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The Future of the Jewish People in Five Photographs

Peter S. Temes

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The Future of the Jewish People in Five Photographs

Peter S. Temes

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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This book is dedicated to Irving and Eleanor Rempell, and to Lloyd Temes. As always, Judy Temes has been my first and most exploited audience, and my partner in reflection.

Many teachers and wise men and women have helped me think through the ideas presented here. Rabbis Fred Greene, Irwin Kula, and James Prosnit deserve special thanks. My dear friends Ilan Stavans and Uri Cohen have been rabbis of another kind to me as well, and I thank them most sincerely.

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Eyeh Asher Eyeh

As a boy in Brooklyn, I discovered early on that each of the subtribes and microcommunities in my Jewish world had its own approach, distinctive and richly flavored, to the past. One collection of stooped uncles (most of them actually *uncles* of my uncles) was always neatly dressed for business in dark wool jackets and ties, smelled of a range of tobaccos, and would stand around in modest family-gathering living rooms holding plastic cups of seltzer and talking about the war or the family's departure from Russia or some recent business misadventure. They would quickly get to the point of *what really happened*, emphasizing the "really." "What *really* happened?" one of them would say to close a question just as it was opening. "I'll *tell* you! It was *enough*! So it's *over*. And that's *it*."

From another branch—this one hailing from Poland instead of Russia, a bit more urban and educated—came an entirely different emphasis: "What *really happened*," these taller, trimmer storytellers would say, stretching the "happened" into three or four words' worth of open vowels, "if I can *remember*"—another looping pretzel of sound—"was kind of a *mess*."

The Jewish look back, reluctant but irresistible to these old men and women who had lived through the worst of the twentieth century, felt to me like a boundary the old Jews of my childhood could not quite get past. Of the many qualities

of grief in their intonation—no matter how jocular or generous they might be, they could never hide that grief—one certainly came from knowing that their shared past kept them from the full embrace of the most fundamental Jewish task, the task of looking forward.

Most of us wonder about the future, of course, and not only for the pleasure of imagining ourselves years from now, reinvented perhaps or happily the same. We also have vital questions—Will we be safe? Will we be happy? Will we be good?

When we turn specifically to the future of the Jewish people, we do more than play the game of imagination, and we carry more than the weight of prudent anticipation. The future is a special concern of Jewish people. When Moses climbed Mount Sinai and stood before the burning bush, he asked, “What shall I tell the people is your name?” The Hebrew answer to that question—*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*—has been translated in many different ways. Memorably, the voice of God in the epic film *The Ten Commandments* says, “I am that I am.” That translation from the Hebrew began with the first Greek version of the bible, from the third century BCE, a translation carried forward in many of the most widely read English-language bibles ever since. But the literal Hebrew in the original is different. The words are in the future, not the present, tense. God tells Moses his name this way: “I will be who I will be.”

The center of Jewish religious experience is, in fact, the God who is unfolding, who is in the process of becoming. That is what we worship. And so as we sit in our rooms today and ask, “What will become of the Jews?” we are not talking about something beside or beyond the core of Jewish teachings. A central lesson of the Torah is that God is present in every place, in every moment in all the world, above

us and beside us. If we reflect on the name of God—“I will be who I will be”—we see that the future is the very essence of Jewish religious experience. For all the emphasis on the thousands of years of tradition and for all the teaching about Jewish history, it is the *becoming*—not the remembering—that the Jewish God identifies with most. When we seek the divine in our lives and in the lives of others as Jews, we seek a quite specific kind of divinity. We seek the future.



The five photographs that, taken together, serve as the organizing principle of this book hint at possibilities of that future, possibilities hopeful and inspiring but also challenging and troubling.

The first two photographs ask us to consider the difference between religious experience and the countable facts of demographics. Does it matter whether there are more or fewer Jews? Is it perhaps more important to consider *how* we are Jews, rather than how many? Perhaps a single deeply, properly, powerfully *Jewish* Jew would mean more than a hundred or a million Jews who could all check the “I’m Jewish” box but do little more. Or does that emphasis on individual spiritual experience lead us away from the communal essence of Judaism? (The one-great-Jew theory, my friend Rabbi Irwin Kula insightfully points out, is very close to the story Christianity tells about its own superseding of Judaism, a story in which the one perfect Jew is named Jesus.)

The third photo asks about virtue: Is it enough to fight the good fight, even if we fail? Or must we win? Put another way, to what degree ought the Jewish people, in our efforts to help heal the world, keep our own status and well-being in mind, rather than pursuing virtue fully, at any cost? Golda Meir offered one answer to this question when she reportedly said to

Anwar Sadat, “We can forgive you for killing our sons. We cannot forgive you for forcing us to kill yours.” To heal the world—to do the work that Jews must do—first Jews must survive, she suggests, even with a loss of innocence and a loss of virtue that we find bitter and that diminish us spiritually. This balance between survival and virtue remains one of the most contentious questions about Judaism across the world. How we answer it as individuals affects our families and our communities. How we answer it as a people affects whether there will be very many Jews at all a few generations forward.

The fourth photo extends these questions about virtue to the role of Jews governing a Jewish state and asks about the exercise of practical power as a special challenge to all that is best about religion.

And the last photo asks about the difference between the meaning we *put in* to the sacred Torah scrolls through our worship and the meaning we *take from* those scrolls. As we gather to read, to hold, and to cherish the Torah, are we encountering a set of stories and commandments that are complete in their own terms, that we are to understand and obey, or are we entering into a dialogue with the Torah, interpreting and reinventing it as our communities grow and change?

It would be enough for many Jews if these scrolls were our source of power and faith because in them we can find our fathers and mothers, Moses and Sarah, the Jews of Egypt and the Jews of ancient Israel. And as we consider the scrolls as objects, as the pillars of worship through past centuries, they hint at the lost Jews of a hundred nations: the Jews cast out of Spain, the Jews of Poland, the Jews of the camps. Our families, for generations, have poured so much into the scrolls through their worship. Even if the scrolls were empty, even if the scrolls were entirely outdated or simply wrong in their

teachings, they would still hold enormous and irreplaceable meaning built by every pair of hands that has ever held a Torah.

But from another perspective, this meaning is merely a beginning, barely approaching the essence of the Torah, which taken on its own terms is nothing short of God's presence touching our lives and forming the substance of the world.

Focusing on what we put in to the Torah offers a tolerant and expansive view of Jewish identity—if not quite man creating God, then at least men and women making choices about how God and Jewish identity suit them. It allows the richness of Jewish tradition, the comfort of Jewish affiliation, and an embrace of Jewish history, without demanding submission to God or in fact much else. The contrasting perspective brings with it the power and wonder of divinity, but it also closes many doors. The final photo forces us to consider which of these alternatives holds a better future for the Jewish people, or perhaps which will allow any long-term future at all. And it might suggest, hopefully, the prospect of the integration of these two alternatives, a making whole of otherwise separate extremes. “The reason God gave us two tablets,” one rabbi recently told me, “was to give us the job of integrating them and making them into a single, usable whole.”



The relatively happy circumstances of Jews in America over the past several generations have allowed many—perhaps most—American Jews to answer all of these questions without conceding the fundamental choices and compromises that they will eventually demand. We have been able, more or less, to be in favor of strength *and* virtue. We have been able to say that we accept the Torah on its own terms, and

also reshape it to fit the lives we lead. We have been strong voices in helping others, from the American civil rights movement to the moral catastrophe in Darfur, while not failing to help ourselves.

But the nature of the challenges to the Jewish people is clearly changing. The demographic engine of intermarriage and assimilation is no longer a prediction but a long-established fact. The moral compromises of occupation and coexistence in Israel are today starker and more closely watched by world powers, established and emerging, than they have been in at least a generation. The forces driving Jewish continuity in the home and in the world at large are in many ways weaker than they have ever been, while the private and public pressures *against* Jewish continuity seem to be gathering force.

One economist, a professor at an Ivy League university, presented the challenge to me this way: “Reason won’t support the Jewish future. If you think like an economist, you see that the incentives for being Jewish, in practical terms, are much smaller than the incentives for becoming part of the dominant religion in the larger community most of us live in. It just makes more sense not to be Jewish in any kind of serious way, and the exit door is wide open, with nice-seeming people saying, Come on, we love you, step through this door. So it’s not reason that will keep Jews Jewish. It has to be faith. We don’t just have to *know* that we’re Jewish; we have to *feel* it.”

THE FUTURE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE
IN FIVE PHOTOGRAPHS

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How Does It Feel?

The feeling of being Jewish in the United States has never been simple, or fixed. It's astonishing, in fact, how different being Jewish has felt generation to generation in the places I've lived.

Two of my great-grandparents—my mother's grandmother, called Bubu, and her husband Jamesie—were typical of their generation, arriving in New York shortly after the turn of the century as teenage immigrants in the crowded, cobblestoned streets of New York's Lower East Side, a Jewish ghetto of tightly packed tenements. Men and women dressed in the black jackets and long, coarse skirts of eastern Europe filled the sidewalks. Half the goods to be bought in the area—fruit, pickles, fish, clothing, pots, and pans—were sold from wooden pushcarts; the rest, from storefronts with Hebrew lettering spelling out Yiddish words over every other shop, English woven through for the sake of clarity in some cases and confusion in others.

They had met as children in Poland and fell in love as young adults in New York. Married, they moved to the West Bronx, another Jewish ghetto though less dense, with cleaner streets and a cheap apartment with more rooms for a family

that would include four children. Every neighbor was Jewish; every store in their neighborhood served a Jewish clientele; and Yiddish and English and Polish—to say nothing of Latvian and Russian and Romanian and Hungarian and Czech—gave the public spaces a linguistic tumult distinctly Jewish, distinctly eastern European, and distinctly American.

Bubu (her name a variant on the Yiddish word for grandmother) and Jamesie (his American name born of his habit for describing any object he could not say in English a “Jim-jick”) never went to *shul*. “Never. Not once,” my mother recalls. But the shul they did not go to had a pariticular character. They were not avoiding an airy suburban temple, as I might today, or a communal hub sanctioned by a Polish governor and supported by a tax levied on all Jews in the district, as their parents might have. They failed to attend a specific kind of shul—small, presided over by a rabbi who had likely traveled from Lodz or Minsk or Krakow with a knot of townsmen and their families, renting cheap space for cramped services in Hebrew shaped by the inflections of dialect Polish and local Yiddish. They didn’t attend, but they would have heard the language of this worship, would have heard of the rabbis, would be known by their neighbors not to attend—just as the majority of their new American Jewish neighbors did not attend.

They were consciously nonworshipping Jews, but they were Jews absolutely. And being Jewish felt like being part of a nation within a nation. Jamesie was a waiter, always in New York’s Lower East Side kosher restaurants. If he had to defend his habit of abstaining from worship, it would most likely be over the sabbath dinner table with relatives or at a Passover seder. If he didn’t say the prayers, he certainly knew them.

And Bubu, who did not work outside the house, cooked

every day and for every holiday meal—every *Jewish* holiday meal. They both spoke English with heavy accents, and they went to Jewish doctors, Jewish grocers, Jewish bakers, Jewish weddings, Jewish celebrations of the birth of a new son (the bris always held on the eighth day of life and including the ritual circumcision to affirm the child's place in the Jewish covenant with God).

What did being Jewish feel like to them? It must have felt like a life raft, something to cling to in the sea of American culture, a way to trust the local merchant and a common bond with the man who might offer you a job. It must have sounded like the intonations of a family dialect and tasted like food at a ritual dinner hinting back at generations of continuity, all offering some degree of comfort even in a radically new place.

My grandmother—daughter of Bubu and Jamesie—and my grandfather were both born here, and both witnessed as children the social realities of the Great Depression. My grandfather, seventy years later, would weep as he recalled seeing neighbors go hungry. For this generation, the feeling of being Jewish involved more choices. Like their parents, my grandparents too avoided worship; and like their parents, they also lived in a thoroughly Jewish world. Still, they ventured outward in ways their parents did not.

In the 1920s and '30s, they were the first generation in their families to attend public schools, schools with mostly Irish and Italian and Yankee teachers, mostly women. Poor performers, then, were firmly asked to leave school—to go find work, which was legal in the 1920s and '30s for even the youngest children. As they grew older, my grandparents became aware of the edges of their Jewish identities in ways that their parents, firmly fixed in the Jewish immigrant world for work and play and politics, were not. My grandfather

became a union organizer on the docks, cheek by jowel with Irish and Italian unionists (and antiunionists). My grandmother and her sister joined the Earl Robinson People's Chorus, an interracial singing society dedicated to progressive politics as seen through the lens of the American Communist Party. My grandmother, finishing high school, went to work as a clerk at a public hospital, working with every variety and persuasion of New Yorker imaginable.

My grandfather, having bitterly left school at sixteen to help support his parents and siblings, agonized over whether to join up with the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the International Brigade, to sneak into Spain and fight against Francisco Franco's Fascists, along with two thousand other American Communists and Socialists, many of whom were Jewish and many of whom were not. To be Jewish, he felt, was to have a conscience, to fight for what you believed in, to strike a blow on every occasion possible for the man on the bottom of the pile.

He stayed in the Bronx, adding his paycheck to his family budget, while his best friend went to Spain and died. Forty years later, he and I played a game of paddleball—a game I've only ever seen played in New York—in the park near our homes in Brooklyn. My mother had moved out of her family's upstairs apartment on Exeter Street to settle with my father in a home on Coleridge Street (the blocks in my neighborhood ran alphabetically, named after the schools and poets and shires of England). My grandfather always wore a bulky ring, the metal forming a knot across the top, and he had put it in his pocket before we began our game of slapping a hard, black ball against a single, stark concrete wall with wooden paddles not too distantly removed from cutting boards. Then he stopped. He'd lost his ring. He searched for half an hour, not panicked but deeply troubled. The ring had been his friend's gift before going to Spain. He told me a little

about his friend and the cause in Spain, but his mind was on the ring; his feeling of loss was almost overwhelming.

The ring reminds me that for much of my grandfather's generation in New York, being Jewish meant being part of a small world nested in a larger one. Being Jewish in his time and place meant a Bronx Yiddish tone to his English and a street around the corner with a kosher butcher, a hat shop that sold yarmulkas, and an appetizer store specializing in herring and pickles; but it also meant a more engaged kind of politics, life in public schools, and unions. It meant certain songs, as well as language and foods and neighborhoods. None of these flavors and feelings of Jewish life for him were simple, and many remained painfully incomplete. He'd loved his American school but had to leave. And he was never sure he had made the right decision about Spain. The waterfront union to which he devoted a decade of his life—and some of his blood—was a triumph, but also a failure: wages went up, the workweek went down, and workingmen claimed a strong voice, but the union was soon notoriously corrupt, eventually the subject of the film *On the Waterfront*.

In the next generation, things were very different. For my parents, many of the hinted promises that the prior generation had heard were unequivocally fulfilled. Their generation of Jews, born in the decade before the Second World War, by and large stayed in the public schools—and in New York they were very good schools. Their teenage years arrived in the postwar boom. Very few felt the economic weight that bent so many of their parents; and after finishing high school, they found public colleges that were putting aside their restrictions against Jews, cost little or nothing, and rewarded the cultural habits of closely reading texts and arguing the meaning of details that Jewish learning had valorized for five hundred years.

My mother's father and my father's father had not attended a traditional Jewish *beit midrash*—house of learning—where the rabbis wandered as referees through small rooms packed with pairs of students facing each other across long tables arguing the textual fine points of Torah and Talmud; but *their* fathers had, and their fathers before them, part of a chain stretching back for generations. What each new generation learned over the dinner table, carrying that culture forward, was strikingly well tuned to the academic machine creating a new postwar American professional class. *Pay attention to the details. Read, and read more. Make your case. Challenge your peers, but respect authority. Argue carefully.* These Jewish habits, carried over from the yeshivas of eastern Europe and the remnants of Jewish Babylon and Spain, helped Jews of my parents' generation feel that large swaths of the world—at least the parts of the American world most of them lived in—would reward them for their work, not only in spite of their Jewishness, but in some ways because of it. While the horrors of the Holocaust cast their shadow over this generation—I can recall my father crying after he helped carry my Hungarian father-in-law's casket, later saying that he was so moved by the privilege to bury a survivor, “at least, one that Hitler didn't kill”—the very darkness of Europe would highlight for many the pure good fortune of being Jewish in America instead of being Jewish anywhere else. That they might have been something else in America certainly did not occur to my parents, though they too seldom went to shul.

My parents were both born in Jewish neighborhoods—real American ghettos with Yiddish still in the air, close quarters, and stores that people from other neighborhoods seldom shopped in and would have found hard to understand:

Barrells of pickles? Tongue sandwiches? A store window full of *tallises*? But when my mother was a teenager, her parents moved from the Bronx to the far side of Brooklyn, near the ocean. Their younger daughter, my mother's only sibling, often had trouble breathing, and her doctor prescribed ocean air and less crowded streets. My grandparents moved to the upstairs apartment in a private house. The neighborhood had been built originally as a summer colony for Manhattan's wealthy. By the time my grandparents arrived with their two daughters, it too was a thoroughly Jewish neighborhood but with a broader range of Jews than they'd lived among before. It remained a ghetto only as a matter of religious demographics: it was a prosperous place, Jewish doctors and Jewish lawyers living beside schoolteachers and shopkeepers who had spent perhaps a little more on their homes than prudent; though, even there this generation had the wind at their backs, as the extraordinary rise in New York real estate beginning in the 1970s led many to think themselves small-time financial genuises. My father was one of the schoolteachers; his friend Marty across the street was another. Both earned PhDs at night, course by course, their incremental bumps in pay with every new credit completed outpacing the cost of graduate school tuition and adding up over time. When my parents bought their small home in 1968, my mother didn't work. The family already included two children and would soon add a third. They paid \$38,000. Forty years later, my mother sold that house for \$1.2 million.

Being Jewish in my parents' generation was a complex feeling. They were still outsiders in some ways—and more so in some places than in others. But as their world changed, as education became the vital passport to the middle classes and as the middle classes prospered as they never had before,

as the material benefits of being an American in the middle of the twentieth century became more and more clear, being Jewish took on a new dimension. In some ways, it felt *lucky*.

My father certainly felt this luck, in fact all too much. I can remember gratitude and wonder in his voice when he sat on the couch in the upstairs apartment my wife and I rented in the Brooklyn neighborhood where my parents both still lived—each in their own house, though, after their divorce; my mother was in the family home from 1968, and my father in the house he bought in 1979 (he bought it for \$125,000 and sold it in 2000, for \$1 million, still lucky).

“Can you believe it?” he asked, as a room full of us took a break from admiring my new baby daughter, the first of the nine grandchildren my sisters and I would eventually raise in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Florida. “A guy like me,” my father continued, “can take \$50,000 and turn it into \$1 million.” He was talking about a real estate deal, the largest in a series of smaller ventures that had taken the equity in his house and his share of my mother’s and parlayed it all into ownership of a thirty-family apartment building, home mostly to welfare recipients, a few blocks south of a trendy neighborhood whose borders were stretching in that direction seemingly month by month.

My father was going to sell the apartments as co-ops. He was already counting the money. This was 1988, and the real estate bubble that had multiplied his net worth unstopably through the 1970s had already begun retreating from its peak, though few as yet understood that, certainly not my father. “No one,” he had told me a few years earlier, as he was beginning to borrow on his homes to buy small investment properties, “has ever lost money on real estate in New York.” Even as a teenager, I had a pretty good feel-

ing that he was wrong. Years later, we could remember that remark around a holiday table and toast my father with a warm smile: “Here’s to the first man who ever lost money on real estate in New York.”

And he lost a lot of it—all he had, in fact, though by then he was not nearly as broken by his financial reversal as he might have been earlier. After my parents divorced, his net worth still rising, I helped my father move into an apartment over a shop in a small apartment building he had bought on the edge of our neighborhood. It had been a low-income building—a genuine dump—for generations, and he took pleasure making himself at home there. “I really don’t need much,” he told me. “Money is for the family. And look at you, you’re all doing great.” His emphasis on family was certainly a mark of his generation of American Jews, though my parents’ 1970s divorce was one as well.

I asked my father once, when I was in high school, why he had become an engineer. “I wasn’t smart enough to be a doctor,” he told me. “And an engineer was the next best thing to make a good living.” I was stunned to hear that. My thoughts about the future were all about finding a calling, doing meaningful work. Making a living—something I took for granted—was not part of my calculus. It was striking to think that it had been the entirety of his. Money was not suspect as a motive for my father because he had learned that money, at its essence, is family. It was what a good father used to build a wall to protect his wife and children, to give them choices, and to make them all strong.

All this he understood as Jewish, but Jewish in a special way—certainly not religious. Once, he told me, “You have to understand why I love Puerto Rican people so much,” and this was at a moment in the history of our city when Puerto Ricans were often maligned and the Puerto Rican gang movie

The Warriors—really a decline-and-fall-of-New-York propaganda film—had just come out, its action taking place two neighborhoods away in Coney Island. My father said, “I love them because when I was a kid, Jews were Puerto Ricans.” Look at the jobs these people have, he would tell me, look at how hard they have to work, listen to the accents, notice how other people treat them. In his childhood, Jews played a similar role. Even my father’s English had a slight hint of Yiddish to it, and the older men and women in the neighborhood of his childhood had heavy accents. Jews were normal citizens in their own buildings, their own streets, their own shops; but they were keenly aware of being outsiders elsewhere. Some jobs were off-limits. True, if there were private clubs, restaurants, and hotels that were similarly restricted, they hardly felt it, because when did they go to clubs, restaurants, or hotels? My father’s point was that to look at Jews from an outsider’s perspective in the 1940s must have felt a lot like looking at Puerto Ricans in the 1970s. Perhaps the elders didn’t think much about their role in the larger public life of the city and country because they were so fully engaged in their families’ survival, but their children certainly would. For my father, being Jewish felt in the end like being a winner, but he understood that the game kept on and others deserved the same chance to fight and win as well.

Yet, for my father, feeling Jewish had almost nothing to do with feeling the presence of God. Going to shul was an experience in nostalgia for him. He took me on two occasions to an ultraorthodox shul when I was a boy, and I did have a bar mitzvah. But we rarely went to temple otherwise.

My mother’s experience was different. Like her parents, she’d been inside synagogues only for family functions, and she seldom thought of Judaism as connected to God. Like her parents—and my father—she felt thoroughly Jewish. Yet

when she divorced at forty, she told her friends that she hoped her next husband would be like Mr. Rogers, the children's television host. I don't think she recognized that Fred Rogers, a Christian minister, was about the most distinctly un-Jewish man one could find. Her second husband, in fact, turned out to be a tall, trim, soft-spoken Christian from Iowa. He was a kind and dedicated husband and precisely the man you'd want central casting to send over if your principal need was "not a Jew." Yet my mother felt something in Judaism that her parents and my father never really did. She felt a spiritual tug. She wanted to encounter God.

My parents had both taken the civil rights movement very seriously; and while they were a little old to be part of the 1960s counterculture, they were drawn in small ways to its spirit. Beyond the notable Jewish presence in the movement—beginning with the extant news clips of students dancing the hora during the occupation of a building at the University of California at Berkeley at the launch of the free speech movement in 1963—a strand of underground Judaism was there on the margins and caught my mother's attention. Similar to the Jesus movement that became a small part of the counterculture, the quieter Jewish parallel took the form of a growing consciousness of outside-the-shul worship, and included a strong feminist perspective. A number of *havurahs*—organized worship groups with an iconoclastic feel, often meeting in members' homes—were launched by young rabbis and students, including one led by Art Green near Boston. Green had published an essay in 1968, "Psychedelics and Kaballah," that connected his visions while taking LSD with Jewish spirituality. Green made the connection between radical youth culture and Jewish religious experience in no uncertain terms. *The Jewish Catalog*, a book I recall finding in my living room as a boy, had a similar place

at the juncture of Jewish spirituality and the explosions of alternative culture, consciously paralleling the Ken Kesey–inspired *Whole Earth Catalog*, something of a hands-on how-to guide to alternative living in America.

As a divorced woman, a professional with a career and a home with children growing up feeling that every door in the world might open for them if only they knocked, my mother wanted things her parents had not thought to want. She was not rich but could make the money she and her family needed to live comfortably. She was not politically naive, but she was no radical and took no communal comfort in protest or political struggle. It was being Jewish that held a promise of spiritual community, something she came to value more and more as she moved through her life. She became more reflective, thought more about God, and was an engaged visitor to any number of shuls and temples. She loved the hard-core Orthodox for their passion and the completeness of their faith, but she had no interest in following their rules. She enjoyed Reform and alternative services for their openness and their tolerance. She never joined a new synagogue, and she kept her sense of Jewish spirituality as a private commitment, something to share with friends who felt it too but something apart from much of the rest of her life. She could call on Judaism when she needed it, when she felt pulled to express gratitude or to find refuge and strength; but it made very few demands on her. It was a kind of bonus, laid on top of a largely happy and prosperous life.



I think often about that economist’s comment—that the future of Judaism hinges on how it feels to be Jewish. For me, the feeling of being Jewish has been different at different times—and places—in my life. The Brooklyn I grew up in

was a very Jewish place. Through grade school, being Jewish was the norm. But junior high school, in a building across a footbridge that separated our neighborhood from the rest of Brooklyn, was a place that required a degree of caution. The economic and cultural cleavage that made my friends and I targets of the older, tougher students from other neighborhoods—eighth and ninth graders held back long enough for some to have full beards and blue-collar part-time jobs—fell along religious lines, but it took a while for us to notice. Even college in upstate New York meant a colony largely of young New Yorkers and our cultural cousins from other cities and suburbs. Only as I began to travel for business jobs after college and later as a teacher and lecturer in small towns did I feel far enough from home to understand my Jewishness as a mark of real difference. When I'd visit a college in rural Ohio for example and hear from my host that the FCA really dominates the culture of the campus, later learning that FCA stood for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, I'd wonder how they might interpret my New York vowels and gestures, even my small beard. But one could never know the answers. I keep in mind Jackie Mason's line: I'm not a racist; I don't like you *personally*.



In Connecticut on the edge of the New York City commuting bubble, I drove one night some years ago with my two teenage daughters. We were coming home after a visit to my parents and my sisters, all living now in New Jersey. We talked about how the growing branches of my family are different today, and about how we're similar. We talked about being Jewish, something that my daughters feel in a very different way than I did at their age.

Counting about 20 percent of the population as Jews of

some variety or other, our town is far more Jewish than most of the others in our strip of Connecticut suburbs. That's still a small enough proportion for my daughters to feel that to be Jewish is to be a little bit different. Both of my daughters went to temple, went to Jewish camps, were bat mitzvahed—but each act of belonging has been an active choice that has meant a step away from a circle of school friends or a sports event on a Jewish holiday. Our daughters are now far more learned in Jewish prayer and history than I am because of their studies at Hebrew school and summer camps. They've stepped decisively toward Jewish identity in ways that I—and most of the people I grew up with—seldom had to.

On that car trip, we also talked about what it means to be a rabbi. My younger daughter had been thinking about it as a possible career path. At that moment, I'd been thinking about it too. My life as a teacher of literature and ethics had led me to learn a great deal about Christian philosophy and to encounter a fair number of Christian clerics whom I'd admired. My daughters had heard me say before that, were I a Christian, I'd already be a minister, though as a Jew I thought I would not become a rabbi, because the role of the rabbi is in some ways fundamentally different, with more duty to preserve, defend, and carry forward the faith. That did not sound like me.

But that night on a quiet country parkway, both my daughters challenged me—we think you don't really know enough to say that, they told me. And I decided they were right. That kicked off several months of serious study of Hebrew and Jewish scripture, and about a year later I applied to the rabbinical program at a Jewish seminary. By the time I heard of my acceptance, though, I was already sadly back to where I had started: this was not for me. My sense of Judaism as a spiritual path was exactly that, a path toward the

divine. Because I am a Jew, my path toward God will be a Jewish path, but the universal human experience of divinity is clearly the glowing aspiration. Yet at every step, I found the idea of Jewish peoplehood woven into the spiritual duties of the rabbi and rabbinical student, even to the point of every Jewish seminary in the United States wanting to know the religious history of my wife and her family. Many would not enroll a candidate who had married outside of Judaism. And all the seminaries wanted to know each applicant's feelings about Israel, some quietly making it clear—and some not so quietly—that a commitment to the state of Israel was a requirement. My motive, my sense of calling, was about Judaism as a religion, but there was something more built into the rabbi's role in the seminaries I applied to: the rabbi as a particular kind of communal leader, still playing something of the role of the civic authority that the priest had been in biblical times and that rabbis still played in much of Europe through the early twentieth century as the larger political establishments would cede local governance of the Jews to the rabbis and Jewish councils in exchange for a collective tax and enforcement of often onerous laws of separation and servility.

At that point in my exploration of rabbinical study, being a Jew felt to me like bearing a complicated history on my back. I looked—without success—for a collection of fellow Jews who wished to put down the load while still trying to follow a Jewish path toward God and who also happened to have a rabbinical school.

Later, while driving that same road in Connecticut, I found myself heading home alone one evening after a light snow. My lights lit up the road directly ahead of me but not much farther. Then for a moment I heard the sound of rain, and it stopped. Then came a sharp, green smell: pine tar,

eucalyptus. The snow in front of me became, for a moment, a carpet of green. I saw a thin chimney of steam rising along a tree on the other side of the road, over the barrier. In another moment, it was all behind me. It took me a minute or two of dazed driving, moving quickly away from that dark scene, to understand what had happened. A car had hit a tree. The tree took the hard blow, and the force of it moved up and out along its branches, pine needles shooting out by the thousand, each trailing a drop of green pitch and filling the air with that smell, then blanketing the snow.

I'd passed close by someone else's tragedy, while tasting the sticky pine smell of fresh life. The questions I asked automatically—Am I in danger? What's going on? Can I help?—are certainly not especially Jewish questions, but a moment like this does test us and reveal us. I kept on driving. I didn't panic, but I didn't first think to try to rescue anyone (and was hardly equipped to the task, if I'd wanted to). I came away with a feeling that I should do more. More importantly, I should *be able* to do more. The unexpected illumination of the dangers in the familiar, and the realization that someone might have died that night while I felt able to do nothing more useful than dial 911, told me that I'm too comfortable with my own comfort, so secure and removed from the suffering of others that I should work harder to see the troubled places where I might do some good. I suspect that this feeling might in fact be the most distinctive addition by my own generation to what it feels like to be Jewish.