in my life to define what a Jew was. During my first day in my first homestay family, when I was asked if I was Catholic and I responded, "no, I'm Jewish," they were completely confused. I was challenged that day, and pretty much every day for the month that I lived there, to not only define Judaism, but to answer questions about the minutiae of my religion, questions that sometimes I didn't know the answer to. I tried my hardest to explain the different holidays: why I would be home late on Rosh Hashanah and why I couldn't eat on Yom Kippur. Although I had forewarned them weeks in advance, when I awoke that day I was asked what I wanted for breakfast, and had to sit through a torturous lunch where everyone else ate and I explained the significance of the holiday. Perhaps the most frustrating part was that I was never able to fully convey the meaning of the holidays, the true significance, and why it was so important to me to not eat on a single day. My host family thought fasting was kind of a cool thing, that perhaps they should do it for a day, and I attempted to explain to them that it was not just about the lack of food, it was about so much more. I think that experience of trying to define the holidays and the significance of them allowed me to realize just how important it was to me to observe them, even if I could never exactly define why.

The second week of my program was Rosh Hashanah, and as one of our directors was Jewish she invited me and the other Jews to go to services with her. After class we rode into Quito and went for a snack, and then my parents called me. My family was sitting around the table eating brisket and *tsimmes* and I couldn't help but feel so far away. Though I loved being abroad, for that one day I wanted to be with them. As they passed the phone around and my mother promised to recreate the meal for me when I was home, I thought about how important the traditions of Judaism are to me. Although I have never been sure

of my views of God, when I went to the synagogue in Quito I felt at home again, in an odd way. Finding the synagogue was another story; no one knew what a synagogue was and when we asked for the "church of the Jews" we got some interesting looks and responses. After a long time of searching we arrived at the bunkered compound, complete with a synagogue, a school, and something that appeared to be a country club with a swimming pool and signs for a fitness center. It was as if all of a sudden I was transported back into the U.S. Many people were speaking in English, the kids had blonde hair, and the cars were fancier than I had seen in the entire country. In an impoverished nation, where it was hard to walk down the streets without having a child ask you for money, it was a shock to enter a world of luxury cars with chauffeurs, bathrooms with marble counter tops and women dressed in the highest fashion. Up in the women's area it was difficult to follow the service, and since we weren't regular members we had to sit in the very back, but I could still hear the familiar prayers and sing the usual songs. I forgot for just a moment that I was miles away from home.

I bought my first host mother a book about Judaism (the only one that existed in the book store) to answer her questions, and after that first homestay I found myself not correcting people when they assumed that my parents were coming to visit me so that we could celebrate Christmas. It just seemed too complicated to go through that whole song and dance. However, I was asked once more, when I stayed with a rural family on the coast for five days, about my religion. This time it was more blunt: my host mother, Aleja, asked me if I believed in him, indicating an image of Jesus on the wall, and I was forced to explain Judaism to her as well. Whereas my other family had heard of Judaism but simply never knew what it was, Aleja had never even heard the word, and it is quite possible that I will be the only Jew she will ever meet. I was baffled at that moment; I knew that there were people who didn't know what Judaism was, but never had I encountered them. So I explained a little, saying that Judaism is what existed before Christianity, that it is what Christ was when he was born. I'm not sure if that explanation worked, and I think that she was a bit confused about who I was, but I would like to think that I broadened her perspective on the world just a little bit, as living with her broadened mine.

My Judaism was challenged during that homestay with Aleja in another way. My friend and I were staying with her in her village of 200 to practice fieldwork methods; however for us it became much more than simply an assignment. We

were viewed as extremely wealthy. Our parents had professional jobs, we both had digital cameras and we had left the country to study. On the first day, while sitting around the breakfast table over a meal of a whole fish served with rice and plantains, we were asked, out of nowhere, if our parents could send some form of *ayuda*, or help. We were asked the same question day after day, and when we left we were even given their contact information so that we could send them something. We told them we would talk to our parents because an outright "no" just didn't seem right. What they wanted was a health center, because the closest one was half an hour's drive away, and when the buses didn't run at night there was little way to get medical attention. They needed $6,000 to build it, a sum of money which, in the scheme of things, is not that much, although we knew it would not be a form of sustainable development to simply send them money. Having been taught the concept of *tikkun olam* from an early age, however, and always firmly believing that it was my responsibility as a Jew to help others in need, I felt guilty walking away from an opportunity to really make a change. I was overwhelmed with feeling so powerful and yet so powerless at the same time. Part of me saw myself dedicating myself to the community of Rio Chico, helping them write grants and proposals, finding doctors and supplies. I have talked to many people about this experience and I know that it is not my fault that they live in poverty, and that I would not have been able to change things much for them, that there are forces beyond my control. But there is still a little voice inside my head that reminds me of my obligation to help others. Though I did not help them directly, I know that the experience there will stay with me forever, and propel my efforts of *tikkun olam* for the rest of my life.

There are about 1,000 Jews in all of Ecuador – less than half of the students at Vassar in a nation of 13 million. In a place where Judaism is such a non-entity I was challenged as never before. I expected to be challenged in my studies and in communication in Spanish, but I didn't expect my religion to present such a difficulty for me. I think that in being in a place so far removed from any form of Judaism and being forced to explain and define my religion and traditions, I realized just how critical to my identity Judaism was.

Richard Bellis

Eitsu, Who Lived in the Fields
(A True Story)

This short piece contains almost everything I know about my great uncle Eitsu. I can count on one hand the times I have seen him, and the brief memories I have of him are very distinct and focused. Working with these bits and pieces of memory and information was challenging and exciting. I tried to string them together so as to convey the tragic and rather bewildering impression I have of his life. Eitsu's story is a story of pure chance, but somehow, oddly, it is also for me a distinctly Jewish story, fitting equally well beside those of Exodus or Portnoy's Complaint. *I tried, too, to avoid sentimentalizing and philosophizing. Getting tossed around by the entropy of life is, I think, how we know we're living.*

Eitsu was the one who lived in the fields during the war.

Elunka, Elza, Shifru, Eva, Eitsu.

Eva is my grandmother, and last week Eitsu was hit by a car on a rainy morning in Brooklyn. These days we have to remind Eva not to speak in Hungarian or else we won't understand her, so we've decided not to tell her that her brother has been hit by a car.

I last saw Uncle Eitsu when my mother organized a family reunion for Grandma's birthday. This was maybe three, maybe four years ago. He and his children drove down from Brooklyn for the day. It was overcast but not terribly cold. I was assigned the task of making tuna fish, although my mother claimed it was unlikely any of them would eat it because it wouldn't be kosher enough, not in our house filled with *trayfe*, with our undivided kitchen sink and my Catholic-born father who never converted. But you can't invite people over and risk running out of food. Hence a bowl of tuna fish, a fitting compliment to the spread we picked up from the kosher section of the supermarket. I was told to keep it simple: tuna and mayonnaise, nothing more. I obeyed, uncanning five cans of tuna fish and pressing down the metal lids with my thumbs so the fish-water drained out, flowing redolently over my hands and down the drain.

Eitsu wore a hat, a white shirt (wrinkled but tucked in), black pleated slacks without a belt, and beaten up brown leather shoes. His socks were navy blue. Hair grew from out of his ears, out of his nose (the nostrils *and* right off the tip of it), and from his eyebrows, like antennae. His eyes were wide and rolling and milky, and when they settled on you they stared you up and down for a few moments before drifting elsewhere. The corners of his mouth were always turned up into a pleasant, almost boyish grin.

To our surprise, everyone partook of our offering of tuna fish. They drank and talked (loudly), and were merry. When dusk came, Uncle Eitsu roused the men in the house, distributed any *siddurim* my mother could locate, and held a *minyan* in our living room. From my mother's repressed smile and a shrug of her shoulders, I knew I had little choice but to don a yarmulke and mumble along as best I could. We turned to face the picture window above the sofa (which after much discussion was determined to be facing Jerusalem). A light drizzle had begun to pepper the curtains with faint dappling shadows. The smashed remnants of the rabbit hutch my father once built still stood visible against the fence in the back of the yard, ivy crawling up its sides since my rabbit died two and half years before. We *davened* for forty minutes or so, and when it was entirely dark they all drove back home to Brooklyn.

Last week my mother's cousin Carol called to relay the news about her father's accident and ask that no one tell Eva because she'd get upset. Carol wears a wig, just like her mother, Muncee, but she also wears heavy foundation and thick eyeliner and has begun to refer to herself as Caroline, ostensibly because there's another Carol in her office.

"It was some maniac Dominican in an old Ford," she tells my mother over the phone.

Eitsu has been in an out of surgery and, though still in the hospital, is apparently in stable condition.

But he is very old.

He spent the war years running and hiding in the fields of Romania, Hungary, possibly Poland, possibly even Germany. How far or for how long is impossible to tell. He ran with a band of Jews like him—that is, in the same predicament of running.

Elunka, Elza, Shifru, Eva,

Eitsu.

He was the only boy in the family so his father sewed money into the lining of his clothes and sent him off.

"Run," he told Eitsu.

And so Eitsu ran.

He ran until he found others running, others with money sewn into the lining of their clothes or stuffed into the hollowed-out soles of their shoes. They ran through tall grass and trudged through river beds and came through places without names but didn't, couldn't of course, stop there. They slept with rats and field mice and crickets and all the nocturnal creatures one imagines might inhabit the shadows of the Eastern European night.

The running must have turned to walking at some point, and the walking must have turned to something quite unlike movement at all. How can you run for four, five, six—who knows exactly how many—years?

When Grandma Eva came out of Auschwitz, she traveled to Sweden and let her hair grow back. She was quarantined outside Stockholm for lice and was later set up with a Swedish family with whom she lived for probably a year or two before contacting her uncle in America, who bought her passage to New York. It was in Sweden, when her hair was growing back (my mother has a picture of her with short but pretty hair, pinned modestly on one side and smiling somewhat absent-mindedly, and the purple stamp of the photographer is in Swedish on the reverse side) that she got in touch with the American Red Cross. The Red Cross was busy throughout Europe helping survivors locate lost family members. Elza and Shifru had survived but Elunka, as Grandma says, "perished."

When Eitsu was located by the American Red Cross in 1945 or 1946, he had no money sewn into the lining of his clothes. He carried only his own weight on his own feet, but he had succeeded, in one way. He was never taken to a camp, never shot, never found in the fields, nor in the side streets, nor in the riverbeds, nor the high places and the low places he ran.

But he carried his guilt.

Eva had a number on the inside of her forearm. It did not go away when her hair grew back, and it has not gone away yet—only faded, gradually, out of focus. Elza and Shifru had numbers too. And very likely Elunka had one until she perished. Eitsu has been carrying his unblemished forearm around with him

the same way he did when he lived in the fields during the war.

He carried it right into that rainy street in Brooklyn.

Elza is very old. She lives by herself in Romania. Her children are grown and no longer speak to her or to one another. One lives in Israel, the other in Canada. One is a doctor, and both are musicians.

Shifru died in New Jersey when I was five years old. She looked like a photocopy of my Grandmother, reduced 10% and with whiter hair. She gave my brother a paperweight with a fake lotus blossom suspended inside an oblong glass ball, which we still have on the shelf of a bookcase in the living room, and I can remember the floor plan of her apartment and the parking lot visible through the lace curtains in the bedroom, even though I only remember visiting her once. (It was on an overcast Saturday and all the lights were turned off).

My grandmother Eva mumbles English, Yiddish, Hungarian into the rooms of the apartment she shares with my quietly reading grandfather in Florida. They like to keep the shades drawn at least part of the way to save air conditioning.

Eitsu was the one who lived in the fields during the war.

He lies in a hospital bed in Brooklyn because last week he stepped into the street on a rainy morning and was hit by a car.

What's Left Behind – Auschwitz

Marissa Mandel

Modern Reflections

Lauren Wyner

The Golan

An old Israeli boyfriend named Omer returned to Israel from Boston for his military service just as the war with Lebanon broke out in the summer of 2006. I decided I would also travel to Israel—his professed paradise—to formulate my own opinion. Once there, I found that no one could agree on anything except that it was beautiful. I wanted to articulate something about Israel and Omer that I still do not fully understand.

Amiel wakes me at seven to leave Hispin.
We get into the jeep and he points to Syria,
the row of white lights not two miles away.

Threat of rain hovers like a stench in the air.
We drive East from the Sea of Galilee
through the Golan,
the plateau blemished with basalt stones,
offspring of retired volcanoes nearby.
Infrequent trees puff up,
tired great-great-grandchildren of forests.

A gray gauze covers the day. Sluggishly,
brown, white, and red-specked cows
bleed through, grazing into vision,
drifting in crowds. Syrian cows
seek out their usual green.

Further North, tall grasses grow through
metal remains of cars, tanks and fences.
Square yellow signs stippling the land
mark the location of Syrian mines.
Cows graze in the minefields.

Omer

Your sunburned hands flecked white with brick
oven burns and sun spots, are sticky at the tips
with pizza, pot, beer, engine grease and gasoline.

Your right palm lands on the ball of the stick
shift and you curl your fingers down one at a time,
starting with the pinky and ending with the thumb

that keeps tapping to the silence between us
as you shift forward to third gear. You drive
without any shoes on, ramming the clutch

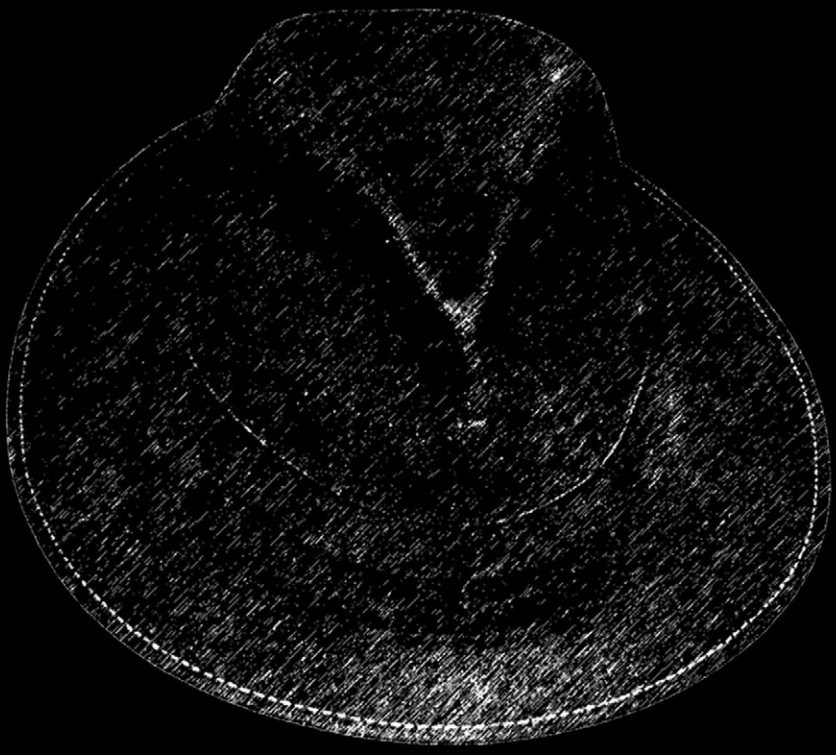
with the ball of your foot until we're up to fourth.
At fifth our eyes meet, brown to browner, and your
lips curve to the right, that side-of-your-face smile;

that same smile in your photos from home, when
you were five years old, a communal child, tossed
from adult to adult like a bundle of wheat.

You shift down a gear and I see you, a five year-old
learning to clutch and shift a tractor in a kibbutz
in the northern Negev. Did you speed even then,

before paved roads, back in the desert, before I was
your passenger, sixteen, needing to get home before
seven in the morning when my father always wakes?

You turn to me, ignoring the carless road, noticing
my hands gripping the seat cushion. You tell me
I don't need my seatbelt, you've almost got me home.



(black hat)