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THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD TO TEMPLE AKIBA

BY JESSICA DONATH



Cover: Photo by Jay Jacobs.

Above: Photo by Jessica Donath.

THIS IS THE story of how BCC came to hold High Holy Day services this year at Temple Akiba. Like Jewish communities around the country, BCC was ecstatic that after two years during which we could only gather on Zoom, we could meet this year on our holiest days in person. But how? And where?

During the pandemic, our former hosts at Temple Isaiah discovered that they wanted to use their space for their services at least some of the time. Another complication was that Rabbi Jillian Cameron, High Holy Day chair Nicolasa Nevarez and I had zero experience organizing in-person High Holy Days for BCC. We found ourselves “homeless” and out of practice. (Cantor Juval Porat and others who had done it before made themselves available to answer questions and help.)

As executive vice president of BCC, I worked with

Rabbi Jillian to search for our new home away from home. As any self-respecting member of a millennial-adjacent generation would, I started Googling. I found some, shall we say, unusual alternative locations like an abandoned power plant at the beach.

Correspondence with a couple of more traditional event spaces amounted to nothing. The rabbi and I developed a list of criteria our new space would have to meet. It had to be geographically at least as accessible as Temple Isaiah; it had to have a place for our Torah scrolls; it had to have comfortable seating, a place for breakout sessions and luncheons, live streaming capabilities, and space for child-care services.

Based on this list, my initial favorite was the rooftop deck at the Los Angeles Coliseum. As a Trojan, I was excited about returning to my alma mater for the High Holy Days



Above: Photo by Jay Jacobs.
Below: Photo by Jessica Donath.

— until I spoke with a cheerful USC hospitality representative who was thrilled to offer BCC a non-profit discount, which brought the price down to \$11,000 per day. Oy!

I realized that such unique locations might not be the way to go in our first post-pandemic year. At a meeting of the Vision Awards Committee, someone mentioned Reverend Troy Perry of MCC, who was instrumental in getting the fledgling Jewish group that later became BCC off the ground. I thought to myself, “wouldn’t it be nice to return to MCC, where it all began?” Granted, it would be a primarily spiritual return since MCC has occupied at least six

different buildings since the handful of Jews attended a rap group in one of the basements. Still, it would nonetheless be meaningful to be able to say that BCC, in its 50th year, is holding High Holy Day services at MCC. A few days later, at a different meeting, Mike King shared that BCC used to gather at Temple Akiba for the High Holy Days before moving to Temple Isaiah. With all the dance studios, abandoned power plants, and Hollywood Hills mansions ruled out, MCC and Temple Akiba emerged as the favorites.

After several Zoom calls with representatives of both and site visits with and without the rabbi (and, in the



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Right: Photo by Elise Zimmerman.
 Below: Photo by Jessica Donath.

case of MCC, the rabbi and the rabbi emerita), Temple Akiba won. Those who attended in person know that it fits our needs like a glove. The sanctuary isn't too big or too small. It's bright and airy and feels welcoming. The chairs have just the right amount of padding.

From a production standpoint, the only downside was the retractable video screen in an awkward position, blocking half the bimah. Temple Akiba graciously allowed us to spread out so that we could serve the Rosh Hashanah luncheon outside and the break fast in the social hall. Everyone, including the maintenance and security staff, went above and beyond to make our first High Holy Days experience pleasant. And we only had to send a couple of errant Akiba members to their temple's location a mile down the street!

The sermons, the music, the rituals, and the community coming together after so long were amazing and special (and no doubt would have been amazing and special in any location). And I'm excited that we have

only received positive feedback about Temple Akiba, which I take to mean that we won't have to search again next year. We have found BCC's new home away from home.



THE GRUDGES WE BEAR

BY RABBI JILLIAN CAMERON

Drash delivered at Temple Akiba on Yom Kippur morning, 10 Tishrei 5783 (October 5, 2022)

A 2014 YOUNGpoll found that 13% of Americans were still holding a grudge against England for opposing their independence in 1776.

Just to put that in perspective, 13% of Americans in 2014 is 41 million 340 thousand people.

Still mad at England!

A friend told me this story about her Aunt Jeanette: I loved my Aunt Jeanette. She used to take me and my siblings to Kiddieland on North Avenue in Chicago. She would be there waving as our rides went around and around. Aunt Jeanette was fun.

And Aunt Jeanette told the best stories. And we listened intently to each one. But as I got older I noticed that there was an odd tone to a couple of her stories, especially the ones about her sister Tanya, who lived in Greece.

Somehow when Aunt Jeanette talked about Tanya, her facial features changed. Once, she told us about a pair of white shoes that she desperately wanted when she was a young child and just needed \$1.00 to buy them and she asked her sister Tanya.

“But did she give me the dollar? No. She wouldn’t do it.” Aunt Jeanette complained, with her face pinched.

As an adult, hearing the story about the dollar, I once asked, “Will you ever forgive her for that?”

“Forgive her?” She said loudly, “Never.” And there was that look again. That bitter look.

As far as I could tell, Aunt Jeanette carried that story to her grave.
One dollar. It was just one dollar. ¹

It might be easy to brush that story off, how silly of Aunt Jeanette, a lifelong grudge over just one dollar! But then we realize that most of us have our own Aunt Jeanette story or something similar. Perhaps it’s something smaller like a single dollar for a pair of shoes 40 years ago or perhaps a bigger betrayal,

¹ <https://medium.com/publishous/how-one-grudge-holder-learned-how-to-forgive-d2506aa1252c>

a loss of trust, of faith, something that forced you to change direction or become a little more guarded, something that just plain hurt and when you are

reminded of that moment or that person, you are transported right back however long ago, the pain still fresh.

Simply defined, a grudge is a negative feeling toward someone because of something they did or are perceived to have done in the past.

Grudges are real and messy.

The language we use around grudges highlights their longevity. We talk of “holding,” “bearing,” “harboring” and “nursing” grudges. Common synonyms, such as resentment, bitterness, grievance, and malice, indicate other feelings and emotions that may be present to varying degrees. And it isn’t just emotional as our language suggests, it can be very physical, a weight. All that holding and bearing and harboring and nursing can have real physical consequences, not just psychological.

It seems against our own self-interest to hold on to past wrongs, to remain seething, to be unable to move forward. Holding a grudge can become part of our identity, how we recognize ourselves, perhaps even what motivates us, or creates purpose, often for vengeance or revenge, which is of course, the first cousin of a grudge.

This is no modern concept, for we are actually prohibited from bearing grudges in Leviticus. During



our afternoon Torah service later today, we will read this verse from chapter 19:

Lo ti-kom v'lo ti-tor et b'nai amecha,

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people. ²

Rabbi Joshua Samuels teaches,

There are multiple Hebrew words for “grudge”. The first is *satan* which can also mean “to hate” or “cherish animosity” against someone. We see this word used in Genesis 27. “and Esau hated/bore a grudge against Jacob.” We also see this word used in the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 50. “They [Joseph’s brothers] said, ‘It may be that Joseph bears a grudge against us and will fully reciprocate all the evil which we did to him.’”

The other Hebrew word that translates to “grudge” is from the root *natar*, which means “to keep, to guard, to retain.”

This is the root used in Leviticus, *lo ti-tor*, do not bear a grudge, literally, when one holds a grudge, one is keeping alive the memory of another’s offense, guarding it, retaining it.

Our wise sage Rashi explains bearing a grudge in this verse with this example:

If Paula says to neighbor Joel, “Lend me your lawnmower”, and he replies “No!” and on the next day Joel says to Paula, “Lend me your watering can”, and she replies: “Here it is; I am not like you, because I gave you the watering can even though you would not lend me the lawnmower.”

It’s a little bit of an update to Rashi, I admit. But the point remains the same. Rashi calls this bearing a grudge because Paula retains the hostility, the anger in her heart even if she ended up not giving Joel a taste of his own medicine and still offering the watering can. ³

The result seems measured and fair, not vengeful, but the intention isn’t there, the anger in her heart is the motivator, rather than the desire to be helpful, neighborly, a *mensch*.

The rabbis hotly debate grudges attempting to ascertain what is considered a grudge and therefore forbidden by Leviticus 19 and what is not. If someone insults me personally, can I hate them, just a little? For how long? Can I choose not to help them or help them begrudgingly? What if they never apologize? How

long can I be angry if every Yom Kippur while I wait for the apology call that never comes?

The difference between vengeance and bearing a grudge as understood by the rabbis is clear. Vengeance is acting in a retaliatory fashion—I won’t lend something to you because you wouldn’t lend to me.

Bearing a grudge is a verbal withholding. I’ll lend it to you, but I won’t like it and I’ll tell you why.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan commonly known as the *Chafetz Chaim*, a 19th century rabbi and ethicist, came to this conclusion after going through the pages and pages of rabbinic grudge-related what ifs posed by the rabbis of the Talmud. He wrote: “Enough already! One must wipe the thing from one’s heart!”

But how?

Maimonides suggests:

When one person sins against another, [the victim] should not harbor hatred and remain silent. ... Rather, it is incumbent upon them to speak [to the assailant] and to say, “Why have you done such and such? ... If the [aggressor] repents and asks for forgiveness, the victim must forgive. The forgiver must not be cruel.” ⁴

One must wipe the thing from one’s heart!

Here we are, the holiest day of our year, Yom Kippur, a day of repentance, atonement, of turning away from sin, away from bad choices and ultimately a day for forgiveness.

Are we ready?

Atonement, in Jewish tradition, requires accountability. Our tradition teaches that we are obligated to forgive the perpetrator who has apologized and started the hard work of behavioral change, but when those two elements are not present, we have no obligation to forgive. But can we choose, through our own hard work, our own internal struggle and persistence, through the sheer force of our will and intention, through our own *t’shuva*, turning and returning, can we choose to let go? ⁵

There’s an old Buddhist story of two monks traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a woman also attempting to cross. She asked if they could help her.

The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman. Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and continued on his journey.

Two more hours passed, then three, and finally the younger monk could not contain himself any longer. He blurted out, “As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman. How could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?”

The older monk looked at him and replied, “Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?”

Oh I know it’s easier said than done, I certainly know. But can we try?

Carrie Fischer, of blessed memory, apparently used to say, “Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

Researchers have actually measured brain waves as well as blood pressure to really determine how holding onto anger can cause us harm.

A study performed at Oxford University has stated that holding a grudge has been associated with heightened cardiovascular diseases and risky high blood pressure.

Similarly, a study was done in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* which stated that holding a grudge can negatively affect your sleeping. It was stated that being hostile would decrease your ability to have a good night’s sleep which in turn has been proven to have detrimental effects as you go about your day.

The implications of holding a grudge can also manifest themselves in our mental health that we may not immediately detect. We are likely to get so caught up in a situation that we don’t see a way out of it and the only response that makes sense is being angry.

The thing about not getting over a wrong-doing is that these feelings of anger, bitterness, and resentment can begin to show themselves in our other relationships. The negative feelings rob us of the ability to enjoy the rest of our lives, preventing us from replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. ⁶

We lose so much when we hold and harbor, when we nurse and bear, we lose bits of ourselves, our joy, our humanity, our connection with something greater than

⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inviting-monkey-tea/201503/why-we-hold-grudges-and-how-let-them-go>

we are, God.

Enough loss, enough anger, let us return.

Return and take another look at Leviticus 19:

Lo ti-kom v’lo ti-tor et b’nai amecha,
You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people.

but the verse continues:

Vahavta l’re-acha kamocho, Ani Adonai.
Love your fellow as yourself, I am Adonai. ⁷

Maybe our path toward forgiveness, towards letting go, our path home to ourselves, was there all along.

Love your fellow as yourself, I am Adonai.

When we see the humanity in another,
when we give the benefit of the doubt,
when we offer forgiveness,
when we cultivate joy,
when we let go,

We love.

We love our fellow and we love ourselves.

Psychologist Nancy Collier states: Our heart contains both our pain and the elixir for our pain. When we move our attention inside, into our heart, our pain shifts.

In re-focusing our attention, we find the soothing kindness and compassion that the grudge itself desires. We can then let go of the identity of the one who was “wronged,” because it no longer serves us and because our own presence is now righting that wrong. Without the need for our grudge, it often simply drops away without our knowing how. What becomes clear is that we are where we need to be, in our own heart’s company. ⁸

May we love, ourselves, each other, the other.

May we love enough to seek happiness

May we love enough to forgive and let go.

May we love.

Rabbi Nachman taught,

Always look for the good in yourself.

And remember: Joy is not incidental to your spiritual quest, it is vital.

⁷ Lev 19:18

⁸ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inviting-monkey-tea/201503/why-we-hold-grudges-and-how-let-them-go>

THE MANY MEANINGS OF THE SHOFAR

BY LARRY NATHENSON, EDITOR

On September 27, the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Jillian Cameron and Cantor Juval Porat led a creative study session in the BCC parking lot on the background and meanings of the sounding of the shofar during the Days of Awe. Since most BCC members did not attend, I offer this summary so that we all may appreciate the many wonderful insights of our clergy, the rabbinic sources they cited, and the community members who shared their thoughts on this ancient yet timely topic.

OUR CLERGY BEGAN by asking the participants to reflect on what the shofar means to us as modern Jews engaging in an ancient practice on the holiest days of the year. The shofar is sounded several times during the morning service on Rosh Hashanah and again at the conclusion of Yom Kippur. Some communities also sound it at the conclusion of morning services during the month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah. Here are some of the responses of the study session participants who had heard the shofar blown the previous day at Temple Akiba.

- The blowing of the shofar is a wake-up call. It urges us to recognize the importance of the High Holy Days as the start of a new year and as a time for repentance and renewal.
- The shofar connects us to ancient Israel. It is one of the few rituals we still perform that our Biblical ancestors performed as well. Some participants wondered whether the three distinct shofar blasts (the long sustained tekiah, the three short blasts of shevarim, and the long but quivering sound of teruah) conveyed different messages when blown in ancient Israel, where the shofar functioned as a call to war or an announcement of communal or seasonal events like the new moon.
- The shofar connects us to nature. Unlike most musical instruments and other ritual objects, it is not manufactured by humans but taken from an animal.
- As a natural object rather than a manufactured product, the shofar has imperfections and does not make a consistent sound. Cantor

Porat pointed out that the shofar sounds different when blown by him, Rabbi Cameron, or someone else. Each shofar blower adds personal touches to the ritual.

- The shofar stirs up a variety of emotions when we hear it. It evokes our connection to God and our tendency to become complacent about our spiritual lives. It is a call to action, to pursue justice and to make amends to those we may have wronged. Its piercing cry reminds us of the pain and suffering in the world and our duty to try to alleviate them. It also focuses our attention on the hope for a better life in the future.
- For some of us, the shofar brings back memories from childhood of beloved relatives who sounded it during the Days of Awe. For others, it represents a new skill recently learned by oneself or one's children, connecting us anew to our Jewish heritage.

The shofar is mentioned frequently in the Bible and Rabbinic literature. It heralded the revelation at Sinai (Exodus 19:19), accompanied Joshua's conquest of Jericho (Joshua 6:5, 20), and will be sounded to announce the redemption in the Messianic era (Isaiah 27:131, 58:1). According to tradition, the priests sounded the shofar as part of the ceremonies in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Saadia ben Yosef Gaon (882-942 CE), a prominent Babylonian rabbi, listed ten reasons for blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah (see page 268 of our Rosh Hashanah machzor for

the complete list). We sound it to acknowledge the sovereignty of our creator, to stir us to repentance at the beginning of the Ten Days of Awe, to remind us of the revelation at Sinai, and to foreshadow the redemption of Israel. The shofar also evokes the Akedah (the binding of Isaac) and honors the ram offered in Isaac's place on the altar. Our clergy reminded us that on Rosh Hashanah the shofar service has three parts that reflect some of these reasons – Malchuyot (sovereignty), Zichronot (memory), and Shofarot (invoking the hope of redemption).

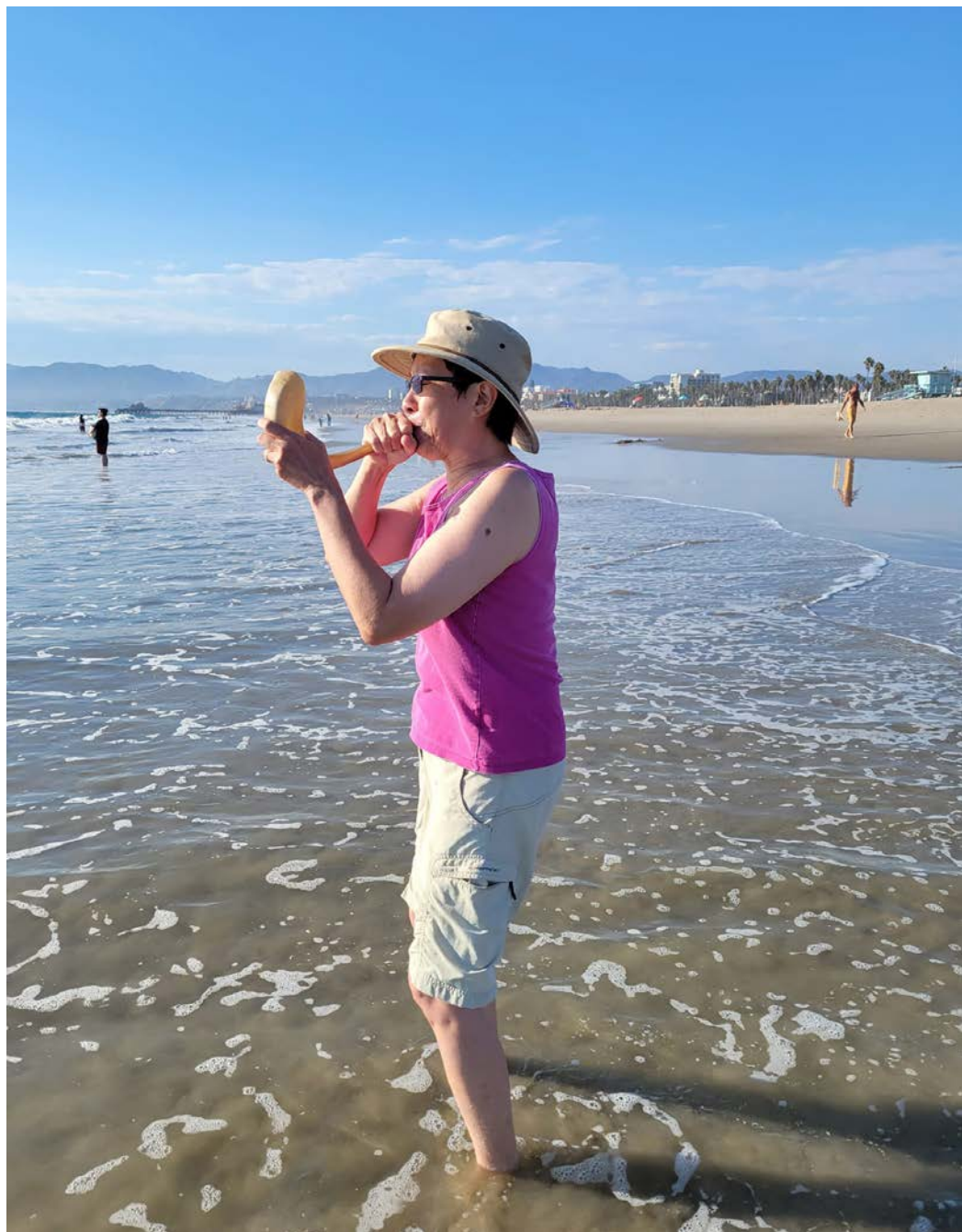
Unlike most mitzvot, the mitzvah associated with the shofar does not require us to perform or refrain from performing any specific action. It requires only that we hear someone else blowing the shofar. But it is not enough just to hear it and move on; we must hear it with kavanah (focused intention). As the Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3 stipulates, if one hears the shofar while passing a synagogue and focuses one's heart, one has fulfilled the obligation. Hearing the shofar without such intention does not fulfill the obligation. Also, one must hear the shofar directly, not its echo, which causes some modern Jews to question whether a recording or livestream (or Zoom) transmission is sufficient.

The Babylonian Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 27b) is quite protective of the shofar's natural purity and prohibits the embellishments that accompany many of our ritual objects. A shofar coated with gold is not kosher if its sound is changed, but all the natural sounds of the shofar are kosher. A shofar is usually a ram's horn, but the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 26a) permits the horn

of any animal except a cow that can be hollowed out for use as an instrument.

At the conclusion of the study session, Cantor Porat asked the participants to stand and move our feet forward and back to focus our attention and achieve kavanah while he blew the shofar. This brief exercise was a fitting conclusion to an experience that opened our eyes to the varied understandings of the shofar in our tradition and the different meanings it can have for us as individuals today.

Below: Davi Cheng blows the shofar at Santa Monica beach during the Tashlich service on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Photo by Elise Zimmerman.



NUDGING THE MILITARY TO VALUE ITS TRANSGENDER MEMBERS

BY ABRAHAM FINBERG



Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF, the military way to say “summary”): This is a story about the Jewish transgender philanthropist Jennifer Pritzker and her impact, through her donation to the Palm Center, on the way the Department of Defense (DOD) implemented its transgender policies and how those policies create a space for gender expression beyond the transitioning process.

Jennifer Pritzker is a member of a very wealthy Jewish family from Chicago. Witnessing the Yom Kippur war in 1973 inspired her to enlist in the Active US Army in 1974. She could have gone on to a university and started her career in the business world or at least joined the Army as an officer after receiving a college degree. Instead, she joined as a Private and went up the enlisted ranks in the normal manner, like anyone else in the military, reaching the rank of Sergeant before returning to civilian life to get her degree. She came back to the Active Army as a commissioned officer. Like many active duty soldiers, she returned to civilian life while serving as a reserve soldier for the US Army Reserves and then the Illinois National Guard, retiring from military service as a Lieutenant Colonel in 2001.

Serving in the military inspired Ms. Pritzker to support various philanthropic causes to help her fellow service members, including a \$1.3 million donation made in 2003 to the Palm Center, a UC Santa Barbara think tank, to study how to include transgender personnel in the military, police departments, and fire departments. The Palm Center, after much supporting research, convened an advisory panel in 2014 headed by

Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders and Rear Admiral Alan Steinman. The panel sent a report to the DOD that concluded the transgender military ban is unsupported by current medical and psychological science, potential medical costs were minuscule, and the ban could be easily removed by executive order.

In March 2015, the Army, Air Force, and Navy issued directives making it almost impossible to force transgender service members out of the military. With this pressure from his service components, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter created a working group in July 2015 on transgender service member integration. Concurrently, the DOD hired the RAND Corporation to study best practices on transgender military service.

RAND studied what happened when armed forces of other countries, including the Israel Defense Forces, allowed transgender members to serve openly. They concluded transgender service did not affect military readiness nor create a burdensome additional medical cost. The study estimated that very few people would transition while in the military, estimating that out of 1.4 million active duty US service members, only 30-90 would request treatment per year.

The RAND report recommended various implementation best practices, including leadership support, service member training with an emphasis on how the military benefits from inclusion and diversity, and perhaps most importantly, clear policies against harassment or hazing of any service member’s gender preference whether or not they are transitioning. DOD Instruction 1300.28 implemented all of the RAND report recommendations.

The DOD Implementation Handbook is the service members’ and commanders’ handbook for implementing this directive. The handbook

instructs the service member to consult with medical personnel and declare to their unit commander that the service member is transitioning. While on duty, the service member continues to follow the grooming and uniform standards as well as use the bathroom for the gender the service member identified as when they joined. While off duty, the service member is free to express themselves in their preferred gender. When military medical personnel confirm the transition is complete, the service member can follow the grooming and uniform standards as well as use the bathroom of their new gender while on duty. The medical personnel's transition determination is ultimately independent of physical attributes of the service member. That means hormone therapy or surgery, while a common aspect of transition, is not necessary for a complete transition.

A larger question regarding non-transitioning service members expressing a gender other than the one assigned at birth affects many more people. The handbook does not directly address gender presentation while off duty (active duty) or not on orders (reserves) if a service member is not officially transitioning. The handbook implies a person is free to do whatever they want while off duty since any attempt to interfere with a service member's off duty gender expression

would be considered harassment subject to Uniform of Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) action. The Navy published its own guidance in 2019 explicitly allowing sailors to live in their "socially preferred gender" while off duty, regardless of their official transition status.

So how is this policy implemented in practice? I am a soldier with the US Army Reserves. I had a fellow reservist ("battle buddy") who transitioned around 2018-2019 from female to male in the unit I used to belong to. The command was very supportive but the final declaration that his status changed to male took a long time. In the meantime, my buddy lived as a man while off duty but wore a female uniform and used the female bathroom during weekend reserve drills. His promotion to Staff Sergeant was not affected by his transition. The command's Public Affairs Office (PAO) created a video about the soldier for their June 2021 pride events to celebrate the Army's acknowledgment that he was male.

The views and opinions of Abraham Finberg are his own and do not represent official positions of the US Army Reserves, The US Army, or the Department of Defense.

SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

We welcome you to contribute to this magazine! Here are some ideas to get your creative juices flowing. Have you recently attended an amazing (virtual) event or art exhibit? Did you read a book or watch a TV show that everyone should know about? Do you have an idea for a new column? Do you think your bubbe has the best rugelach recipe? Please be in touch, we can't wait to hear from you!

Please follow these submission guidelines:

- Articles should be more than 500 words, letters to the editor can be shorter
- Please do not write about officeholders, candidates, or general international, national, state, or local political issues.
- Be respectful of anyone you reference, directly or indirectly, by name or anonymously.
- Please do not advertise any product or service in an article or letter.
- Submissions should be sent by email to the editorial team at gvanim@bcc-la.org as a Word attachment, in the body of the email, or as a Google doc.
- Include your name and phone number.
- All submissions will be proofread and edited for length, clarity, style, and tone.
- Note: Late submissions may not be considered for publication.
- Deadlines will be published in the BCC Weekly News and Updates.

RABBI ROBERT BARUCH REMAINS WITHIN ME

By TOM KNECHTEL



MY HUSBAND OF TWENTY YEARS, Rabbi Robert Baruch, was a devoted member of BCC. He died of complications from Parkinson's disease in May 2018. Early next year, there will be a show in New York of the paintings

I made that tried to embody what it was like to lose Bob and come to grips with his absence. Many of the paintings come from aspects of Jewish experience or literature. Here are two of them, "Kaddish," and "My Rabbi."

learned that all of these people that we lose, and this is what I mean by experience, they're all within us. They become part of our DNA, they become part of our blood." These paintings chronicle how Bob became part of my DNA.

The paintings will be shown at PPOW Gallery in New York City from February 3 to March 11, 2023.



ings I made that tried to embody what it was like to lose Bob and come to grips with his absence. Many of the paintings come from aspects of Jewish experience or literature. Here are two of them, "Kaddish," and "My Rabbi."

Patti Smith said: "... part of the privilege of being human is that we have our moment when we have to say goodbye. It's nothing personal, we just all have to pass through it, and I've just



Top Right: "My Rabbi," 2020; oil on linen, 16.25" x 12"
Above: "Kaddish," 2020; oil on linen, 18" x 40"

PRESSING LOVE

BY BONNIE S. KAPLAN

*Being your slave, what should I do but tend
upon the hours and times of your desire?*
—Sonnet LVII Shakespeare



Roses, not my favorite flower,
defensive, narcissistic—
to them no other flower exists.
Thoughts of naked buds
and oversize blooms
preoccupy their beds.

And yet I cultivate *Yves Piaget*
and *Marilyn Monroe*,
Purple Tiger, *Brass Band*,
Moonstone and *April in Paris*.
From undergrowth to blossom,
I examine every cane and leaf
for signs of stress and unwanted visitors.

No other species commands
such fealty, sweating, on my knees,
arms stung with thorns,
face burnt from the sun.
Till the gnomon leaves no shadow,
I can't stop tending the long
days of their desire.

Published in *Out of Sequence: The Sonnets Remixed* (Upstart: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies, 2014) Clemson University

Secret City: The Hidden History of Gay Washington

by
James Kirchick
(Holt, 2022)

Reviewed by Roy Liebman

LIFE FOR GAY AMERICAN MEN DURING MUCH OF THE 20TH CENTURY WAS OFTEN STIFLING, lonely, and sometimes even physically perilous. (The word “gay” was not widely used for much of the century, but it will be used here.) Sexual activity between men was illegal in nearly every state. In those places (often mob-owned) where men could congregate, there was the constant threat of police raids and possible exposure to workplace and family. Gays, being considered mentally disordered until the 1970s, could find themselves subject to drastic medical procedures.

For those working for the government in Washington, there was even greater reason to conceal their homosexuality.

A lengthy but eminently readable book, *Secret City* reveals the considerable presence and influence of gay men from the Roosevelt to the Clinton administrations. It also reveals the hypocrisy of some closeted men in important positions who “rooted out”

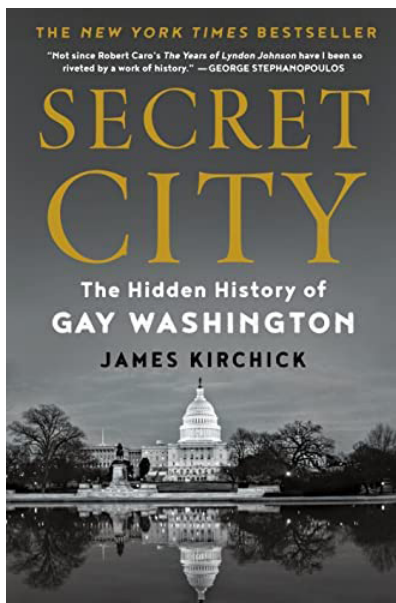
their fellow gays.

Kirchick writes with a narrative drive which makes the 800-plus pages of this book seem like a crime thriller. You are almost compelled to keep going to the end. His research is wide-ranging, deep, and well documented. The reader will wonder how he uncovered much of what he did, but it seems all too unfortunately true. Here are a few highlights.

During FDR’s presidency it was widely rumored that one highly-placed diplomat, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, was gay or at least bisexual. Worse yet for many high-born contemporaries, his sexual interest seemed to be in Pullman porters (mostly black railroad workers). His career was over, and others of his sexual orientation had even more reason to conceal their sexual preferences.

Matters became progressively worse during the Cold War when it was widely believed that gays were open to Soviet blackmail because of their orientation. They could give secrets away, or maybe even become traitors. Innumerable gay men (and presumably those just suspected) lost their livelihoods in the State Department and other agencies. One of those most fervent in rooting them out was J. Edgar Hoover, himself likely gay. This began in the Truman administration and worsened in the Eisenhower years. Senator Joe McCarthy and his oh-so gay sidekick Roy Cohn pursued gays with fervor.

Even during the presidency of gay-friendly John F. Kennedy there was little to brighten the picture. However, there gradually grew underground and then open resistance to this ongoing cruel crusade. Men like Franklin Kameny, ousted from his job as a government astronomer, became outspoken opponents and gay “heroes.” The bureaucratic layers of the government did not yield easily to rectifying the anti-gay hysteria, hypocrisy, and harm of decades, but very gradually change came.



Golem Girl by Riva Lehrer

Reviewed by Larry Nathenson

Legend has it that when the Jews of 16th century Prague were threatened with destruction by a Gentile mob, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (known as the Maharal) took clay from the river and used divine incantations to fashion a human-like creature with superhuman strength. This golem protected the Jews but later rebelled against its human creator; when it acted with its own intentions, it had to be destroyed. Golems in Jewish lore are usually portrayed as monsters, as disfigured or disabled in some way despite their superhuman powers. Since the creators of golems and similar creatures are usually men (Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* and Marge Piercy's novel *He, She, and It* are notable exceptions), Riva Lehrer speculates that men who make golems are trying to appropriate the female power to generate life and then shape it to their own purposes.

Lehrer was born in 1958 with spina bifida, a condition that was nearly always fatal within two years. The bones and casing around the spinal cord fail to fuse, leaving the latter exposed to the outside of the body. Her mother, determined not to accept the common medical wisdom, shepherded her through numerous surgeries throughout her childhood that eventually enabled her to function somewhat normally in the world, though she was still unusually short and walked with a limp. Lehrer considers herself the creation of the (male) doctors who modified her body to enable her to live; hence the title "Golem Girl." But she was also a natural human being, determined to break free of the expectations of her parents, her doctors, and all who thought she could never live on her own and have a job or a romantic relationship.

The first part of this memoir details Lehrer's childhood surgeries at great length while also placing her complicated family dynamics on full display. In the second part Lehrer goes off to college and begins her self-transformation into the artist and activist she has become. She was fortunate to have exceptional artistic talent that helped her to overcome the educational and career obstacles her condition placed in her way. She describes her work as "focuse(d) on issues of physical identity

and the socially challenged body." A longtime faculty member of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Lehrer also teaches "medical humanities" at Northwestern University, where her course instructs medical students in the representation of human bodies, including disabled ones, opening their eyes and minds to the variations in the human physical form.

While reading this memoir I learned a lot about Disability Culture, a term and phenomenon about which I previously knew nothing. Lehrer maintains that people with disabilities have, and

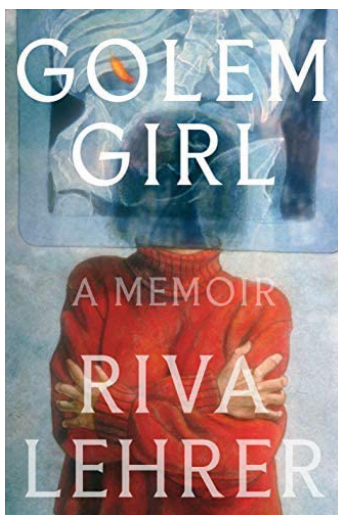
should cultivate, a distinct social and cultural identity that can be expressed in art, literature, film, and other media. In recent decades we have all been encouraged to demand greater sensitivity to the diversity in race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, in the arts and in our culture more broadly, but the disabled are rarely included in our catalog of diverse identities. This book and others like it may help us to see disability as an opportunity for creativity, a variation on what it means to be human.

Lehrer's memoir includes numerous examples of her portraits of people with varying physical conditions and identities, including the back stories of how she met her subjects and why she chose to paint them. Each portrait is a collaboration between artist and subject, not simply Lehrer's own perspective on different bodies. These vignettes provide a window into the lives of people who have found (or in some cases have not found) a place in American society in which they can thrive or at least survive. Most of the paintings are not attractive in the conventional sense, but neither are they repulsive as one might expect if unprepared to view them. The humanity of Lehrer's subjects shines through, no matter how disfigured some of their bodies may be. They are not pathetic, frightening, or worthless but people who have faced uncommon challenges in their lives.

Like many disabled people, Lehrer has not married or had children. But she has had a variety of relationships, some long-term, with individuals of both genders and neither gender. Most of her partners have not been physically disabled. In our book group discussion we speculated about what attracted these partners to Lehrer – her sharp mind, her courage and determination, perhaps a disability fetish. Lehrer doesn't say, but her description of the dynamics of her relationships (other than physical sex) is not unlike what able-bodied individuals experience.

For all that this memoir achieves in educating the reader about Disability Culture and the lives of disabled individuals, it has some flaws that sometimes detract from its power. The detailed accounts of Lehrer's repeated surgeries are often tedious, and the description of her career path is disjointed and unfocused as she winds back and forth between different scholarly and professional influences and opportunities. Her relationships and portraits are sprinkled through the book, often with little context in her overall life story. But I still found it well worth reading and would recommend it to anyone interested in learning about Disability Culture and its place in our diverse American society.

BCC's Books and Bagels discussion group has met continuously since January 1995. The group met monthly in members' homes for a bagel brunch and discussion, although now we are meeting by Zoom until further notice. We read a variety of books: fiction and non-fiction, American and Israeli, historical and contemporary. The only requirement is some Jewish content (LGBT content is a plus, but not required). The group is open to BCC members and non-members, and you are welcome to join us for a particular book that may interest you. RSVP is required. For upcoming books, see the BCC Weekly News and Updates or check the [website calendar](#). To register for the Zoom link, contact Larry Nathenson at larrynath@aol.com.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ...

In this column, BCC members share things they do or love on a typical day. In this issue, executive vice president, journalist, and mom of two Jessica Donath tells us about her day.



Jessica pictured on the left.

6:30 - the alarm goes off. I tell Google to set a timer for 15 minutes because I don't want to get up yet.



7:15 - I make the kids breakfast: Chocolate milk with Liege-style waffles (from the freezer section at Target).



7:45 - drive the kids to school. It takes 15 minutes. We argue over whether to listen to KPCC or German children's songs.



10:00 - 10:30 - the interview with a representative of a synagogue about their "greener by default" initiative goes well.

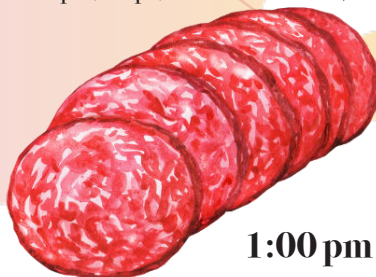
9:00 - I check emails again and scroll through the news on "The Old Reader", a website that allows me to see all the German and American publications I keep track all in one place.



11:30 - I talk to my parents in Germany on video chat. There's a 9 hour time difference and sometimes I forget to call them before they go to sleep.



12:15 - I look in the fridge for lunch ideas. Since no one has done any grocery shopping in a while, I can't find anything. I end up eating more snacks instead of lunch (a German chocolate bar called Duplo, chips, and salami sticks.)



1:00 pm - I start transcribing my interviews



2:30 - I have to leave to pick up my kids from school. It takes only 15 minutes to drive there, but including the time spent in the car pick-up lane, it takes about an hour.



3:30 - we arrive back home. They eat a snack. Luca does his homework, and Elissa watches Youtube videos on my tablet that she keeps referring to as her tablet.



4:30 - Luca is done with his homework and playing. It's his turn to watch something. I play Connect 4 with Elissa. She wins. Then I win and she cries.



5:30 - Vince takes Luca to his hockey lesson at the Pasadena Iceskating Center. I take Ibuprofen against a persistent migraine.



6:00 - I order delivery instead of cooking. I'm in the mood for Korean BBQ. I feed the dog and take her for a short walk after. She just turned 15.

6:30 - Vince and Luca return. Vince and I make a box of mac & cheese for the kids. I don't like cheese and the smell bothers me when I'm not feeling well.

6:45 - the food for grownups arrives and we have dinner together



8:00 - Elissa insists that I learn how to play volleyball on the Switch. I follow the tutorial without any idea what's going on. We play two matches. I still don't know what I'm doing but I win the first one and lose the second one.

8:45 - I go upstairs to turn on Bubble Guppies music for Elissa and an episode of the Brains On podcast for Luca

9:30 - I watch the latest episode of "Girl Meets Farm" on the Food Network. I'm obsessed with Molly Yeh, a Chinese-American Jewish chef and blogger.



10:00 - I read more articles on "The Old Reader" and get ready for bed

BCC QUESTIONNAIRE:

BCC TREASURER JIM POTTER

Asking a set of questions to learn new things about old friends was a popular pastime in 19th century Europe. At 14, future French novelist Marcel Proust became one of the first to fill out a questionnaire in his friend Antoinette Faure's book Confessions; An Album to Record Thoughts, Feelings, & co. In modern times, Inside the Actor's Studio host James Lipton created a set of questions as a fun and not-too-serious way of getting to know his guests better. Vanity Fair published a Proust-inspired questionnaire on the last page of the magazine for more than 20 years that became one of its most successful and popular columns. Since its heyday, [Karl Marx](#), [Terry Gross](#), [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), and [David Bowie](#) have all participated in a version of the classic question-and-answer parlor game. At G'vanim Magazine, we are pleased to introduce the BCC Questionnaire!

1. What is your idea of Perfect Happiness?

BCC having plenty of money to do all the things we want and me being completely caught up on my Treasurer responsibilities.

2. What is your greatest fear?

That I will never come close to perfect happiness.

3. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?

Current events.

4. Where would you most like to live?

Some place with summers like Santa Monica and winters like New England.

5. What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

Distractibility.

6. What is the trait you most deplore in others?

Mean-spiritedness.

7. What is the quality you most like in a person?

Warmth.

8. What do you consider the most over-rated virtue?

I'll go with neatness.

9. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

What was the question?

10. Which living person do you most admire?

Jessica Donath.

11. On what occasion do you lie?

Never.

12. Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

Yeah, no; my real answer is not fit for a family publication.

13. Which talent would you most like to have?

I would like to be more articulate.

14. What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Making it this far.

15. What is your most treasured possession?

Alas, I can't have it and eat it too.

16. What is your greatest extravagance?

Remodeling.

17. What is your favorite TV show?

West Wing, maybe.

18. What is your favorite sound?

Rock and Roll.

19. Which book do you wish you had written?

Bruce Springsteen's Autobiography.
(Not really.)

20. Who is your hero of fiction or Torah?

Jack Potowski.

21. Which historical figure would you most like to meet?

Jane Austen.

22. Who are your heroes in real life?

People who visualize something new and create it.

23. What are your favorite names?

Tatty Jane and Scantlebury.

24. What is your favorite age?

New.

25. What is your favorite childhood memory?

Retirement.

26. What turns you on (creatively, spiritually or emotionally)?

A beautiful, wide-open vista.

27. What turns you off?

Selfish Megomania.

28. What is your favorite curse word?

Really?

29. What is your favorite language?

Sadly, the only one I speak.

30. What profession other than your own would you like to attempt?

Mathematician.

31. Who would you like to see on a new banknote?

Dr. Martin Luther King.

32. Which invention do you admire most?

Solar Panels.

33. What is the first thing you do in the morning?

Wordle.

34. What is the last thing you do before going to bed?

This Survey.

35. How would you like to die?

With a full stomach.

36. If you were to die and come back as a person, an animal or a thing, who or what would it be?

Is that an option, coming back as a thing?