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By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, when we remembered Zion . . . If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

—PSALMS 137:1, 5-6

THEY KEEP ASKING ME:
Are you Jewish?

Outside the death camp at Sachsenhausen on a snowy morning just before my sixteenth birthday, the guard sighed the question over his morning paper. That's my first memory of being asked. He wanted to see if it was worth getting up and unlocking the gate. The Memorial (that's what he called the place) was technically closed, but if I was Jewish, well, exceptions could be made . . .

In college, walking in and out of campus, the Lubovitch with their black hats and palm fronds and their Mitzvah Mobile accosted me

with the question. They wanted to perform a mitzvah on me—a good deed—but only if I was really Jewish. *Was your mother Jewish? Your father Jewish?*

In a market in Mbale, Eastern Uganda, a young man crossed four lanes of dusty traffic to shake my hand, to say shalom, to ask if I was Jewish. He wore a knitted *kippah* on his head and smiled broadly. I was asked outside the cemetery in Guanabacoa, Cuba, the nexus of the island's Afro-Cuban religions. The director of the Jewish hospital in Tehran asked, a university dean in Nablus in the West Bank asked, and an Orthodox soldier at the Western Wall smirked the question at me. I could have sworn he was flirting. The fringes of his tzitzit dangled near the butt of his gun.

The same question all over the world with the same intention: to find out if I belong. Did I belong in that death camp? Was I a friend to the Ugandan Jews on the hill outside Mbale? Did I have a right to visit the Jewish cemetery in Cuba? Did I belong with the Palestinians in Nablus, with the devout at the Western Wall? Was I a member of the tribe?

I certainly didn't think of myself as a member of the tribe. I hadn't been raised with a strong sense of ethnic identity, and my family was not religious. My upbringing was more Don DeLillo than Phillip Roth (except for the masturbation guilt), and I didn't have any great desire to be Jewish. My grandmother—Gram Bev we called her—would have dinners at her apartment on the Jewish High Holidays, but they were more about family than about Judaism. She didn't say prayers or even cook her own brisket. She was, in fact, a terrible cook. She was far more comfortable at cocktail parties than at synagogue, and my family followed her lead. No one in my family could read Hebrew or Yiddish or had any interest in learning to do so.

When I asked Gram Bev about where she grew up, she would tell me, simply, Virginia. She painted a picture of a grand southern plantation. I imagined her as Scarlett O'Hara, wearing giant hoopskirts and

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going to balls. She fancied herself a bit of a southern belle, even though she'd moved to Baltimore when she was young. She married a businessman with a German-Jewish background, joined the country club, and played the role of the socialite, a role for which she felt she had been raised. In one of my strongest memories of her, she stands in a black Oscar de la Renta cocktail dress, leaning on the piano in a banquet hall, singing along to "My Way." She had a love for crooners, and Frank Sinatra was her favorite.

"I'm just a thoroughly mod Gram," she would say, smiling. She was an art lover, and could perform hours of exegesis on the works of Matisse or Basquiat, but she only ever mentioned being Jewish when she talked about the time she met the Cohn sisters at their Baltimore apartment. They were two of the most notable art collectors of their day, and Gram raved about their fabulous collection, most of which now belongs to the Baltimore Museum of Art. She spent decades as a docent there, studying and teaching. She simply loved beauty and good taste, and that was how I imagined her. Even after she had a stroke, which impaired her speech and movement, she would go out to dinner at least once a week. I never saw her with less than impeccable hair and makeup. Her temple was aesthetics; her religion, art. It struck me as odd that she had the High Holidays services piped in over her phone after she had her second stroke. I'd always assumed she went to the synagogue in order to be seen. I couldn't imagine what she gained by listening in from the yellow armchair in her living room. But I didn't ask either. I was more interested in talking with her about Miro than Moses.

I never knew her first husband, my grandfather. He died long before I was born, and his death pushed my father away from organized religion.

"It just wasn't a comfort to me," my father said. "It seemed like a show; I didn't want to be part of that. It just didn't have any meaning. I didn't know the Hebrew and I didn't want to know. I'd feel like a hypo-

crite if I pretended to pray.” And then he added, “But I am proud of being Jewish.” I wasn’t sure what he meant by being Jewish then. If there was no religion in it, no ethnic food, no cultural events, no involvement in any Jewish organizations or studying of Jewish history, what could it have meant to him?

My mother did serve on the board of the National Council of Jewish Women, because she believed in the progressive agenda for which they advocated, but when the NCJW ladies would come over in December, we would frantically take down the Christmas stockings. There were no Jewish writers on the bookshelves and there was no Jewish music on the CD players. The news sometimes talked about Israel and the Palestinians, but I didn’t imagine that had anything to do with me, and I didn’t talk about it in my family.

My first memorable encounter with being a Jew sent me running to hide my tears in the bathroom. No one called me “kike” or drew a swastika on my locker or pelted me with stale bagels. My tormentors were studious young Jews at the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, where my parents had sent me to get my Judaism from the professionals.

I was twelve years old and preparing for my bar mitzvah with an introductory class at the synagogue. A private tutor would come later. The classroom itself was unremarkable, looking like any primary school classroom anywhere. Paper cutouts from arts and crafts projects hung on the wall. A map of the Holy Land stood sentinel by the door, its deserts stained a pleasing pink. A poster of the Ten Commandments hung by the blackboard, and the teacher, aware, I’m sure, of the authority it gave her, stood in front of it, flash cards in hand. In my mind, she wore the same robes as Charlton Heston in the movie.

There were only four of us in this class, and I provided the only masculine element, such as it was. I had gone to an all boys prep school since first grade, so I already felt a little off guard in the classroom presence of girls. The circumstances were cruel—putting me in my first real contact

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with the opposite sex just as the awkwardness of puberty was taking hold. The entire custom seemed designed to embarrass me. One of the girls had been a regular in Hebrew school for ages and could already read the language with some proficiency. I could hardly recognize the letters, let alone divine their sounds. What words I knew, I knew only from their English transliteration. My mother went to synagogue twice a year in the fall for the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and I always went with her, reluctantly. My father and my sister never did. We held a Seder at our house for Passover, where I, as the youngest, would ask the Four Questions in English. And now my parents had sent me to the professionals, the Hebrew school teacher, the synagogue staff, to fake my way through the language and prepare to become a Jewish man.

The flash cards went up in the teacher's hand, each one more meaningless to me than the one before. At twelve, I was an eager reader of novels but I became suddenly reacquainted with illiteracy. The girls all seemed to know, all seemed so comfortable with this strange alphabet. One of them even mentioned that she had gone to kindergarten in this very room back in ancient times, seven years ago. The girls terrified me, not just for their unfamiliar femininity, but because they were so Jewish. My regular school was an old Baltimore bastion of WASPishness, deeply tied to the good old boy network that ran up and down the East Coast corridors of power and finance. There were other Jews in my class, of course, but we were small in number and highly assimilated, country-club Jews. Our Jewish identity was hardly visible on the surface. I had only one Jewish friend, and Judaism was not the basis of our friendship. We'd been neighbors until I was six.

But these girls went to coed schools that were dominated by Jews. They had Purim celebrations in class and came dressed as Queen Esther. I'd never in my life been to a Purim celebration, although my sister had, and my parents still tell the story of that ill-fated fete. The tradition calls for the adult men to get drunk and the children to dress up as characters

from the biblical story of Queen Esther, who saved the Babylonian Jews from genocide at the hands of the royal vizier Haman. My sister went to the party dressed as Peter Pan. My father didn't attend, and even if he had, he doesn't drink. It would be a number of years before I learned the story of Purim, taught first by a Ugandan on a commuter train and then by a left-wing rabbi among the ruins of Persepolis.

My family celebrated Christmas for reasons that were, at the time, not entirely clear to me, though I enjoyed it all the same. When my friends at school talked about what they got for Christmas, I could join right in. Not even my name brought me closer to the tribe: Charles London? It sounded like an Anglican estate lawyer's name. And I never, until that day in class at age twelve and a half, felt the lack of any of it.

For the girls in my b'nai mitzvah class, names like Kleinberg and Grossbaum and Mendelsohn were not exotic. All three of them lived in the Jewish part of town: Pikesville—a name that made me cringe whenever I heard it, given the unfortunate rhymes it brought to mind. In this class I felt like I was on foreign soil, and, by the third letter I couldn't name, let alone pronounce, my lip began to quiver. I ran to the bathroom and burst into tears, cursing at my mother for dropping me off in this accursed place, for making me Jewish, for not making me Jewish enough. I didn't fit. I was a bad Jew, and these girls and this teacher could see it. I cried with the shame of not belonging in a community to which I'd never before wanted to belong.

When I came back to the classroom, I excused myself and told that old journeyman lie: "My stomach hurts."

My mother was called and I was picked up early.

After that humiliating episode, I steeled myself for the remaining bar mitzvah lessons, bit my lower lip, and got through the ritual. At the same time, on the other side of the world, Sammy Samuels, whose Burmese name is Aug Soe Lwin, was preparing for his bar mitzvah, which would be the first in Burma in over thirty years. And in Israel, Ivan

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Hrkas, also thirteen years old, was arriving from war-ravaged Sarajevo in one of the first convoys to escape the city, arranged by Sarajevo's small Jewish community.

The portion of the Torah I read is known as "Parshat Bo." *Bo* is the command form of the Hebrew word for "go" and it is the first word God speaks to Moses in that Torah portion, telling him to visit Pharaoh and bring him the final three plagues. It is also the passage where Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert, into freedom. The first commandments of the Torah are here, turning the book from a story of a nomadic and then enslaved shepherding people into a book of laws.

The whole idea of "going" has always been central to the story of the Jews. The Torah begins with God expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden, and Abraham going forth into Canaan, and Jacob going forth into Egypt, and the Israelites, named for Jacob, going into exile in Babylon and going back again under the Persians, and, of course, the big Go, from my little *parsha*, the Israelites going forth from bondage in Egypt, that Exodus that is the essential condition of Judaism. Without it, there would be no Torah, no commandments, no Jews, just a tribe of Israelites that was once scattered around the Middle East.

The Jews became Jews as refugees. Fleeing slavery in Egypt, crossing the desert, so the national myth goes, they became one people by receiving a book, *the Book*, the Torah, given by God to Moses and by Moses to the Hebrews at Mount Sinai. The Hebrew people took this Torah and vowed to obey it and to understand it, and upon taking that vow, they became Jews. They had long had a covenant with God, ever since the circumcision of Abraham, but they were not one people until Moses brought the Torah down the mountain.

When Moses presented the Torah to his people, they all cried out in response to each of the commandments, "We will do and we will hear!" And by crying out, they bound themselves under the yoke of those commandments and to each other as one nation. "We will do and we will

hear,” they said. Doing first, hearing—*understanding*— only later. The most important part, the first duty, was simply to do whatever it was God asked of them. This mixed multitude pledging their obedience to the law Moses had brought down was probably the most unified group of Jews there ever was and ever will be. A crowd of refugees granted freedom and celebrating law, even if they didn’t obey it for long.

Among those fleeing Egypt, we are told, there were those who were not Hebrews—Exodus 12:38 reads “a mixed multitude also went up with them.” Did those not of the tribe of Hebrews become Hebrews? They were in a crowd of over a million in the desert; they suffered the same journey, fleeing under the awful grace of God. But there is no mention of this mixed multitude later in the journey, wandering the desert for forty years. After receiving the Torah, they were transformed into one nation.

To be a Jew, then, is to be born of those two escapes: into the desert and into the Book. Exile and text created us far more than genealogical descent from Abraham or the high priests, and throughout our history we have always turned back to these two concepts for strength, inspiration, and rebirth. There is no convincing archaeological evidence for the flight from Egypt. Evidence that the Hebrews were even enslaved in Egypt is scarce. But the Exodus story doesn’t need to be true to serve its purpose. Whether divinely inspired or written by a series of editors over hundreds of years, the Torah narrative has its normative function, summed up succinctly by my bar mitzvah portion: you owe a debt to the God who sent you wandering, who made you into a people, who promises you won’t wander forever.

At the time, I didn’t really understand my Torah portion and I didn’t give it much thought. I recited it phonetically, and in so doing, I became a man. Then I did my own going forth, and left organized Judaism behind, I thought, for good. My big Go. I heard and I didn’t want to do or obey. Once the ritual was complete, my parents appeased, I became just like so

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many others of my generation in America—to use a word so feared by so much of the Jewish establishment: *assimilated*.

And, like many of my generation, I took an active role in forming my identity while in my early twenties. I constructed layers of meaning, rather than operating only from those labels I had inherited. My friends and I built our identities around other factors—educational background, career, sexuality, the shifting ground of taste, political affiliation, and geography, whether real or imagined. We defined ourselves by our commitments—to causes and ideas rather than ethnic groups and institutions. While attending a synagogue or going to a Jewish community center never entered my mind, I happily went to gay rights rallies and Amnesty International meetings and cleaning days in parks in Harlem.

Thanks to social networking websites like Friendster and MySpace and Facebook, I could tag myself with all the multiple, overlapping definitions I wanted, and do or undo them publicly with the click of a button. Never has identity been so fluid as it is now, so easy to make up or delete. So groundless.

In virtual space, I could connect with the town of my birth or the borough where I lived or the university where I studied or everyone who had ever worked with me at any job. The multitude of nations that fled Egypt with Moses was at my fingertips; I could join it without leaving my apartment, I could leave it again in an instant. Check boxes on the computer, I reasoned, were a hell of a lot better than Yellow Stars pinned to my clothes, yet I never checked off the religion box on any of those websites. I was more comfortable telling a world of strangers that I was a gay writer/librarian who lived in Brooklyn, liked Nina Simone and the works of Italo Calvino, and had a dog named Baxter, than saying I was Jewish. I didn't feel Jewish. I used to tell people that I felt guilty claiming my Jewish identity when so many "better Jews" had died for theirs. That reasoning made me sound far more thoughtful about Judaism than I was.

I did believe in God, and felt I had a spiritual life, but it was deeply

personal, and not something my partner, Tim, and I talked about. He had been raised in a fundamentalist Christian home, but had grown distant from religion. We talked about the curiosities of faith communities—lavish bar mitzvahs vs. Bible camp—but we never really discussed our own faith. My religion, in that sense, was more like an inner monologue mixed with a moral code. I believed in God, argued with God, and prayed when I felt the need, but I didn't like to admit any of those things. My conception of God was still very Old Testament, while everyone around me was into more abstract spiritual conceptions of the divine. I couldn't shake the idea of a God who could be moody, who could be vengeful, and who could love to chat. But I didn't like to publicize our relationship.

My story is certainly not unique among American Jews. A 2007 study by sociologists Steven Cohen, professor of Jewish Social Policy at Hebrew Union College's Jewish Institute of Religion, and Ari Kelman, professor of American Studies at the University of California, Davis, suggested that feelings of attachment to Israel among younger Jews—those born after 1974—were decreasing substantially. The study asserted that younger Jews, Jews in my age bracket, were less likely to draw on positive memories and associations with Israel. We were more likely to recall the first Lebanon war in 1982, the First and Second Intifada, and the second Lebanon war or the ongoing violence in Gaza and the West Bank, when we thought about Israel, than to consider the earlier, and, the authors asserted, less morally ambiguous wars between 1948 and 1974. Of course, another institution of Jewish thought, the Steinhart Social Research Institute at Brandeis, published its own report on the heels of the Cohen-Kelman survey, which argued that attachment to Israel remained a constant and that as people aged, their attachment tended to increase, thus negating the effects of any age cohort that the data might suggest.

Cohen, however, insists that his data holds up to scrutiny. In the report, "Beyond Distancing," he argues that the main cause of this disconnection from Israel is intermarriage, which goes along with a general

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decline of Jewish ethnic identity. Jews have left the shtetls and the ghettos and become part of the mainstream. Young American Jews want to marry whom they want; they exist in an open society with choice and freedoms that their parents and grandparents didn't have. And once they do marry, it seems, they become less attached to the Jewish state.

"The connection to Israel is a piece of a larger sense of the collective Jewish identity," Cohen explained to me. "Not just part of a religious faith, but also part of an ethnic group, a tribe, frankly, a nation. Intermarriage and its antecedents and its consequences—the things that lead to intermarriage and the processes that flow from intermarriage—are associated with and certainly incompatible with deep commitment to Jews as a collective nationlike entity. They're more in keeping with a sense of Jews as a religion, a personal faith rather than collective identity. So in that context, among the things that fall down as identification with Jews as a collective identity is involvement and identification with Israel."

So I found myself part of a statistic, part of a trend. I was indeed in a situation akin to intermarriage: I am in a same-sex, interfaith domestic partnership, which complicates my relationship to the Jewish establishment even more. I didn't feel there was much room in the organized Jewish world for me and had certainly never seen outreach that spoke to my concerns and needs. I wasn't all that interested in finding a connection to organized Judaism anyway.

When I thought about Israel, I did indeed think with revulsion about all those wars and the uprisings Cohen mentioned. If young people were thinking beyond nation-states, beyond ethnicity, I considered it a good thing. Sixty years after the founding of Israel, the world remained anxious about the Jews, the Jews remained anxious about each other, and these two anxieties animated a great flurry of activity out of all proportion to the size of the world's Jewish population. There are about thirteen and a half million Jews in the world. Some estimates put the number of Muslims in the world at about one and a half billion. I couldn't understand why the Jews got so much press.

Historically, there's no denying that the Jews have been embattled, persecuted, and hounded to near extinction. But Cohen's data indicates that fear about Jewish survival is no longer an animating anxiety for the next generation of Jews. The idea of Jewish extinction didn't make me reach for my wallet or for my prayer book. I never gave it any thought. Perhaps I was too comfortable in America.

Zionism simply could not be the *sine qua non* of my Jewish existence, and I saw no reason to jump into an identity so tied to that particular nationalism. Jewish values—service, study, faith—these are potent notions, and ones that, living in America, I rarely associated with Israel or with those Jews who argued so vehemently in its defense whenever they felt the smallest criticism directed toward the Jewish state. Alan Dershowitz, arguing in defense of Israel, defended torture. I didn't want any part of a Jewish people that felt the need for such arguments.

I could have remained happily distanced from any sense of Jewish identity and certainly from Israel were it not for a few events that awoke me to the unavoidable reality that I was a Jew and that that meant something.

During college, I started to work with children in war zones around the world, traveling to Africa, Asia, and the Balkans. In the summer of 2004, I stumbled upon the Jewish community of Bosnia. They showed me a kind of Jewish life alongside Muslims and Christians that I had not before had the capacity to imagine. As the Security Barrier began to go up in Israel, turning the West Bank into a kind of giant prison, separating neighbors from each other and farmers from their land, I saw a community in Sarajevo that was tearing down walls and forging lasting relationships with all faiths and ethnicities. They were doing so in what had very recently been one of the most violent cities on earth. The tiny group of Jews, I was told, managed to save thousands of lives during the siege, and got supplies into the city when no one else could. I started to get the idea that there might be something to this three-thousand-year-

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old culture, something worth knowing about, some part of my identity I needed to find. Even with high unemployment and instability, the Jews were staying in Bosnia, not going to Israel, and they were proud to be Bosnian. I found very few Zionists among them. Rather, I saw in them a community that had disavowed ethnic nationalism and had found purpose in caring for its neighbors. I liked the idea of a humanitarian Judaism rather than a nationalistic one.

After that visit, I didn't think much about getting "more Jewish" or about my relationship to Israel for a few years. The closest I got to an acute awareness of being Jewish in that time came thanks to a patron of the library where I worked for a year. I hadn't noticed she was drunk when I offered to assist her in finding whatever it was she needed. She took one look at me and started shouting about how she knew my kind, knew that I was a Jew, and that Jews were the cause of most of the world's problems, that we were racist against black people like her, and greedy and evil.

"Why don't I call my people and you call your people to meet outside. Then we'll see," she threatened.

My people? I thought. Who would that be? Whom would I call? How had this become a conflict between peoples? I just wanted to help her find a reference book.

She ranted at me for a bit longer, something about her brothers and the FBI and the CIA and a bit more about the perfidy of the Jewish people, until my boss calmed her down and sent her on her way. I had been rattled, however. I felt vulnerable and very much alone. What if she did have "her people" waiting for me outside? Apparently I looked like a Jew, and in her eyes that was the worst thing to be.

No matter what my complicated postmodern multicultural queer-theory-saturated hypernuanced identity told me I was, there seemed to be a biological or historical fact of my Jewishness that meant something to that angry woman, but meant almost nothing to me. I began to see a lot of anti-Semitism the moment I started looking for it. I saw videos

about French youths in the suburbs of Paris, Muslims who blamed all their problems on Jews. I heard complaints that the Jews were buying up Harlem and kicking out the residents, that the Jews had, Svengali-like, manipulated the war in Iraq into existence, or caused 9/11. In 2006 I heard from the Iranian president that the Holocaust was a lie, or if not a lie, exaggerated, or if not exaggerated, then it was caused by Jews, whose Zionist fervor compelled them to sacrifice millions of their own in order to force the international community to create a Jewish state.

Regardless of what I thought about what it meant to be a Jew, the world seemed to think a lot about it for me. On the other side, supposedly my side, I saw irate settlers claiming land in contested territory, undermining the peace process with the Palestinians. I saw missile assassinations and collective punishment, and I saw terrorism. There was always collateral damage: dead civilians, dead children. I saw the Security Barrier being built to cut off the Palestinians from the Israelis. If I was going to be labeled a Jew, I didn't want walls built with a Jewish imprimatur, assassinations undertaken by a Jewish state, no matter what the strategic need. But I didn't want Jews, or anyone, killed by rocket fire or suicide bombers either. I began to think more about Israel in a vague, anguished way. I didn't want that brutal, unending, morally ambiguous conflict to have anything to do with me, and yet I couldn't escape that it was, somehow, part of my identity. Even though Zionism was born as a nineteenth-century nationalist movement, it had tied itself to Judaism, and I couldn't relate to one without relating to the other. This contradiction kept me from both of them.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2007, MY grandmother, Gram Bev, passed away. She bequeathed to me her collection of books and monographs, whatever art I wanted from her apartment, and a mystery about her roots that forced me to reconsider my own. As I rummaged through her library, I found yearbooks from the Jewish country club with her picture in them, looking slim and elegantly dressed at parties, a highball glass held deli-

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cately in her hand. I found books about the “strange sexual practices of exotic peoples” and books about the founding of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. I found books like *The Jewish Mystique* and odd tracts about early Zionism and Jewish renewal in America. Scattered throughout the thousands of art books and museum catalogs, I saw the literary grapplings Gram Bev had gone through with her Jewish identity. Though she never spoke of it, her reading habits suggested that there was more to her Judaism than membership in the country club. I thought again about how she listened to High Holidays services over the telephone after she became too ill to attend synagogue.

While my family gathered to mourn, I hungered to learn more about her, and I asked everyone who knew about her life before she was my Gram. She did indeed come from Virginia, as she had always told me, but not from the type of place she had always implied. Her childhood was far more *Fiddler on the Roof* than *Gone with the Wind*.

She came from a town called Berkley, across the Elizabeth River from Norfolk, in a spot George Washington had once considered a potential site for the nation’s capital. Around the turn of the century, Berkley had a Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Jewish community that numbered over four hundred people. Now, the independent town of Berkley is gone, incorporated into Norfolk in 1909. Gone, too, are the Jews, who had scattered across the country by the late 1940s and left Orthodox practice behind. My grandmother moved with her family up to Baltimore when she was a little girl, and in Baltimore she reinvented herself, keeping the southern part of her identity but leaving the shtetl behind.

When I learned that my “thoroughly mod” Gram Bev came from Orthodox Jews in an Orthodox town, I was shaken. She had a childhood that was rich in the stuff of faith and ethnicity, which she had not told me about, even though we were close. When I asked my father about it, he didn’t know a thing. She never spoke about it to anyone. Her brother didn’t remember much either; he was just a baby when they left Berkley.

I wanted to know more than the scant details I had. Those stories were my grandmother's stories; they were my stories. I wanted to know them. The few facts I had explained nothing.

They didn't describe how Lena Goodman wooed her future husband with homemade *rugelach*, how the back room of the Mace Sack's Candy Store was the neighborhood hideout where Jewish storekeepers played cards, or how Eastern European songs poured forth from the Mikro Kodesh Shul onto Liberty Street every Saturday. They didn't tell of the camaraderie of the first Jewish families to arrive in the late nineteenth century—the Glassers, the Legums, the Salsburys, the Zedds—or the bustle of the stores and saloons after the Sabbath ended each week, when everyone seemed to be out in the street.

And these facts certainly did not explain why, over a weekend in the fall of 2007, 250 descendants of the town returned to remember and share stories about the days of a self-contained Jewish community in Virginia, or why I hadn't known about it.

"I grew up listening to Berkley stories," says Amy Ostrower, a California writer whose book, *Nana Lena's Kitchen: Recipes for Life*, recounts her grandmother's tales of Berkley with memories and recipes. "Berkley stories were my fairy tales," she says.

"This was a Yiddish-speaking shtetl in Dixie," Stephen Baer explained to me. He is my uncle through marriage, and, oddly, his grandparents and my great-grandparents were founding families of the Berkley Jewish community. "The families were extremely close. The Jews who settled here did not want to assimilate. They were Orthodox Jews [who] brought their Litvak shtetl with them." Baer, now in his sixties, remembers visiting his family in Berkley on weekends, driving down or taking the Old Bay Line south from Baltimore, where his family had also settled. Baer, a musician and retired businessman, had taken it upon himself to preserve and pass on the town's Jewish legacy. He was one of the key organizers of the Berkley Reunion.

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“My mother had such a strong feeling about her neighbors and the people that she grew up with; her influence was grounding to me,” he told me. “She had ten brothers and sisters in Berkley, and her parents still lived there . . . Because of these frequent visits and my mother’s love for the place, I always had a Berkley feeling.”

I never knew of Berkley and my family history until Stephen Baer described it, and it saddened me that I didn’t know about the reunion until after it had happened. I knew my grandmother’s maiden name had been Legum; I knew her grandfather had been named Abraham and that she came from Virginia, but I never saw a photo of Abe Legum until Stephen showed me one.

The saga of Berkley begins in the Pale of Settlement in Lithuania. During the vicious pogroms of the 1870s and 1880s, life in the shtetl of Ligim became almost unbearable for the Jews. Two young men, Abe Legum and Dovid Glosser, made their escape, embarking by ship to Baltimore, a place where many Lithuanian Jews had settled before them. Moses Molin, who was from a nearby village, took the same path. At the time, Jacob Epstein, one of the most prominent members of the Baltimore Lithuanian Jewish community, was looking to expand his wholesale business into more rural areas, and in these Yiddish-speaking new arrivals, he found the entrepreneurial spirit he needed.

He dispatched Molin to a farming community in Salisbury, Maryland, to go door-to-door selling goods. “When Moses first arrived in Salisbury, he would knock on the doors of the various farmhouses and the person would open the door and then slam it in his face,” Baer relates. “He went to another farm and got the same treatment. In each instance, the person would shout, ‘Scarlet fever!’ Moses didn’t understand what that meant and he was very distraught. He had traveled all this way in his wagon and no one wanted his goods. All they wanted was ‘scarlet fever.’ So he got word back to the Baltimore Bargain House: ‘Send me some scarlet fever. You gave me the wrong stuff!’” In time, however, Mo-

lin's business found its way, and, as an homage, he changed his name to Moses Salsbury.

Dovid Glosser, who became Davis Glasser, was sent off to Pendleton County in West Virginia, where he opened a small store selling Epstein's merchandise to the coal miners. His English was limited, but he eventually met with modest success.

And lastly, at the request of the Chesapeake Knitting Mills, based in Berkley, Epstein sent Abe Legum to supply its workers with staples. The main product coming out of the mills was high-quality underwear, and with 175 employees, business was booming.

Things went well for Legum in Berkley, and he suggested that Epstein send down his *lantsman* friend Glasser. Epstein did so and also sent Moses Salsbury. As business flourished, the men sent for their brothers and sisters and parents to join them. New families came from Baltimore and from Lithuania—Zedds and Goodmans, Zacks, Krugers, Galumbecks, and Jacobsons. All the families, with their complex web of marriages, lived within a one-mile radius of each other, much as they had in Lithuania.

They opened grocery stores and delis and hardware stores and became furniture and dry goods retailers. Baer's research showed eleven Jewish-owned saloons in the neighborhood, which mostly served Gentile customers from the mills and the shipyards. Horses and cows needed to eat too, and Abraham Berman made a business selling hay, grain, and feed. The town kept growing to the point where Norfolk's financial institutions opened Berkley branches and were glad to do business with the Jews.

They were still, however, missing a place to worship. Three times a day they held services in a store owned by the Salsburys. Finally, in 1892, they built the Mikro Kodesh Shul, named after the shul in East Baltimore (and perhaps after the synagogue they had left behind in Lithuania, though those records are lost to history). In 1893 the first Jewish wedding in Berkley took place. A local paper noted that the service "was

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enjoyed on account of its novelty, especially by the Gentile portion of the assemblage, which was quite large.” As the community grew, construction began on a larger Mikro Kodesh to replace the original; it was completed in 1922, with a price tag of fifty thousand dollars. The original cornerstone is still in place.

Times changed in Berkley. A bridge was built to span the river to Norfolk. A streetcar brought Berkley’s children to school in the city, where they interacted with the assimilated Jews—who nicknamed Berkley “Herring Town,” even though the Berkley Jews had built fine homes in the southern style with wraparound porches on tree-lined streets. Still, their religious piety, old-fashioned closeness, and continued use of Yiddish phrases marked them as different.

Though the assimilated Jews of Norfolk sometimes looked down on them, the Berkley Jews did not hide their heritage or attempt to blend in. They learned to do business with the good ol’ boys of the South. Everyone knew the Berkley Jews came from good, tight-knit families that valued education and honor.

“World War II changed a lot of things,” said Ted Kruger, who grew up in Berkley but left for college in 1946. “After ’46, I never really came back. Most young people didn’t come back for more than Sunday visits.”

After World War II, the returning young men had been exposed to the wider world. They expanded their businesses into Norfolk and beyond. They intermarried—that is, they married Jews from outside of Berkley.

“By the late forties, it was evident Berkley had had its day in the sun,” Baer notes with a touch of regret. Ellie Lipkin, who moved from Berkley to Norfolk in 1942 when she was just thirteen, remembers that the younger generation was no longer learning Yiddish. By the 1960s, most of the Jewish residents had moved away to more cosmopolitan environments—Norfolk proper, Philadelphia, New York, even Los Angeles—to establish businesses or practice their professions. Shtetl life in Dixie had come to an end.

When I asked him why he organized the reunion, Stephen told me, “It was time to bring the community back together again. This was a unique place with a unique character. They safeguarded their cultural heritage and their *haimishe* values.” To prepare, he dove into the records in Virginia and Baltimore, reconstructing the Jewish narrative. He collected photographs and newspaper articles, studied ship manifests, and created a 102-slide PowerPoint presentation to show to the descendants of the Berkley Jews.

“For me, sharing this story verified the reason I’m here, justified it, because I didn’t grow up in Berkley. Bringing everyone together was, for me, a public statement. *Hineini*, in Hebrew. You know *Hineini*? It’s what Abraham and Moses say when God asks for them. It means ‘I am here.’”

During the three-day reunion, the local social hall, used as a lunchroom, was renamed the Nosh Shop; in its earlier incarnation, it was Pincus Paul’s Furniture Store. On Saturday night, members of the African-American community told their own stories about Jewish Berkley—how welcoming it was, how people looked out for each other when money was tight or times were hard. The Church of Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, which now occupied the old shul, opened its doors to the visitors and was once more alive with Jewish song. Sitting on the same wooden pews their ancestors had used, members of all the old families soaked up 120 years of their history as Baer presented his slide show. For many, this was the first time they had ever heard the story of their lineage. Families walked through the streets on a tour, visiting the old houses and addresses that held so many memories. People told each other stories that they had heard from their parents and grandparents.

“It is an amazing thing,” Kruger said, “this natural camaraderie that was never lost. In Lithuania, in America, these were the people you were comfortable with.”

It was also fascinating, said Ostrower, who brought her mother with

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her, “to see that many people descended from eight or ten people who came from Lithuania.”

On Sunday, the final day of the gathering, they went to the old cemetery, established in 1890, for a memorial service. A retired rabbi from a temple in Norfolk gave a dedication, and a cantor chanted Yiddish songs.

As Baer described the event, “I made it real for [the descendants]. I connected the dots. I became a historian of our common heritage and became part of Berkley by telling the story.”

I will never hear my grandmother’s childhood memories of Liberty Street or Mace Sack’s Candy Store or the great fire of 1922. Before talking to Baer, I never would have thought to attend this reunion had I known about it and, given how far Gram Bev had drifted from her Litvak roots, I’m sure our family’s absence at the reunion was not noticed. I would never become part of the story the way Stephen had. As much as it could have been my story, it wasn’t my story, because my grandmother chose to close off that part of her past to us.

The Berkley community and its way of life are gone from America: the unlocked doors, the idyllic summer picnics. These are the American dreams that the Litvaks of Virginia embraced, embodied, and passed on with a Yiddish flavor. As Ellie Lipkin told me, “No matter when you left Berkley, you took something with you that you cherish. It was a special place.”

This idea of a place to which all your longing goes makes me think of Psalm 137, that passionate lamentation for Zion that was written during the Babylonian exile after the First Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people scattered from their Promised Land: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, when we remembered Zion . . . If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.”

I had never felt such longing for a place, such a connection to anywhere. Stephen Baer knew that high joy in a place, having found in Berkeley his own Jerusalem. When I thought of Jerusalem, of Zion, all I could conjure up was the problematic word *Zionism*, and suicide bombers, massacred Palestinians, colonialism, uprooted cultures, a constant refrain about the Holocaust and past wrongs, and all the opposing claims to victimhood.

And as I lamented my own lack of rootedness, I thought once more about Bosnia. I remembered how the children at the interfaith summer camp played with each other. I remembered the convoys Bosnia's Jewish community had organized to get women, children, and the elderly out of the city through the front lines of the war. I remembered the respect with which Muslim and Christian citizens of Sarajevo spoke about their Jewish neighbors. I remembered that theirs was a Jewish story that I wanted to know more about. Theirs was a Judaism rooted in a place from which they could easily have vanished, but did not. If some lost community in Virginia that I had never seen and would never see was a part of me, then why couldn't a real Jewish community growing under extremely challenging conditions be part of me too?

I began to wonder if there were other communities like that, places where the Jews stayed to create something meaningful in spite of all the pressures to leave, where they built their meaning out of whatever soil they had. Places where the Jews gave back to the culture in which they lived, whatever lessons their history had to teach. The Jewish community from which I had come was gone, and now that I knew it, I wanted to find others. I wondered what Jewish communities would look like where they were not in constant struggle with their neighbors. I wanted to find places where another narrative was being lived out, a narrative that is just as true as the violent conflict in Israel, if not just as publicized. I wanted to find the stories of peaceful coexistence, and of longing for a place that was a home that wasn't Jerusalem. Didn't Jews have a gift for

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building sacred spaces wherever they found themselves scattered? Didn't they always, in a great history of wandering and exile, manage to influence a place without exerting political control over it? I wanted to find a Judaism that was meaningful without politics, and grounded without dominating the ground.

I thought if I could seek out Jewish communities in challenging circumstances that had found paths other than confrontation and violence, I could perhaps find a model for my own Jewish self that went beyond nationalism but didn't collapse into navel-gazing.

I also thought I could touch something like the community in Berkeley and see a little of the life my grandmother might have had, or the life I might have had if she had remained part of the place from which she came.

So I set out for a year of searching for these communities around the globe, without a clear idea what I would find, just a voice in my head telling me to keep moving, to keep looking, to go. I had been a traveler for most of my years as a writer, and it seemed fitting that I would find myself by traveling more. I also realized I could spend the rest of my life looking for interesting Jewish communities but only touch on a small number. This journey led me to Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, rural Arkansas, East Africa, Iran, back to Bosnia, and inevitably to Israel. And though I set out on a personal journey, I became, ultimately, tied to the journey of a people, a variety of peoples, all connected by a label, a religion, a history. I didn't find any one answer to what it was. Like any worthwhile travel, the journey raised more questions than it answered.