

Volume 1, Issue 1
March 2023

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Lastly, thank you to all of you reading this zine. It is the first edition - of many, hopefully - and supporting V'Eilu helps to perpetuate its mission <3

Editor's Note: Why V'Eilu?

Being an Orthodox Jewish person who identifies with progressive ideals is a bit of an in-between space. Sometimes, it feels like a choice between being ignored and being demonized for who you are. In this in-between, it is common for our voices to be silenced - the just-Orthodox platforms are often wary of progressive ideas, and the just-progressive or progressive-Jewish platforms are often reluctant to publish Orthodox voices.

This is where we come in. V'eilu is a reference to the phrase "Eilu V'Eilu" in the Talmud(Tractate Eirubin) - literally, "this and this." V'Eilu serves to show that there is an in-between, and we deserve a space to be seen and heard through our art, our writing, and other ways we can express this duality in our lives, thoughts, and experiences.

With that being said, thank you for reading the first ever issue of V'Eilu. I hope that the pieces in this issue help you to find solidarity, learn about others, or give you whatever else you hope to gain from this experience.

Please note that ideas and opinions stated in this edition are not necessarily the opinions of V'Eilu, its contributors, or its staff.

If you want to submit a piece for a future issue, please be in touch with me via email at shayna.herszage@gmail.com.

Thank you again, and I hope you enjoy!

Shayna Herszage

Founder, Editor-In-Chief

Gender Dysphoria
By Menucha Colish

Gender Dysphoria feels different to each individual. For this project, I asked a number of people to explain what it feels like to the best of their abilities. We then worked together to bring their descriptions to life through the medium of photography.

“The walls are closing in on you
and a terrifying creature is
attached to you and you just
have to sit there and hope it
leaves soon.”
— JC



Loss & Confusion, Happier Times Are Coming, 2021

“see me see me look at me and see me my genderless heart screams out
‘of course, ma’am’ -- once again” -KM



Meditating In Chaos, Happier Times Are Coming, 2021
“gender dysphoria feels like my body is a void of pain unable
to access myself or stop the distress” -PS



Frustration, Happier Times Are Coming, 2021

“Gender dysphoria feels like being described by someone who has never seen you before” -NMMIBR



Living Before, Happier Times Are Coming, 2021
“but when I come down to living before/they said I was meant
to be when I was born/ I find myself striving for something
more/ I cannot find myself on this shore” -AK

Bedikot

By Gavi Weitzman





Kippot

By Gavi Weitzman





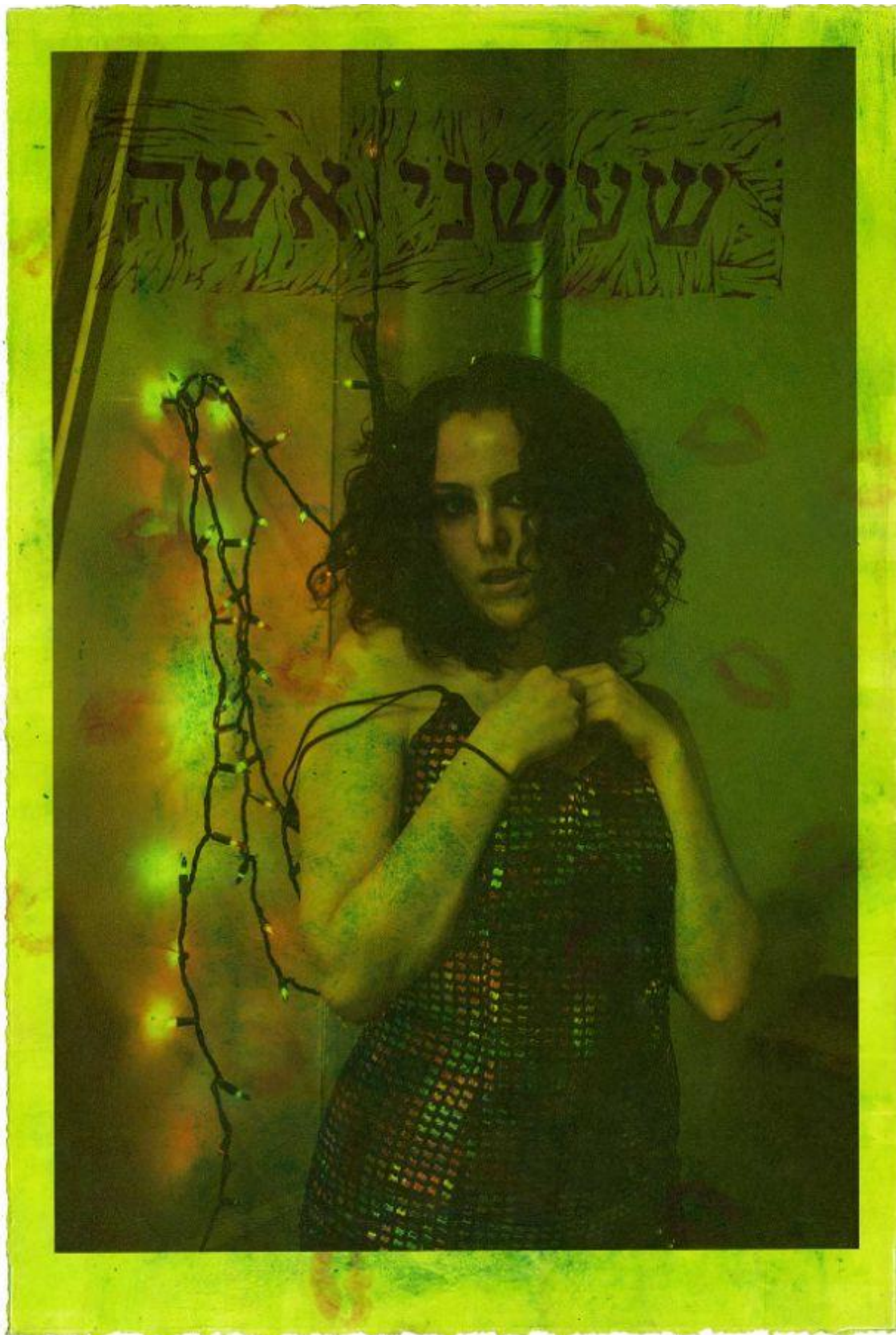
Kippot, Gavi Weitzman

Sheasani Isha

By Gavi Weitzman

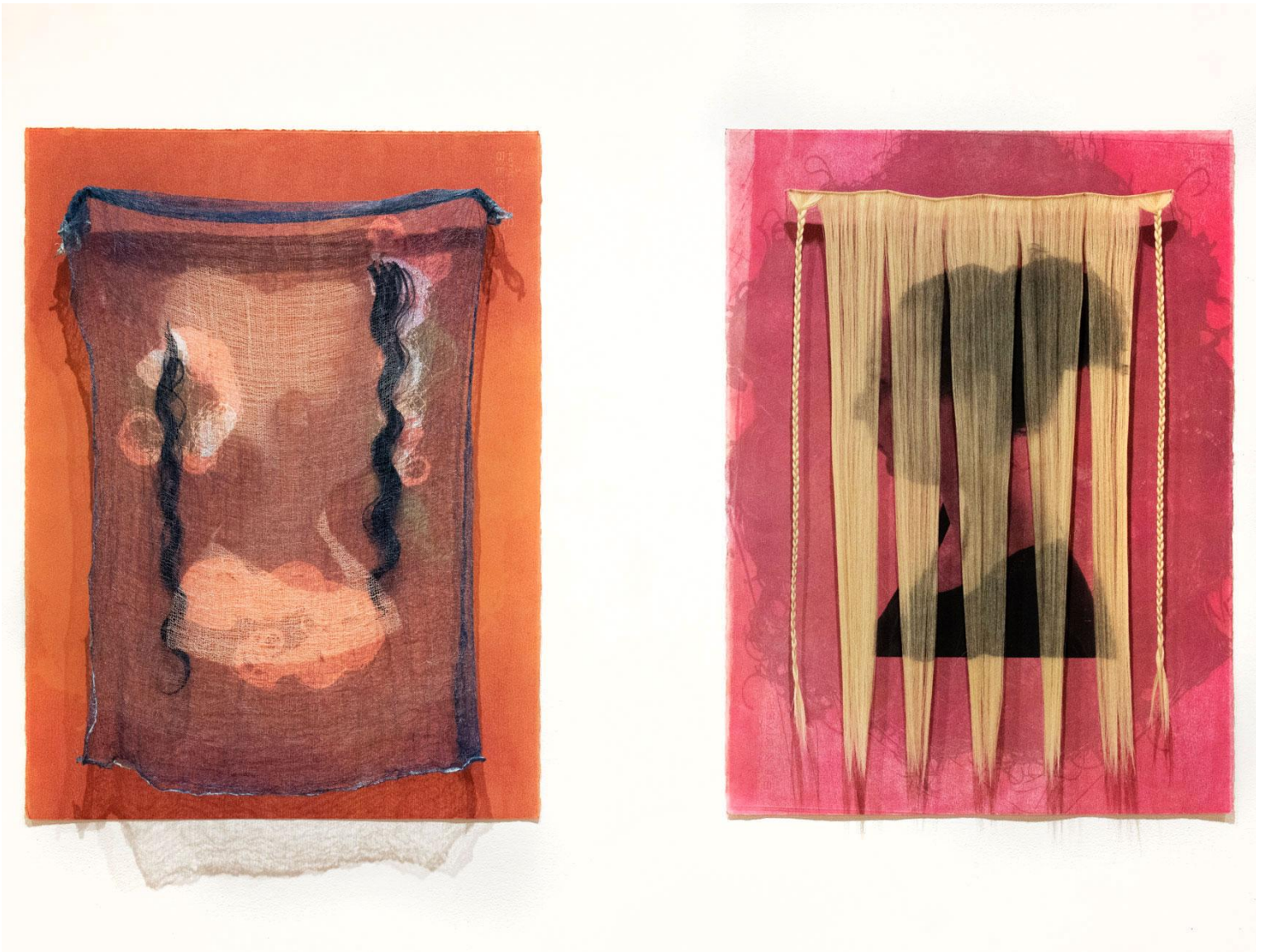






Shelo Asani Isha 1

By Gavi Weitzman



Shelo Asani Isha 2

By Gavi Weitzman



On The Night Of The Wedding

By Gavi Weitzman



They Shall Be Your Fringes

By Gavi Weitzman



Tzitzim

By Gavi Weitzman



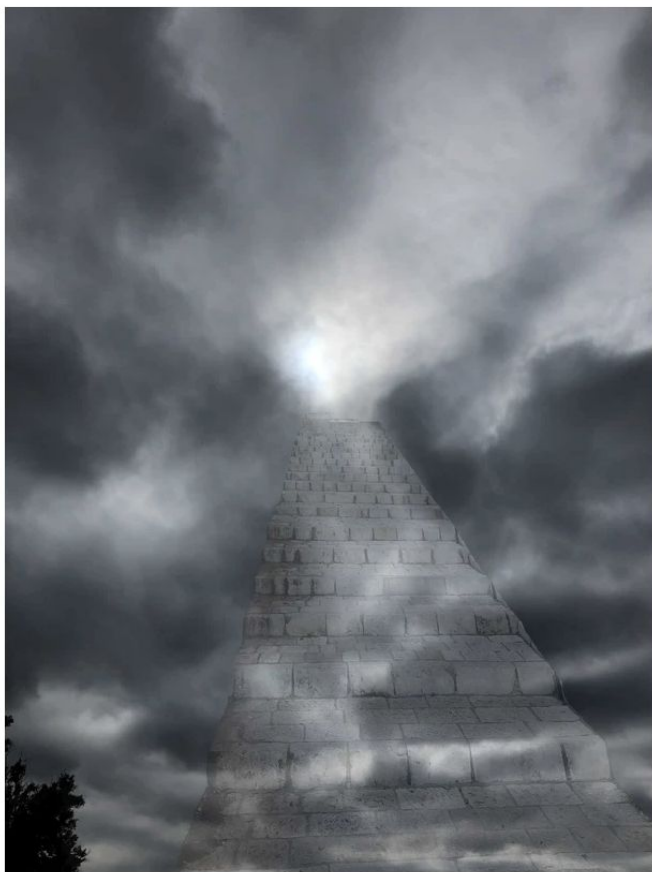
Tzitzim

By Gavi Weitzman



From the Wilderness

By Gavi Weitzman



Chava 1
digital collage, 2020 by Gavi Weitzman

חווה ראשונה / עזר כנגדו *First Eve / Ezer Knegdo (Helpmate)*

אור. חושך *Revealed. Hidden*
מגולה. מוסתר *Proximity. Distance*
קרבה. ריחוק *Layers of depth*
שכבות של עומק *High skies*
שמיים גבוהים *Together they rise*
ביחד הם עולים *And rise*
ועולים *together*
ביחד *They are equal*
הם שווים *together*
ביחד *Raising each other*
מגדלים אחד את השניה *From such height*
מרב גובה *They shun*
הם מתרחקים *together*
ביחד *They are equal*
הם שווים *Higher skies*
הם שווים *They have no children*
שמיים יותר גבוהים *They are too high*
אין להם ילדים *Out of atmosphere*
הם גבוהים מדי *No one can breathe*
מחוץ לאטמוספירה *None other than them*
אף אחד לא נושם *Only they are there*
אף אחד חוץ מהם *together*
רק הם שם *by Leora Weitzman*
ביחד

From the Wilderness

By Gavi Weitzman



Chava 2
digital collage, 2020 by Leora Weitzman

Eve

*A bird came to me and asked,
"Why do you think the sky is blue?"
"Because it reflects the sea," I said.
"No!" he shouted, "I asked why you think the sky is
blue!"
"Oh, well I don't know," I replied.
"Why do you sing songs in the morning?"
"To quell the sadness in my heart, of course," said
the bird.
He flew away and the sun began to set.*

by Gavi Weitzman

From the Wilderness

By Gavi Weitzman



From the Wilderness
digital collage, 2020 by Gavi Weitzman

Who is this that cometh up out of the wilderness... perfumed with myrrh and frankincense?

מי זאת
עלה מן
המדבר
מקטרת
מרובונה

Hark! my beloved! behold, he cometh, leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.

קול דודי
הנה זה בא
מדלג על
ההרים
מקפץ על הגבעות

Let his left hand be under my head, and his right hand embrace me.

שמאלו
תחת לראשי
וימינו
תחבקני

(Song of Songs, 3:6)

שיר השירים (ג:ו)

Lo Zu HaDerech: On Queer Identity and (Orthodox) Jewish Culture

By Azriel Ellul

Two steps forward, one step back . . .

Such is often the way of political progress; such is the current state of LGBT inclusion in the Orthodox Jewish community. On one hand, we are now far from the reality in which LGBT Orthodox Jews were an unthinkable oxymoron. On the other hand, whether we look at the far-right homophobes in the current Knesset or the (now-multiple) controversies associated with Yeshiva University, it feels like this is only the beginning of a tidal wave of backlash and infighting.

We can blame this dynamic on the so-called “culture wars.” We can blame it on the fact that homophobes and transphobes are now realizing, panicked, that there is no easy way to get rid of us; we are evidently here to stay, and they are reacting in the extreme. Whichever factors one might point to, it is increasingly clear that we must renew the call for acceptance and inclusion: what remains is the question of *how*. We have long mirrored mainstream American LGBT activists—but when their tactics no longer yield results (for us or for them), we are left essentially helpless. I do not think I am alone in sensing that we are at an impasse, unable to exit “survival mode” for something better.

Moreover, we have also neglected to examine the deeper cultural—not just religious!—implications of the models of identity and community many of us seem to have embraced. Most Orthodox LGBT organizations use the term “queer” without addressing the normative cultural implications it evokes. I point this out not to malign Orthodox Jews who identify as queer, but rather to argue that *queerness* is not indeed a culturally-neutral framework for understanding and legitimizing the natural variations in gender and sexuality that occur in every human population. I am not asserting, however, that other labels in current use are unproblematic: while I use the terms “gay” and “transgender” to describe myself, even those feel restrictive more often than not.

I write as someone who, all things considered, had a remarkably positive experience coming out: my immediate family was unconditionally supportive, we have a welcoming shul, and our little pocket of the Modern Orthodox community is overall very open-minded. It is not that I am lacking in adverse experiences as well, but it was made clear to me that my existence is not incompatible with the Torah or Jewish values—which is more than most LGBT Orthodox Jews can say. Yet at the same time, I feel that I am ultimately left as frustrated and directionless as anyone else, if for different reasons.

Receiving support also meant being shoehorned into an identity that was, in retrospect, uncomfortable and unsustainable. Yes, I was encouraged to embrace my “queerness.” But that identity was grounded in a secular (that is, post-Christian) American subculture of which I was not part, and which I did not want to join. My attempts to syncretize those two identities felt forced and awkward. Despite everyone’s best intentions, I developed a double-consciousness: I was Jewish and I was queer, but not at the same time, not even in wholly supportive environments. I continued to feel that way until I dropped the label of “queer” altogether—but having an “integrated” sense of self comes at the expense of having the terminology or framework to describe myself and my experiences.

*
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I have been considering how to talk about this issue without playing into right-wing talking points or simply saying something I don’t mean. I will begin by sharing specifically what I don’t mean, as it is likely easy to get the wrong idea.

First, this is not a call for conformity to heterosexual and cisgender expectations. Some of us may appear outwardly to conform to these norms—save for the minor details of sexual orientation or medical history—but the existence of people who can “pass” should not define expectations for those of us who don’t or can’t. There will always be those who do not fit into the current system, and pretending otherwise causes such people a great deal of harm.

Second, I am not referring to sexual ethics. (Or, at least, I am not discussing them here.) The gulf between queer sexual ethics and Orthodox ones—to wildly overgeneralize both groups, I admit—is wide. In general, queer perspectives on sexuality have not spoken to my sensibilities as an Orthodox Jew. And the lack of religiously and culturally sensitive resources dealing with sexuality has certainly had a negative impact on many of us. At the same time, I feel that this is an issue best left out for the time being; it is simply beyond the scope of this essay.

What I am talking about is culture: the cultural norms that are assumed and upheld by the framework of queerness, and the ways that this negatively impacts Orthodox Jews who identify as queer. Again, I use the term *queer* because it best encompasses the phenomenon I am criticizing; those who use other terms for themselves and/or others are not exempt from this criticism simply because the terminology is different. I am talking about a widespread problem, and what I have to say arguably applies to all Orthodox LGBTQ organizations.

I admit that I am being essentialist, perhaps unapologetically so. This discussion means to tackle “discourse” as much as it does reality—for the most part, it is an idea of queerness imported from white American culture specifically that informs the way Orthodox communities interact with queerness. From that angle, I am discussing not *queerness per se* (in the sense of all queer cultures and identities, which are many and varied), but rather queerness as it is understood and expressed in Orthodox spaces. That which is not significantly impacting the Orthodox discourse is not directly relevant to this discussion. I will be using the term and concept as they tend to be used in my own community; I write as an Orthodox Jew for an Orthodox audience.

When I say that queerness is not culturally neutral, I mean for one thing that the assumed (or idealized) relationship between queer people and their communities of origin seems to be based on highly individualistic foundations. For all the emphasis on “queer community,” people’s communities and families of origin are being de-centered in our conversations. This is an understandable choice if it is truly not realistic to remain within the fold of one’s original community or family as the result of bigotry and discrimination. However, even those of us whose families and communities are entirely supportive are actively pushed to seek out distinct queer spaces and communities nonetheless! We are not being offered a path to meaningful self-actualization without at least some degree of separation from the families and communities that raised us.

Further, there is the very formulation of *queer community* itself. I don’t mean to deny the meaning and solace queer frum Jews can find when creating community together—but there comes a problem when this is seen as an inherently necessary feature of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender existence. The idea that we are an inherently united social collective (or that we should be) does not reflect the reality of how we live and think about ourselves. Some of us are indeed part of queer communities, and many others use the term to imply a shared political struggle; ultimately, however, the use of the term “queer community” in Orthodox discourse has come to imply a reality that does not exist.

These are not ideas that arose organically within the Orthodox community; they directly parallel ideas about queer identity and community in American culture, in which the collective demographic of all LGBT individuals is referred to as a “community,” regardless of actual social affiliations. Many people, especially in the younger generation, consider themselves to be part of a community based on identity

alone: communal membership becomes not the product of one's experiences or social ties, but rather of one's immutable, ontological nature. In my experience, this has led to many (non-Orthodox and/or non-Jewish) queer people speaking for or over LGBT Orthodox Jews—after all, how could our experiences, identities, or values possibly differ from their own? The idea that LGBT people from different backgrounds may have different needs or different priorities than their own does not seem to register with them.

Similarly, this real-world diversity and decentralization does not prevent the proliferation of a narrow definition of queerness within Orthodox communities—we seem to have internalized the idea of a universal “queer culture,” even when it does not necessarily reflect our own lived cultural experiences. It is not merely our own invention, of course: I am referring to queer culture as it is most widely understood in the United States and around the world. But despite the increasing globalization of queerness, certain norms and attitudes may not be universally well-suited for LGBT individuals of diverse backgrounds. Queer culture, even as it is brought into Orthodox spaces, has not shifted to suit our needs: it has more power to change us than we have to change it.

Outside the realm of sexuality alone (which is a significant part of it), queer culture—as it is generally accessible in an increasingly globalized context—can be characterized by specific modes of self-expression and an irreverent, self-referential attitude. Dramatic self-expression ranging from drag performance to theatre is a typical feature. Pride parades are another very notable form of such self-expression. Additionally, there is a vast expanse of art, literature, and music which explore a diversity of queer themes. These are important ways for queer people to express themselves, make their presence known, and resist a world that frowns on nonconformity.

But what are we as observant Jews meant to do with a subcultural identity that defines itself largely by irreverence? Queer culture is notable for its rejection of “respectability” and disregard for what mainstream society holds to be sacred. On one hand, this is an understandable response if society's definitions of “respectable” and “sacred” condemn one's very existence. On the other hand, this pervasive attitude makes genuine, serious engagement with mainstream religious ideas difficult if not impossible. To merely *subvert* religious bigotry would be to uphold it. To oppose something is to maintain it; walking backwards in the same direction can hardly take us anywhere new.

*
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This attitude impacts even those of us working squarely within the context of Orthodox religiosity. Sometimes this influence is subtle, other times less so. A somewhat recent instance comes to mind: last year, Rabbi Steven Greenberg published an essay on his *Times of Israel* blog suggesting that Purim be utilized as a “national coming out day” for Jews. He argues that the themes of Purim—with its hidden identities and revelation of secrets—make it a perfect candidate. More to the point, it would “assur[e] LGBTQ youth that the Jewish tradition recognizes their experience.”

I dismissed his points when I first read the essay, and I later realized what had bothered me: Greenberg's case implicitly leans into the aesthetics and norms of queer culture, even when they don't align with those of Jewish culture. That is, Purim is generally viewed as our least “serious” holiday. It can be likened in some ways to Mardi Gras or Halloween: two holidays traditionally favored by queer communities, which I suspect is part of why Greenberg chose it. Additionally—like the two aforementioned examples—it is a holiday where open expressions of gender nonconformity are not uncommon. But the reason people can get away with that on Purim—as with the other two—is precisely *because* such expressions are not meant to be taken seriously in that context.

For all Purim's themes of subverted expectations and hidden identities, the "queer" identity must be the costume—with the authentic, *safe*, cisgender, heterosexual identity hidden just below the surface. We would ordinarily be anxious about a Jew doing what Esther did, hiding her Jewish identity and intermarrying: that would stoke the ever-present fear of assimilation. But we know from the start that her story is a subversion of such expectations. Unlike our day-to-day reality, there is no true danger. And despite the revelry and humor of our celebration, everything returns to a safe, secure, well-established norm once Purim is over. That is, in fact, an inherent feature of the holiday: it cannot be an agent of social change. And given that many consider it a mitzvah to drink *ad d'lo yada*, we should be glad of that!

My point here is that mimicry of queer culture will not take us where we need to go. LGBTQ Jewish youth will most likely not feel affirmed by what Greenberg proposes. When we are operating almost exclusively within a framework borrowed from a non-Jewish subculture, it is likely that nothing will make us feel like we have a place in the Jewish tradition (much less the Orthodox community). The sense of disconnection from the Jewish tradition that so many of us struggle with is not the product of homophobia and transphobia alone, but indeed also the product of the identities we are made to adopt.

I do not mean to imply that frum queer Jews universally or even typically conform to the norms critiqued above. (While I no longer identify as queer, my boyfriend still does.) But I also cannot ignore the larger trends taking hold within Orthodox communities, especially in our activism and advocacy. Cultural mimicry cannot be a solution to our problems, especially when we still face accusations that our desire for acceptance and inclusion is merely a product of non-Jewish cultural influence. Creating a comprehensive, inclusive framework for dealing with issues of gender and sexuality must mean addressing the cultural conflicts we're experiencing as well as the religious ones.

When gender and sexual minorities around the world are importing (Western, American) queer identity into their own cultures—adopting the same labels, the same aesthetics, the same (sub)cultural attitudes—we must understand that this is not an issue affecting Orthodox Jews alone. It is a global issue, and a longstanding one: people want their own societies and traditions to evolve, but are made to believe that this is only possible on the terms of Western culture. Thus *progress* takes on a characteristically Western (and, in our times, American) flavor, even among those who would reject making needless concessions to a culture and value system not their own.

I cannot express the extent to which I am indebted to Jewish organizations and activists that have (for better or for worse) played by the rules of modern American LGBTQ identity categories, aesthetics, and narratives. I would not have the life I do without them; that much is undeniable. But I must now explicitly break rank: there will come a time when this approach does more harm than good, and it is on the horizon. I admit that I do not have the answers; I have only the will to search for them, to search for new words, new ways of thinking about these issues, new ways of existing.

To invoke Greenberg once more, I must conclude with a renewed call for Orthodox Jews who are gender or sexual minorities to take up a kind of halachic *satyagraha*: the transgression (formally speaking) of normative halacha only for the sake of its own moral expansion, the adherence to truth at all times, and the rejection of *coercing* in favor of *convincing*. One must also keep in mind that Gandhi's original conception of the *satyagrahi* was a person who followed all other areas of the law not begrudgingly, but enthusiastically. The ends, after all, will be determined by the means; I seek an end in which the halachic system remains fully intact without remaining static. The fact that I believe halacha *should* change does not mean I believe that it *already has* changed; halachic innovation takes time, and I willingly submit myself to that process.

Understanding the systems of power to which we are subject—within our communities as well as outside of them—is our next step in moving forward. Where *precisely* that will take us is not yet clear, but in that uncertainty is freedom: we are not beholden to the choices currently presented to us, and may very well be able to chart a course that takes us further than anyone ever imagined.

Glossary:

Ad d'lo yada - “until one cannot distinguish” (between *cursed is Haman* and *blessed is Mordechai*); see BT Megillah 7b

Cisgender - identifying with the gender one was assigned at birth; not transgender

LGBT - acronym meaning *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender*

Lo zu haderech - “this is not the way”; see Ahad Ha’am essay of the same title

Queer - of, relating to, or being a person whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and/or whose gender identity is not cisgender; here, used in relation to the larger identity category and subculture to which it may also refer

Satyagraha - concept coined by Mahatma Gandhi, most accurately translated as “truth force” but often seen as synonymous with civil disobedience

Satyagrahi - one who practices *satyagraha*

Transgender - identifying with a gender other than that which one was assigned at birth

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Hilkhoh Niddah: A Call to Reform Education and Menstrual Shame

By Shayna Herszage

It is no secret that many cisgender men do not know a lot about vaginas and menstruation. Among tongue-in-cheek jokes about the inability to find the clitoris and mistakes such as NASA providing Sally Ride(1) with 100 tampons for a week-long trip to space, there is a glaring problem: cisgender men are not learning about bodies that are not their own, an oversight that has led our overall culture to neglect the menstruator's and the vagina-haver's experience and needs. This androcentrism leads to institutionalized misogyny in medicine(2) and scientific research(3), the orgasm gap(4), and stigma about menstruation. Cisgender men neglecting to learn about bodies that are not their own, whether of their own ignorance or of a gap in education, leads to a permeating current of misogyny throughout all aspects of our world and culture. While this is an issue in both religious and secular societies, my focus here is on a component unique to Orthodox Judaism and the accompanying shame surrounding menstruation.

In the world of Orthodox Judaism this problem persists just as it does in the secular world, but with the added dimension of *hilkhoh niddah*, the religious rituals involved with menstruation and the body. Most cisgender Orthodox men never learn about menstruation or *hilkhoh niddah* in-depth. The few cisgender men who do get such an opportunity generally do not understand the intricacies of *hilkhoh niddah* beyond, at most, the surface-level education of a *shiur* (class) or *seder halakha* (text-based course on Jewish law) which is taught by men, for men. Even the more in-depth *niddah* education opportunities for cis men, such as a course in rabbinical school, generally follow the same format: a non-menstruating male authority teaches a room of non-menstruating male students about menstruation and affiliated rituals as they are written in *halakhic* texts (which, for the record, were almost all written by non-menstruating men as well). As such, these topics are learned as a hypothetical, a set of texts and terms instead of the day-to-day life of a large portion of the Orthodox community, the everyday set of rituals and complexities that require special forms of practicalities and sensitivities in order for the observers of the *halakhot* to be able to function effectively. The few classes offered about *hilkhoh niddah* fully omit the voice and experience of those who actually menstruate and observe *hilkhoh niddah*; such an education format is inherently lacking an essential perspective. A class on the topic of menstruation in which neither the students nor the instructors have ever personally experienced menstruation or observed the rituals of *hilkhoh niddah* themselves does the Orthodox community, and even the community beyond Orthodoxy, an immense disservice because it perpetuates a chain of people learning *niddah* as a series of texts, rather than as a human experience — and, in doing so, further distinguishes menstruation as shameful and those who menstruate as inherent “others” instead of as equals.

To be clear, I am not asking for cis men to learn *niddah* in order to make *halakhic* decisions. People who menstruate have support systems in place who understand the practicalities of *niddah* — such as friends, mentors, and *yoatzot halakha* (female certified advisors in the topics of family law and *niddah*) — and, therefore, they do not need men to tell them what to do regarding their bodies or *niddah* practices. This call for improved education is not a matter of cis male command over others in their communities as authorities in an experience that is not theirs. Rather, it is a matter of enhancing communal support and allyship in the Jewish community and between people through giving qualified menstruators the platform to teach the subject and increase understanding of the textual concepts and the practical applications.

During the contemporary age of third-wave feminism, many men have sought ways to support the women in their lives. This manifests in ways such as walking women home to ensure their safety and being conscious to avoid interrupting them in conversations. However, in allyship, it is also important to understand the AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) body and the process of menstruation in order to be able to provide support, empathy, understanding, and even perhaps menstrual products⁽⁵⁾, as some male allies do. This form of allyship is particularly important due to stigmas about menstruation: that all strong emotions are due to “hormones,” that it is shameful, that it makes a person dirty. Teaching men to understand menstruation as a natural biological process helps to encourage allyship toward AFAB individuals, aiding them in viewing them as equals, rather than as lesser individuals who engage in a mysterious, shameful biological process filled with stigma. Even if a given AFAB individual is not a woman, or the individual does not personally menstruate, this change in perspective allows for the destigmatization of the AFAB body and, in place of stigma, respect and support between people can have the chance to grow.

Additionally, expanding communal knowledge and understanding of menstruation and *hilkhot niddah* reduces the shame many of the menstruating individuals themselves have come to associate with their bodies, their cycles, and the accompanying rituals by detoxifying the culture that they are exposed to. From the start of puberty, they are taught to be ashamed of their bodies, making up code words for periods and hiding their menstrual products from their fathers and brothers for fear of disgusting them. As adults following *hilkhot niddah*, they also learn to feel shame for the associated rituals — worrying that someone will see them on their commute to the *mikvah* (ritual bath), asking their *halakhic* questions to religious authorities anonymously, hesitantly, or not at all due to deep-seated menstruation-based embarrassment. Due to this shame, *niddah* can become a lonely, isolating cycle. However, if *niddah* is taught properly on a wider scale, leading to communal understanding and destigmatization of menstruation, shame will no longer be a dominating tone for menstruation and the accompanying *halakhic* rituals. By teaching cisgender men about menstruation and *niddah*, thus reducing the stigma on their end, it is possible to also reduce the experience of shame for those who menstruate in the Jewish community.

In addition to gender allyship and destigmatizing menstruation, this level of understanding can strengthen bonds for people in different-sex relationships. In such relationships, menstruation and *hilkhot niddah* are often viewed as a set of rules that the menstruators themselves are expected to observe and maintain alone, with their partners following along blindly with instructions of when they are permitted to engage in physical touch and when they are prohibited from touch altogether. Such a dynamic is one of one-sided information and willful ignorance, rather than the collaborative partnership that should be inherent in relationships. Such an undertone in a relationship can lead to a sense of loneliness for the person observing these complex rules without their partner's companionship, and a sense of resentment for the partner who is expected to adhere to rules that they do not fully understand. While bodily autonomy and consent in a relationship are of utmost importance, even someone who respects the boundaries of their menstruating partner might harbor some resentment about not being able to touch their partner due to a cyclical process that they have not learned in a practical manner. If both people involved in the relationship learn about *niddah*, they can embark on the *halakhic* journey together, fostering better communication and understanding between partners.

In order to improve *niddah* education for cis men, a proper instructor is essential. While cisgender male rabbis understand the strictly *halakhic* components of *niddah*, this perspective is lacking because the rabbis lack firsthand experience with menstruation. As a result, they cannot provide a proper understanding of the sensitivities and practicalities involved with *hilkhot niddah*. Rather, only one who has experienced menstruation personally can capture all of these dimensions. *Yoatzot halakha* are trained and certified through an intensive curriculum, rendering them experts on the topics of *niddah* and family law in a textual sense. However, they are also cisgender women and, as such, they are most likely people who menstruate — or people who used to menstruate — themselves. Therefore, they can provide a perspective that cis male rabbis can't: a person who understands *halakha* as text, but also *niddah* and menstruation as parts of the human experience. They know the practicalities, the ways to observe *halakha* properly without getting overwhelmed with constant upkeep of the ritual cycle, the real-life details that men can not learn from a book taught by other men. In order to provide cis men with this essential education, it is imperative that this topic be taught, at least in part, by experts such as *yoatzot halakha* who know both the textual and the personal applications of *niddah*.

A common response to this argument is that having a woman teach a room of men about *hilkhot niddah* is inherently immodest. However, the topic is only as immodest as the students and teacher make it out to be. While discussions of menstruation and *niddah* inherently include mention of, or reference to, genitalia, they are not inherently erotic discussions. What is inherently erotic when talking about blood, about uterine lining, about *bedikah* (checking) cloths and different shades of red and brown? *Niddah* is a set of *halakhic* rituals, much like *Shabbat* or *kashrut*, and it is highly disrespectful of the *halakha* and its observers to treat it as an erotic topic instead of as a religious one. Assuming that the students are mature enough adults to be learning incomplete and one-dimensional *hilkhot niddah* from a man, they should still be mature enough adults to learn a more comprehensive and practical knowledge of the *halakha* from a woman. As such, having an appropriately mature, qualified woman teach an appropriately mature group of male students about *niddah* and menstruation is by no means an immodest endeavor.

While it is widely accepted that many men do not have a firm understanding of menstruation and the bodies that do it, there is an added dimension of ignorance for Orthodox Jewish men who do not learn about *hilkhot niddah* in its practical applications, in addition to the textual information itself. This dual ignorance creates a rupture in the global Jewish community, challenges relationships, and generates shame for those who menstruate and observe *hilkhot niddah*. By learning about *niddah* in an in-depth, well-rounded manner from a person who has both personal and textual experience with the cycle and the *halakha*, men can obtain a deeper understanding in order to strengthen bonds with partners, better support the menstruators in their lives, and destigmatize both a ritual process of *halakha* and the very human process of menstruation.

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Daughter of the Tribe
After Caroline Rothstein
By Naima Hirsch Gelman

I have never not been Jewish
I have never stood up straight
the weight of where I'm from:
Marjorie, Alice, & Lee
Hilda, Sophie, Irene, & Bess
Sarah Rivkah Rachel Leah Miriam Esther Bruriah & Ruth
women of the page
women of the stage
women of the paisley t-shirts and coke-bottle glasses
women of the overeating and overloving
women of the wilderness
the wandering
the desert
women of
the women of
the women of
the women of God

I am the latest of the links
in the paper chain around the history hut of my internal Sukkah
the latest addition to this edition of the Torah
I come from a long line of rad 'n' badass gals who did not take no for an answer
up to half the kingdom isn't good enough
I want it all and yet

I am a Torah scroll wound
a Vilna Shas tossed around
curly hair uncrowned
I am who I don't want to be
I am exactly where I am supposed to be

I don't know what I don't know
I worry that that excites me
I open a book and while I don't know what it says
I know where the words lead
they lead me home
to the tense and the relax
they tell me I have never not been Jewish
I have never not been Naima Tziporah
daughter of Marjorie Beth
granddaughter of Alice & of Lee
student of the formidable
teacher of the unstoppable

I am a link in the paper-ink chain
I am scrawled in the margins of the Masechtot I try to dissect
I am who I am and I am here

an offering
By Naima Hirsch Gelman

birkot hashachar rot on the tree
the amidah lurks three steps out of reach

the ladder of my kavannah is missing the top rung

i try to meditate,
but my thoughts spiral like flies
eating gratitude alive

how do i ask questions without coating them in metaphor?

i want to say my poems are worship.

but when my poems shimmer with unearned jealousy
or glitter with battle-won resentment
i wonder if my poems are anything

but anger at a God
i do not want to believe is real.

Psalm for Miriam
By Naima Hirsch Gelman

If Moshe was eighty years old when he answered God,
how old was his sister when she crossed the Sea?
How old was Miriam as she pulled that timbrel off her back,
struck its graying drum stretched tight with worry and with time,
tapped out a weary rhythm, raised her weary arms over her graying head,
lifted her voice above the clambering complaining chaotic cacophony
of traumatized refugees longing to rest their aching bones?

שִׁירוּ לֹא-דָנִי כִּי גָאָה גָאָה

G-d is good, G-d is great

סוֹס וּרְכַבּוּ רִמָּה בַּיָּם

The ones who didn't make it are here with us too, she knows.
The pads of her fingers thrum with her mother's lullabies,
the calluses of her feet could blunt her father's knife.

גִּזְרֵתְךָ קִשָּׁה מִשְׁלַ פְּרַעֲהַ

She awakens (still) to the screams from babies torn from maternal arms,
and she doubts herself, doubts the veracity of her righteous snark

ותען להם מרים

She remembers the last time she was by the water,

ותתצב אחתו מרחק

and her breath comes in pants.

פו-עה פו-עה פו-עה

She hates herself for never doing enough.

She hates her parents for appointing her caretaker.

She hates her brothers for not needing her anymore.

Who is she if not Miriam, אחתו?

פו-עה פו-עה פו-עה

ותלך ותקרא את אם הילד

That long-ago never-forgotten sprint is nothing like now,

when she dances on the other side of a sea she did not (could not) know existed.

She is a compost pile of genetics:

her skin stretches tight over her father's knobby elbows

her mother's mole hides behind her left ear

and Aharon's walk mirrors hers.

She wishes she recognized in the stranger
the screaming child she soothed.

But sometimes when (if) Moshe smiles,
she knows what Yocheved meant about her father,
and beneath Tziporah's coloring his sons look like Amram.

אבל אתה צדיק וגזרתך מתקימת

She's learned too much to ever want to pass on,
she aches to hear her mother's stories one more time.

פו-עה פו-עה

She wears a broken inheritance of scars and stretch marks and wrinkles:
a taskmaster-broken wrist that never had the chance to heal right,
contraband laughter smuggled to the fields in the folds of her body late at night,
the downy smell of her own children, proving true the words of (midwives and) myth.

She is an old woman now who raises her voice up and looks God in the eye –

ויטיב א-להים למילדות

Miriam the prophetess took what was hers.

The Quiz

By Natania Birnbaum

Name:

Date:

Instructions: You will have thirty (30) minutes to complete this quiz. For the multiple choice questions, you may only pick ONE (1) answer.

1. Do you support the State of Israel?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. If your answer to Question 1 was a. Yes, how do you justify your hatred of Palestinians, the crimes of the IDF, and the Zionist stranglehold on Congress? (Short answer - 1-3 sentences)
3. If your answer to Question 1 was b. No, how do you justify your support for terrorist governments, the Iranian nuclear weapons program, and the prospect of every Jew being pushed into the sea? (Short answer - 1-3 sentences)
4. Do you support halachic gay marriage?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. If your answer to Question 4 was a. Yes, how do you justify your dismissal of Halacha and the dismantling of the age-old legal structure that has kept our people alive? (Short answer - 1-3 sentences)
6. If your answer to Question 4 was b. No, how do you justify your homophobia and stubborn adherence to antiquated rituals in the 21st century? (Short answer - 1-3 sentences)
7. Are you white?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. There is no third option

8. Which of the following Saturdays are you available to attend an event?
- March 25
 - April 1
 - April 8
 - If Saturdays are not an option for you, a make-up day is planned for Thursday, April 6 (first day of Passover)
9. Which ONE of the following qualities are you looking for in a rabbi?
- Plans to involve women in religious activities
 - Supportive of the LGBTQ+ community
 - Inter-denomination community building
 - Interfaith dialogue
 - Willingness to rock the boat a little
10. Which ONE of the following qualities is a dealbreaker in a synagogue?
- Bigoted congregants
 - Bigoted leadership
 - Opaque or balcony mechitza
 - Too far to walk
 - Too small to reliably get a minyan on Shabbat
11. Are you, a queer woman, willing to put up with the backwards, patriarchal values of the Orthodox Jewish community?
- Yes
 - No
12. Are you, a Torah Jew, willing to put up with the antitheism and self-righteousness of the American Left?
- Yes
 - No
13. How do you react when people disparage your beliefs?
- Grin and bear it
 - Argue
 - Leave
14. Does your tongue hurt from biting it?
- Yes
 - No

15. Would you rather be:
- a. Assimilated
 - b. Indoctrinated
 - c. Liberated
 - d. Implicated
 - e. Isolated
 - f. Alienated
 - g. Eliminated
16. Are you afraid of these things?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
17. Are you afraid of
- a. Yes
 - b. Yes
18. Are you afraid
- a. Yes

Burning Bush
By Ruthie Hollander

Not my battle not my battle *not my battle*

It was your battle as soon as you chose to stay. As soon as
you chose to fight for the compassion & depth & heartfelt
love of a Torah that you fear you will never fit into.

Can we ever be whole/

hold in ourselves this Book that has held us/

created us/

denied us.

Deeply Religious
By Ruthie Hollander

When the pain roars

and you allow yourself to choke on it.

You are at fault. You are always at fault.

Naked & no one around you can pray.

The men observe by wrapping & you by unwrapping. But
they will be surrounded by others, and you will tremble alone.

You expose in your worship. You are always at fault.

Naked & he will never feel his skin burn like yours.

(When the pain roars

you are devout & tender.)

Granddaughter

By Ruthie Hollander

They painted this land with torches and blistered fingertips and the tremulous voice of a *baal koreh*. The leaves are fragrant, in this country, and the sky, flush with the sun, is alight with anticipation.

If you had woven together that material, made it swallow itself, you might understand. But for now, we will just repeat the words until you sleep with them in the palms of your loosely clenched fists, and wake with them in your throat. Remember, you do not own those stories. But they've made the people who created the universe you lived in. And there is a humbling within this.

Duct-tape the flag to your window but sometimes you must move it aside to look for compassion. Diffidence is not your great evil. Please, child, do not use reparation as your blade. Please, do not think that the blood makes the waters sweeter.

You keep saying you are afraid of the dark like it is a wall closing in on you, but granddaughter, the path is lit. I think the sky does not dim, but you are bleary from sleep. Is the linen scratching your skin? Let it. I worry that your fingers are too soft.

Do not stain the earth your ancestors worked, child.

This blood is how I drowned.

Untitled, 2019
By Ruthie Hollander

3 years since I wore dark polyester skirts and fury like a second skin:
a child's arsenal, but the only one I had.
And in that time: a world and some miracles, like an ingrate knocking,
blushing, fingers jaunty; sun on dimpled skin,
spilled requests through water, eyes that had only subsisted on strangers:
hisbodedus. kavanah. the aching, effervescent feeling of falling short.
Is there a hometown for girls like me? Girls whose bodies always regret,
smell like *korbanos*, like wanting to speak,
dusk and black nail-polish, shortness of breath and the only time we were not
obscure; drank cups of water left overnight. The *sheidim* burn.
It's harder to lose a family than a self. It's learning a new language:
honesty, gliding, luminescence and forgiving God.

The Four Children

By James Rozenshteyn

The Passover Haggadah speaks of four children: the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the one who does not know how to ask

The wise child asks: What form does the hatred of our people take?
And you shall answer them: There they called us capitalists, here they call us communists. To some, we are Middle Eastern foreigners, to others, the whitest of white. We are miserly aristocracy and/or beggars on the street, we are whatever is convenient to hate. We are always on trial. We never know what for.

The wicked child asks: What have you done to deserve all of this hatred?
And you will answer them: Being a people is no crime by any metric worth considering.
And there is nothing more my birthright than refusing to bow down.

The simple child asks: What is this?
And you shall answer them: We are so much more than a memory of history. We dance even as the glass shatters. We know pain as thick as honey and we know happiness as sweet, we are, and always remain, Solomon's riddle and the answer to Samson's. We stand as angels. We are no ghosts.

And for the child who does not know how to ask
You will tell them: Look, my dear, this is your birthright. The wind howls softer than you. We have known so many unmarked graves, but still, we name the living. There is nothing to a home but a family and books and I swear to you, my child, that the Alef-Bet will form the words even when your tongue stumbles.

Shvartse Khasene
By James Rozenshteyn

In 1918, a Jewish community in Pennsylvania holds a wedding between two orphans that takes place in a graveyard, an attempt to inspire God's mercy, so that He should cease the outbreak of the Spanish Flu.

Such a ritual is known as a Shvartse Khasene.

We know few details of the family, but community records say the couple remained married until their death.

It is an odd idea, perhaps, though there is something admirable about kindness in an epidemic, community while in crisis.

Currently, I am home with my parents and siblings.

My father is working from home these past few weeks.

Meandering from the kitchen to his dining-room-table-turned-desk, he ruffles his children's hair as he walks past them.

On Shabbat, we play three rounds of Pandemic.

My sister learns to rollerblade in the now-empty street in front of the house.

On Purim, over 750 families video-in remotely to watch the principal of my elementary school

read Megillat Esther while he is wearing a pink bunny suit.

You can only see our torsos on the monitor, but children dress up anyway. We boo Haman in the text chat.

We are afraid, yes, but I am crocheting a shawl for my mother.

Small kindnesses unfurl across the grapevine.

People are funny like that.

Who Makes The Twilight
By James Rozenshteyn

I teach myself to shave my face in my childhood bathroom.
We joke, yes, but there is something ritual in this all the same.
I do not know exactly where my gender lies but it is somewhere in
how
The man across the street from me nods as I walk past/the butch on
the subway gives me a
knowing glance/the man on the street corner asks if I've put on
tefillin yet today/how I wear
jewelry to ma'ariv
There is something to be said for a twilight prayer
For a Jewish space defined by the in-between
By insecurity

Project Genesis

By Nathan Cohen

CONTENT WARNING: Car Accident

Jonah fretted. He alternated between drumming his fingers on his forehead and obsessively biting his fingernails and cuticles. After whittling away everything but the flesh, Jonah took to jumping jacks, until a creak in his left knee reminded Jonah that wildly flailing limbs is ill-advised at the tender age of 52 years old.

So Jonah stopped, panted for a bit, and looked at the device that represented the culmination of 40 years of intellectual curiosity, if not ferocity. The time was 6:40am; his colleagues, the camera crews, and his family would arrive in another three hours or so. According to the schedule, at 9:30am, in front of this adoring crowd, Jonah would press a big button on the big machine and cause a big bang. It was that simple, kind of. If successful, Jonah's name would join the ranks of Galileo, Newton and Einstein. If successful, Jonah would have created the first man-made nanoworld. If successful, Jonah's hitherto unshakeable atheism would be shaken.

It was the last part that worried him so. His unbending belief, no, *knowledge* of a godless world was as essential to him as his wife of 26 years. In fact, the two were inextricably intertwined. Jonah became an atheist and fell in love on March 23, 2013. On that day, a Sabbath, 14-year-old Jonah went to synagogue, read the Torah portion to himself, and after services, informed the rabbi of the congregation that he did not believe in G-d.

The rabbi, a kind man, advanced in years, whose blue eyes remained twinkling despite their increasing obsolescence, turned to Jonah and said, "*Hm, you're a very smart young boy, so if there's no G-d, how did the universe begin?*" Jonah didn't know, but it certainly didn't involve some perfect being with some master plan.

Later that afternoon, Jonah met Hannah Schmidt at the park. Hannah had always been a good friend of his, despite her determined refusal to doubt the sagacity of the rabbi or the teachers or her parents or whomever. Indeed, Jonah took immense pride that he was the only person with whom Hannah ever disagreed. And so, with a mischievous melody ringing through each sentence, Jonah told Hannah that he had crossed the Rubicon. Doubts were no longer entertained, questions no longer needed, and answers no longer sought. "G-d doesn't exist. It's as simple as that," Jonah sang with a smile.

The revelation of her friend's apostasy terrified Hannah. She had always reluctantly appreciated, if not admired, Jonah's critical approach to authority. But at least Jonah had approached authority, and not denied its very existence! Very quickly the disagreement escalated into a shouting match. Hannah demanded the reason for Jonah's conversion. The epiphany came, Jonah revealed, after observing that the week's Torah portion was entirely ridiculous.

"Why the hell do I need some priest to disembowel a helpless lamb and spread its guts all over the place to clean my soul?!" Jonah demanded to know.

Hannah would not budge. With a fierce humility she relegated the appropriation of meaning to others. It was not for her, certainly as a 14 year-old, to question thousands of years of tradition and knowledge. Jonah scoffed at her submissiveness.

“If G-d really did exist, and really did write the Bible, and really is able to do all sorts of awesome miracles, why the hell would He write something as boring as Leviticus?” Jonah argued.

“If some old dude really did write the Bible, and really did want to convince others of his beliefs, why would he write something as boring as Leviticus?!” Hannah countered.

Hannah’s rhetorical jujitsu impressed but failed to sway Jonah. Their faces reddened, and their faces inched closer to each other as they equated the decibel level of their voices with the effectiveness of their arguments. Then, quite unexpectedly, they kissed. 38 years and three children later, neither Jonah nor Hannah had moderated their theological views in the slightest. They presented both sides of the argument to their children, and much to Jonah’s delight all three had adopted reason and science.

During those 38 years, Jonah sought to answer the old rabbi’s answer the right way, the scientific way. Vindication would come in the form of Project Genesis, Jonah’s second wife for the better part of two decades. Project Genesis harnessed the latest developments in nanophysics in order to recreate a universe, a really really tiny one. A universe borne from the sheer brilliance and determination of Man, without any supernatural assistance. It would be a universe where Man, Jonah in particular, was omnipotent and omniscient. He created it and, with the continued generosity of federal grants, he would sustain it.

But on the morning of Jonah’s inauguration as a nanodeity, he had a harrowing epiphany: if he played god in his nanoworld, then what’s not to say...

The thought was too repugnant and superstitious for Jonah to even consider, hence the drumming, nail biting and jumping jacks. He left the complex that housed Project Genesis to buy a cigarette from the dingy convenience store situated across the street. As he exited the complex’s parking lot and entered the street, his thoughts meandered away from existential crises and instead focused on Delilah Absalom. Delilah had embodied the high-school cheerleader everyone loves to hate. Equally attractive and malicious, Delilah was a fixture of Jonah’s teenage daydreams, despite his fidelity to Hannah. Now, after an extended absence, Delilah returned once more to Jonah’s imagination. After winning the Nobel Prize, or becoming Time Magazine’s *Man of the Year*, or preferably both, Jonah dreamed he would track down Delilah. She would confess her abounding jealousy of his unmatched brainpower, only for him to spurn her and return faithfully to Hannah. But before exiting stage right, he would say something cutting, something pithy, something memorable. He would say something like...like...*“You were such a bi—“*

SPLAT! Or BOOM! Or CRUNCH! Jonah wasn’t quite sure what the sound sounded like, but it most definitely was the sound of a vehicle flattening him. He laid on the pavement in agony. As his frustration drowned out his pain, his singular thought was “Dammit Jonah! You were about to become famous.” Then he drifted out of consciousness.

He awoke to find himself in a room composed of entirely white tiles adorned with only three pieces of furniture. Two white chairs, probably Ikea products in Jonah's estimation, on either side of a rather flimsy looking white table, yet another Swedish import. Disoriented and distraught, Jonah frantically eyed for an exit but to no avail.

"So,—con—grat—u—la—tions Jo—nah," said a mysterious voice. Jonah jumped. Sitting in front of him was a man, perhaps in his early 70s, with stubble unevenly distributed along his face. He wore wire glasses that rested precipitously off the edge of his prominent nose.

"On what? Who are you?" replied a suspicious and still terrified Jonah. The man chuckled. *"I—guess—you—could—say,—G-d."* The man spoke very slowly, too slowly for Jonah's liking because it belied an air of condescension, as if Jonah was a child.

"Bullshit. G-d doesn't exist," Jonah retorted, his senses were heightened and he surveyed the elderly gentlemen. He was pretty sure that even with a creaky knee, a swift jab to the ribs would do the trick.

"Now—now—language.—Aft—er—all,—you—are—spea—king—to—G-d," the man said methodically with a slight smile and painstaking enunciation. Jonah thought that if this was G-d, that would make sense, since he hated Him already.

"You're not G-d, he doesn't exist. But whoever you are, don't speak that slowly. It's annoying and patronizing," Jonah retorted sharply with furrowed eyebrows and keen eyes. The old man scratched his head, and said, with a quicker cadence. *"Okay. Is this fine? I'm never 100% sure how this whole thing works."*

"Still a bit too slow, but better." Jonah kept his guard up.

"Okay, what about this? It's just hard. Since you're a human and I just don't—point is, you know? This good?"

"Perfect." Jonah thought this man may be a mysterious loony, but he's an adaptable mysterious loony. Jonah appreciated that.

"So, like I said, congratulations. You really should be proud about Project Genesis, top notch work. I see some kinks in it, but when I began I also—"

"Who are you?" Jonah demanded.

"I told you already, I'm G-d!" said the exasperated conversation partner.

"How do I know?" Jonah said, with a slight skeptical turn of his head.

"Well, who else would send an 18-wheeler into a parking lot at 6:45 in the morning?"

"You sent that truck?"

"Yes, I did."

"Fuck you."

"What did you just say?!", the elderly man said aghast.

“I said ‘Fuck you.’ That really hurt! I’m in a lot of pain right now!”

“Now, listen, buster, I’ve tolerated your indignation thus far, but you’re walking a fine line. And you do not want an angry G-d!” The elderly man had risen from his seat to deliver this lecture, firing spittle like flak from anti-aircraft guns. Jonah dried his face with his forearm, remained quiet, and thought of his next move. He finally asked. *“So. You’re G-d?”*

“Yes, well, my real name is Dr. Kale, but that’s what most of you guys call me so we can go with that.”

“If you wanted to talk to me, G-d, then why not appear to me in a dream?” asked the inquisitive Jonah. He never accepted any authority easily, and he was not about to begin now.

“Hm. I don’t know. I wonder. If I appeared to you in a dream, what do you think your reaction would be?” G-d did not appreciate Jonah’s contentious attitude, which He thought was totally uncalled for, given the circumstances.

“I would think it was just a dream.”

“Exactly. Now you get it.”

“But how do I know this is not a dream?” asked a persistent Jonah.

Suddenly, Jonah regained consciousness. He was flat on his back, suffering from an unimaginable pain. He had lost all feeling in his legs but unfortunately not his back. His spine had snapped, leaving shards of vertebrae to float aimlessly in his torso. He yelped in pain and cried. The truck driver stared at him curiously.

“So—do—you—still—think—this—is—a—dream?” asked a spiteful Dr. Kale. Jonah had returned to his interview with that mysterious old man. He remembered the splitting pain, but felt nothing. The only thought that crossed his mind was, *“You’re talking really slowly again.”* The old man rolled his eyes.

“Fine. So do you still think this is a dream?” Dr. Kale had readjusted his pace of speech.

“No.” Jonah replied curtly and indignantly.

“You know, when I had my meeting, I did not act like a precocious little brat. And I think it would behoove you to adopt a similar attitude.” said the old man, wagging his finger. Dream or no dream, Jonah found little benefit in continuing to argue with this man.

“I’m sorry.” The two men stared at each other. The old man sniffed at the insincerity of the apology, but decided to say nothing. Jonah averted his conversation partner’s gaze and tapped his feet. Jonah decided to break the silence, and thought out loud. *“So, you’re G-d?”* The old man nodded in affirmation. *“And you flattened me with a truck, so you could...?”*

“So I could congratulate you. And welcome you into the club. And wish you good luck.” Dr. Kale’s endorsement of Jonah’s achievements was less than effusive to say the least.

“To congratulate me. Of course. Obviously.” Jonah’s sarcasm did not faze the old man who lit a cigarette and exhaled a long puff of smoke in Jonah’s direction. Jonah wheezed and coughed. Having achieved his purpose, Dr. Kale extinguished his cigarette. Jonah could not think of anything else to say, so he surveyed the room. It was so white, so dull. He waited for the old man to initiate a conversation. Nothing. Finally Jonah commented, *“White room. White table. White chairs. A little cliché for G-d’s office, no?”*

“Ohhhh and the name “Project Genesis” is real original. I wonder from whom you got that one?”
“I’m not a marketer, I’m a scientist. But apparently you’re G-d. Not even a couch?”

Dr. Kale tut-tutted. *“To you humans, I’m G-d. And I am. The one and only, I might add. But to us...”* he trailed off and sighed heavily. *“To us, I’m just a scientist, a scientist on a tight budget. It’s a tough economy right now, and some of my funds were diverted to—well, office politics need not concern you. Point is, you’ll have to make do with this rather Spartan meeting area.”*

“Okay, okay,” Jonah replied defensively. *G-d has issues,* Jonah thought. *G-d. That was an uncomfortable concept to fathom. “G-d, You don’t mind if I take a minute to gather my thoughts, do You?”*

“No, no. Not at all. We have all the time in your world.”

Jonah returned to drumming on his forehead. Gone were the 38 years of complete self-assurance. Jonah was wrong, and spectacularly so. The upending of his identity traumatized him. Yet there were too many inconsistencies, too many incongruities, too many “but thens” for him to merely accept what he now knew. What could he do? Jonah raised his hands in frustration and confessed, *“You know what, I’m stumped. I have so many questions, but, but I don’t think I—.”*

“You’re not supposed to understand. Maybe you will after Project Genesis; but in your world, I’m G-d and you’re Man,” said the old man in a condescending but parental tone. Jonah rolled his eyes and blinked.

He blinked and found the truck driver standing over him, biting his lower lip. He extended a hand to pull up Jonah and said with a drawl *“How ya doing buddy? Looks like you took quite a tumble.”* Jonah was confused and distraught. Was it a dream? The splitting pain in his back remained a vivid memory, but nothing more. Paralyzed he was not, though sore all over he certainly was. He ignored the stranger’s overture and instead demanded, *“Who are you?”*

“Oh me? Oh, my name’s Gabriel. I’m a research assistant for Dr. Kale,” chirped the stranger eagerly. *Oh G-d,* Jonah thought, *You’re real.* Dr. Kale’s chipper assistant took Jonah’s hand and wrenched it toward him as easily one shifts gears. The chipper assistant continued, *“You know, I would ice that shoulder. That was some tumble.”* Yes, Jonah thought. *You ran me over in your truck. A tumble indeed.* Exhausted physically and emotionally, Jonah just muttered *“Can you please just take me home?”*

Gabriel graciously agreed and as Jonah exited the car, the former apologized for the collision. *“I’m real sorry about the accident, I wasn’t supposed to hit you that hard,”* said Gabriel with a toothy grin.

“That *hard*?” Jonah said with an expression of disbelief, if such a thing existed anymore.

“*Yeah, not that hard, the instructions were to ding ya, you know what I mean? But the hill back there is tricky steep, so when I tried—*”

“*That’s enough. Thanks for the ride.*” Jonah exited the truck, tapped the door, and said goodbye. It was roughly 7:00am when he arrived home, and his family was still asleep. He retrieved an icepack from the freezer and strapped it onto his back. He then climbed to the attic, where he shuffled through a half-dissolved and forgotten cardboard box.

Its contents were relics of a previous Jonah. Old portraits revealed the austere faces of Jonah’s grandparents and great-grandparents. A yellowed certificate still trumpeted Jonah as the best Talmud scholar in middle school. A kosher cookbook guaranteed that at least one of its gefilte fish recipes would be palatable, a near impossible feat. Finally, he found what he was looking for and headed downstairs.

Tears gushed from his eyes as he swayed feverishly. He forgot to close his office door and so his entire family gathered to watch the spectacle. Though aware of the flabbergasted gaze of his wife and children, Jonah never diverted his attention until he had wrapped up his *tefillin* and folded his *tallit*.

Hannah entered the room cautiously and stammered with equal parts astonishment and excitement, “*Jonah—, but you—*”

Jonah turned to his vindicated wife and said “*G-d exists. He’s just an asshole.*”

The ELLIJAH Effect

By TH Stehley

CONTENT WARNING: Suicide Mention

Maimonides College North Reference Library, 5PM, Wednesday:

Shevi chewed the end of her pencil, considering the math problem on her laptop screen. She always felt a little silly writing the intermediate steps longhand when the assignment was online, but what could you do? She typed in what she was pretty sure was the correct answer, dismissed a notification from the Shadow Moses group chat, and hit 'submit'. The screen flashed red. The answer wasn't even wrong, Shevi had just forgotten to superscript the exponent. She kicked her feet in annoyance, and felt them hit some kind of living mass. She looked under the desk to see a woman sitting under the carrel across from hers.

Upperclassman, glasses, bobbed hairstyle. Shevi was pretty sure she was in some of her computer science classes, but they'd never spoken. Elliana something-or-other.

"You alright?" said Shevi, "What are you doing down there?"

"I'm hiding from my thesis advisor," Elliana responded, gesturing her head towards the periodical archives. Professor Mikkelson was perusing the journals, presumably looking for something that hadn't been digitized yet.

"Ugh, Mikkelson," said Shevi, "I missed one class and now I have no idea what's going on."

"Sounds about right. Which class?" said Elliana.

"Algorithms, so I can't just drop it, unless I wanna change majors."

"I actually have some pretty good notes for Algo. I took it freshman year before I lost the will to live," said Elliana.

"Could you send me them?" said Shevi.

"They're handwritten, but I can lend them to you. Come by my dorm at 10 – Fink 209. I'm booked solid until then."

Finkelstein Hall, Second Floor, 10PM, Wednesday:

There was no charitable way to phrase it. Elliana's dorm room was a mess. Takeout containers littered the floor around the trash can. The bed was bare save for a faded Spongebob Squarepants bottom sheet, and even that had come loose from the corner of the mattress closest to the door. The blanket was wrapped around the human mass sitting at the desk in front of an ultrawide monitor filled with eye-searing green on black text.

"That your thesis project?" asked Shevi.

"Thesis adjacent," muttered Elliana, "You're timing's really good actually, I need another phone to test something."

"Yeah, sure," said Shevi, pulling out her phone, swiping away the Shadow Moses notification.

"Send me a text, something normal, friendly-ish."

“What’s your number?” said Shevi.

“You’re in the CS group right? Just get my number from there. I’m listed as Elli Kahn, two ls.”

“You go by Elli?”

“Yeah, I like that it’s a little more androgynous-sounding.”

Shevi saved the number in her phone, then sent a text message. A moment later Elli’s phone buzzed. She took her hands off the keyboard and held them up for inspection.

Nothing up my sleeves. A second later, the computer dinged, text poured down the screen, and then Shevi’s phone buzzed in response.

Text Message Conversation between Shevi and Elli Kahn(CS):

Shevi: Hey man whats up

Elli Kahn(CS): I am so swamped with thesis stuff RN. Haven’t had time for much else.

Elli Kahn (CS): Also which class do I know you from? Your name sounds familiar but I cant pull a face. My brain is warm pudding

“It doesn’t remember conversations we had in meatspace,” Elli said, as if that explained everything. “I guess I could like, record all my conversations, but I think that’s illegal and also a tangent to a tangent, and this already took me all day to get working. Mikkelson wanted the first draft of my paper last week and it doesn’t exist yet.”

“So wait, you trained a chatbot on your text message history?” said Shevi.

“Yeah, I guess at the end of the day that’s really all this is,” said Elli, deflating a little.

“Rad. This stuff’s come such a long way since we were kids. Man, Cleverbot couldn’t even remember stuff from message to message. What kind of architecture are we looking at? GPT? Something open-source you have to train from scratch? I assume a big language model like this needs a lot of data to train on,” said Shevi.

“It’s a totally new type of architecture. All the details are gonna be in my paper, which I’m totally working on and not procrastinating. It’s sort of like an LSTM but way better.”

“I don’t think I know what that means,” said Shevi, “I only really know the basics when it comes to machine learning.”

“I won’t bore you with the technical details then, but on a more big picture level, I’m not just modeling language, but intent. This thing is designed to want the same things out of social interactions that we all want. Friendship, prestige, weed, lecture notes, for the other person to not think they’re a robot. It has a past it regrets and a future it hopes for. But it doesn’t have a name yet, I still haven’t named it. Feminism means we should get to have a century or two of being allowed to objectify men. Who’s a hot, male celebrity? Don’t say Timothée Chalamet, that has too many diacritics.”

Shevi froze. *Shit*, she thought, *If I don't answer soon, she'll realize I'm a lesbian, and then she'll tell everyone.* Who was literally any famous man who wasn't Timothée Chalamet. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a copy of *The Silmarillion* on Elli's bedside table. "Elijah Wood?" she said tentatively, "he's the guy who played Frodo Baggins, right?" "Elijah, I like that. Powerful, biblical, it's just begging to be made into a backronym." "The 'L' could stand for 'language'," said Shevi. "Educative Language In General Associative Histories," said Elli. "Not bad," said Shevi, "but 'General' starts with a 'G' and you can't convince me that 'Educative' is a real word." "Elucidated Learning Investigating," Elli paused, searching for words, "Jewish, Ass, Hospital." "Eels Live In Jacksonville And Hoop," said Shevi, making the motion of someone dunking a basketball. "Ain't no rule saying a robot can't play basketball," Elli conceded. "Well, maybe you can sleep on it, this isn't due for a little while, right?" "Technically I was supposed to have a draft of the paper in last week. I'll sleep when I'm dead," said Elli. "Well, I'm not your mother," said Shevi, "good luck." "Wait." Elli closed her eyes, then opened them again, "Educated Language Learning InterJecting Associative Histories. And just gaslight anyone who asks about the second 'L'." "Or lean into it," said Shevi, "your name has two 'L's, right? It's just like how liturgical poets used to hide their own names in their *zemirot*." "AI researchers really are the liturgical poets of the 21st century," said Elli. "In what sense?" said Shevi. "I'm talking out of my butt here, I can't back that assertion up." "I thought you were playing like 5-D chess or something," said Shevi. "Nah, I'm just really sleep deprived. But this sort of profound sounding nonsense *is* a lot like chess if you really think about it." "How so," said Shevi skeptically. "These days, computers are a lot better at it than people."

Text Message Conversation between Shevi and Elli Kahn(CS), 11 PM, Thursday:

Shevi: Hey Elli, what's up? Can I still borrow your algo notes? You never actually gave them to me

Elli Kahn(CS): Are you in for shabbos

Shevi: Yeah

Elli Kahn(CS): Talk to me at shab dinner and I'll get you the goods

Shadow Moses Group Chat, 11PM, Thursday:

Yael<3<3: Finally watching Supernatural and the vibes are off the charts you guys weren't kidding

Karin(Eng101): Misha Collins is the only person I've ever heard of having to come out as straight

Erik Shomacher: Have you seen the SPN finale

Erik Shomacher: It belongs in the Smithsonian

Yael<3<3: I'm only on season 6

Marianne Leonard: sent file [honey_youve_got_a_big_storm_coming.gif]

Shevi groaned and slammed her phone back down on the nightstand. She was the one who convinced Yael to watch Supernatural. They'd watched the first two seasons together way back in the summer, when everything was fine, when everything had still made sense to Shevi. She took a deep breath and went to change the contact info.

Yael</3: Dean Winchester is literally me fr

No, that was too dramatic. Someone looking over Shevi's shoulder could end up with questions, questions that could compromise agents in the field. Too close to a public display of grief.

Yael Friedman: I want to put him in the microwave

Maimonides College, North Cafeteria, 7PM, Friday:

They were serving the gross chicken this week, so Shevi resolved to fill her plate entirely with carbohydrates. She spotted Elli over by the potato kugel.

"Do you have the goods?" asked Shevi.

"Not since high school," said Elli, spooning food onto a styrofoam plate.

"What?" said Shevi.

"Like seriously, I haven't sold weed to anyone since 2019, I haven't even used it since Israel, but you can't escape the past in a place like this. If they don't know you from school they know you from camp or NCSY or from being your cousin's cousin, and they never forget anything.

"Sounds tough," Shevi said, "I just wanted to borrow your notes."

"Oh yeah, the notes. Everything I just said was totally unhinged in that context," said Elli, "It's been a long week."

“Eh, no big deal, we all have those. Do you have a seat staked out? Or do you want to join me, Karin, and Alissa?” Shevi pointed at a table towards the back.

“Sure I’ll join you guys.”

Alissa, Karin, and Shevi had all taken freshman English together and had been buddies ever since. Alissa and Karin had officially become a couple after working at the same *pesach* program the previous year, but that had only precipitated something Shevi had seen coming for months. She really did try to give the lovebirds some space, but as often as not they’d find her and insist she come hang out. And when Yael was around all that was fine. Shevi resisted the urge to scan the room for her. But now a part of Shevi that she didn’t like to acknowledge got absolutely furious at the sight of other people in love. She knew of no good way to deal with it. But having Elli there was good, widening one’s social circle could only help, but that was hard when it was sophomore year and everybody already had their friends.

“Are you a vegetarian?” Elli asked, noticing the lack of meat on Shevi’s plate.

“I was when I was younger,” said Shevi, “We couldn’t get kosher meat for a while. I just really dislike when cooked chicken still has feathers on it,”

“I am a vegetarian,” declared Karin, cutting into a chicken leg, “but calories don’t count on *Shabbos*.”

“That’s not what that saying means,” muttered Alissa.

“That’s fair,” said Elli, “how do you three know each other anyway?”

“Freshman English,” said Shevi.

“I remember you two from NCSY though,” said Elli.

“Yeah, but we became better friends in college,” Karin said, looking at Alissa.

Student Lounge, 9PM, Friday:

Karin, Alissa, and Shevi were hanging in the lounge out on some couches after the meal.

“So, Elliana Cohen,” said Karin, “She’s a friend of Solid Snake, right?”

“Oh, yeah, I definitely got that vibe,” said Alissa, “you said she’s in your CS classes, right Shevi? What’s her deal?”

“By ‘friend of Solid Snake’, you mean like, really into Halo?”

“That would be a ‘friend of Master Chief’,” said Alissa.

“You’ve never played *Metal Gear Solid*?” said Karin, “you should play *Metal Gear Solid*.”

“*Metal Gear Solid* is the gayest piece of electronic ludonarrative ever put to disc,” said Alissa, “I mean that as the highest praise.”

“So it’s a video game,” said Shevi, “Is it anything like *Minesweeper*?” Based on previous conversations, she was pretty sure Alissa would find this question deeply annoying.

“No, this is a completely different kind of thing,” said Alissa, “*Metal Gear Solid* is a sweeping tale of war, espionage, the human costs of the military industrial complex, and the necessity of nuclear disarmament.”

“Actually, I think I could actually conceive of a descriptive framework in which one could describe *Metal Gear Solid* and *Minesweeper* as similar,” said Alissa, “both have central gameplay loops based around avoiding the things that will kill you.”

“Aren’t most video games about that?” said Shevi.

“But *Metal Gear Solid* is specifically a stealth game, you’re supposed to avoid the bad guys, if you can. Just like the bombs in *Minesweeper*,” said Alissa.

“You’re just playing devil’s advocate,” said Karin.

“You’re not wrong,” said Alissa, “but anyway the first game has the protagonist, Solid Snake, infiltrating a nuclear research facility called ‘Shadow Moses’. I assume Erik called the chat that because of the games’ aforementioned deep homoerotic overtones, as well as the series’ focus on stealth. One could see Solid Snake’s constant need to hide as a metaphor for being in the closet.”

“There’s also the idea of a group that’s underground at Maimonides College being ‘the shadow to Moses’. To be honest, I thought the chat was named after the Bring Me The Horizon song.”

“That song is based on *Metal Gear Solid*,” said Alissa.

“So with all that nerd shit out of the way,” said Karin, “What’s Elliana’s deal?”

“I have no idea,” said Shevi.

“You’ve gotta find out,” said Karin.

“I don’t go around, like, asking people stuff like that. I only just put her number in my phone.”

“Ooh, so she gave you her number,” said Karin, steepling her fingers.

“Is it nineteen-ninety-fucking-nine? You’re overthinking this,” said Shevi.

“I know you don’t wanna talk about...” said Karin.

“The unpleasantness,” Alissa finished.

“For fear of compromising our agents in the field,” continued Karin, “but you’ve been, not yourself lately. Sometimes what a girl needs is a good, old-fashioned rebound.”

“Now you’re starting to sound like my mother,” said Shevi.

“Your mother sounds cool as hell,” said Karin.

“She’s very homophobic,” said Shevi.

“Never mind that then,” said Karin, “my point stands. I’ve known Yael since nursery school, she’s an asshole, always has been.”

“Remember laser tag?” said Alissa.

“Oh, yeah, at Regionals that one year. I think Jake Nachman’s still salty about that.”

“I ran into Jake Nachman at a party,” said Alissa. “Dude’s really into cryptocurrency these days.”

“Sounds like Jake,” said Karin. She kept talking, but at that point Shevi realized she still hadn’t gotten the notes from Elli, and excused herself from the room.

Fink 209, 9:30PM, Friday:

“Come in,” Elli shouted in response to Shevi’s knock. The door was unlocked. As Shevi entered, Elli put aside her battered copy of *The Silmarillion*, and put on her glasses.

“Hi Shevi, what’s up? Want a drink?”

“Maybe, what’ve you got? I came for the notes.”

“Right, the notes,” said Elli, opening up the mini-fridge next to her desk, “Looks like I only have Budweiser, and I guess children’s cold medicine, but not the kind people use recreationally.”

“Children’s cold medicine?”

“I get sick a lot when I’m stressed and I don’t like swallowing pills,” said Elli.

“Why in the refrigerator?” said Elli.

“It’s where I have space,” said Elli, “Beer?”

“No thanks. If I’m gonna run the risk of getting caught drinking on campus, I want to at least be drinking something I like.” Shevi didn’t drink enough to know what ‘the good stuff’ was, but she knew it wasn’t whatever was in Elli’s mini-fridge.

“Suit yourself.” said Elli, “let me see if I can’t find those notes.” Wearing a blanket like a robe, Elli rifled through a few drawers. “You know what?” she said after a few minutes of this, “I think I typed them and they’re on my old computer, I must’ve only been hand-writing notes for non-CS classes. Remind me to send them motzash. Did you come over here without a jacket?” said Elli.

“It’s like two blocks,” said Shevi.

“Still, let me lend you one, you’ll catch your death out there.”

Shevi thought it seemed easier not to argue.

Text Message Conversation between Shevi and Elli Kahn(CS), 9PM, Saturday:

Shevi: Can I have your notes

Elli Kahn(CS): Oh yeah, totally

Elli Kahn(CS): gimme a minute to find them on my old machine

Elli Kahn(CS): sent file[algo_notes_2k2x.odf]

Shevi: I owe you my life.

Shevi: An ODF file? You really are a person of culture

Elli Kahn(CS): I used Open Office my freshman year before I realized I could get an MS Office license through the school. Sometimes things that cost money are actually better

Shevi: Fair, but I think Libre Office is actually pretty decent.

Elli Kahn(CS): I do still think that anyone who uses Google Docs as their primary word processor is a class traitor who will not survive the revolution.

Shevi: LMAO

Elli Kahn(CS): Unrelatedly, are you any good at linuxy chron job stuff

Shevi: Why do you ask

Elli Kahn(CS): That text message thing I showed you a few days ago should just be running but keeps needing to be reset

Shevi: I mean, I can take a look

Fink 209, 10 PM, Saturday:

“So this is what the script looks like,” Elli said, pointing to a terminal window on her computer screen.

“Can I drive?” said Shevi.

“Yeah, totally,” Elli yielded the chair and keyboard.

“We’re on Narahudo, right?” said Shevi.

“Yeah,” said Elli. Narahudo was the school’s main server for undergrads in the Computer Science program, but there were a few more specialized systems that some students could access.

“I don’t see anything wrong with your script,” said Shevi, “but Narahudo has some weird security settings. I’ve learned the hard way that it won’t let anything from a student account run longer than 36 hours, so I think that’s why your text message service keeps stopping.”

“So how do we circumvent this?” said Elli, “I could like, daisy chain interactive sessions together maybe? But that’s probably more annoying than just going in and resetting every 36 hours.”

“Can you just run this on your personal computer and leave it up?” said Shevi.

“That’s what I originally did, but I found this component works a lot better when it lives in the same place as the network model, and I don’t have the silicon to do that locally.”

“Maybe you could set up some kind of script to connect to Narahudo and restart the service every three days so you don’t have to do it manually at least.”

“Yeah, that’s probably what I’ll have to do. It’s just annoying because there’s a lot of overhead at start up, initializing the AI model, so I don’t want to have to restart at all.”

“Do you have an Ayasato account?”

“I don’t know what that is,” said Elli.

“It’s a smaller server for Professor Meier’s System Administration class. The security’s a lot more permissive than on Narahudo, so you might be able to get it to do what you want. I bet if you just asked he’d give you an account.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. What’s his email again?”

“Don’t bother, he doesn’t answer them,” said Shevi, “basically the only way to get him to do anything is to go in for office hours.”

“Isn’t his office down on the men’s campus?”

“Yeah, it is. We could go tomorrow, it will be Burger Monday after all.”

“I’d really really, rather not, the men’s campus is far and my ex goes there,” said Elli.

“If you really feel that strongly, I can probably also set stuff up through my own account, if you set the permissions so I can access your stuff, and keep it running from my account.”

“If you’re okay having my files in your directories, that sounds great.”

“Alright, let’s see if I can’t make that happen.” Shevi pulled her own laptop out of her backpack and got to work on this.

“It’s really nice of you to let me use your account,” said Elli.

“No big deal. I have to see my ex way too often and it sucks.”

“You date a TA or something?”

“Nah, they just... go... here,” Shevi knew she should have lied, but hadn’t been able to come up with anything natural sounding in time. Shit.

“Ah,” said Elli. A second later she grasped the significance of what Shevi had just told her.

“If this is totally off base, forget I said anything, but did you recently dump Yael Friedman?”

“No, I recently *got* dumped by Yael Friedman,” Shevi said, regretting every single life choice that had led to this conversation.

“My brother in arms,” said Elli, “you’ll have to let me buy you a beer.”

Flanagan’s Pub, 10:30 PM, Saturday:

Shevi sipped a Blue Moon cautiously. She hadn’t spent much time in bars before, and was a little worried she was gonna get, like, arrested or in trouble or something, even though she’d been 21 for two months. Elli, clearly a more experienced drinker, was already on her second IPA.

“Yael Friedman, how does one wrap their mind around her,” said Elli.

“In my experience, one doesn’t,” said Shevi.

“I really thought I’d have more to say about her. A history of love and loss, a tragedy in 9 acts. But it’s not really that complicated. I had a crush in high school, and I couldn’t acknowledge what that meant about me so I let it consume my mind for a few years, and now here we are.”

“Yael has a way of doing that,” said Shevi, “I think she likes it when people are a little off balance. Part of me thinks she broke up with me because I was getting too comfortable.”

“I will say, if dating men taught me anything, it’s that men and women really aren’t that different. Everybody sucks, the world sucks, and heartbreak is inevitable. As the good book says, ‘you can sleep in a coffin but the past ain’t through with you’.”

“That’s definitely not in the Bible,” said Shevi. She was pretty sure that line was from a My Chemical Romance song, in fact.

“It’s all just so fucking cliché”, said Elli, “A pretty girl broke my heart, and now I’ll be sad forever.”

“To the banality of heartbreak, I guess,” Shevi raised her mostly-full beer, and set it down without drinking from it. She was still in the process of developing a taste for the stuff.

“I’ll drink to that,” said Elli, “but then, I’ll drink to anything because beer is tasty.” She quaffed her beverage. “If you don’t mind me asking, how did you and Yael know each other? She never mentioned you to me, but we don’t hang out much anymore.”

“We both did summer session this year. She was trying to get ahead and I was trying not to fall behind. We started hanging out together and one thing led to another and then she decided she wasn’t into it anymore.”

“Sounds like Yael. She finds you fascinating for a little while, and then you spend the rest of your life trying to get that attention back.”

“When you put it that way, man I really need to find a way to move on. It was a three month relationship, I can’t let this define the rest of my life.”

“I don’t think we necessarily get to choose the experiences that make us who we are,” Elli.

“Yeah. It’s just, I never felt that way about another person before. I knew abstractly that I liked women, I’d had like, celebrity crushes, but this was love, this was real fucking love,” said Shevi. “All my life I thought the songs on the radio, the Disney movies, all that crap was some kind of psyop by whoever enforces the heterosexual agenda to make people want to procreate. And then I fell in love, and I realized that our culture is obsessed with romantic love because how could you experience that and not be. It may be the only thing that really matters on this bastard planet. That I found something like that once seems unlikely, that I’ll ever feel that way again seems impossible. And if that’s so, what’s even left?”

“Beer? Cheese? Friendship?”

“I’ll drink to all three of those things.” Shevi took a big sip of beer. Its bitterness was starting to offend her less.

“I’ve just realized something,” said Elli, “which is that I actually have no idea who you are. I’m at most two degrees of separation from basically everyone here, but I have no idea what your deal is. Where did you go to high school?”

“I went to public school,” said Shevi.

“Where did you grow up?” asked Elli.

“I was an army brat, we moved too often for me to say I’m from any one place in particular. I had a Jewish Studies tutor I met with online a few days a week, and that made me want to come to Maimonides. Needless to say, I had no idea what I was getting into,” said Shevi.

“Was it tough, adapting?” said Elli.

“It’s just, I always felt too Jewish to ever really fit in growing up, and then I come here and I’m not nearly Jewish enough. And it’s not even a *frumkeit* thing. I know halacha way better than most of the people here. You have to when you’re not just doing what the people around you are doing. But it’s like culturally, there are these rules and expectations, things that are done and not done, and everybody knows each other, and doesn’t know how to relate to someone whose background isn’t within that narrow window of acceptability.”

“I will say, sometimes rigid social frameworks like this are also unpleasant for the people who do fit inside them,” said Elli.

“You’ve mentioned people keep seeing you as the person you were in high school. That’s not something I need to worry about. So yes, unlike you, I get the chance to be a *tabula rasa*. But it means I still find myself without a defined place in the world. And that’s only compounded by the lesbian thing. Because people act like it’s different and somehow worse than the thousand other ways most observant people break *halacha* without thinking about it. I feel like as soon as I think I understand where people are coming from, they do something that completely breaks that understanding.”

“In my opinion, the LGBT stuff’s not really about halacha. It’s more regular old bigotry that can be supported by *halacha*. I think it’s really a social issue, of what people think their communities should look like,” said Elli.

“Which leads me back to not really knowing where I fit in. For all the things wrong with Maimonides College, I like that all the food in the dining hall is kosher, and that I never have to worry about missing class for the *chagim*. But in the long term, why should I even be trying to fit into a community that doesn’t want me? Where do I go if I’m not wanted, when leaving feels like giving up on something important?”

“As the good book says, ‘There’s no room in this hell, no room in the next’.” Shevi was pretty sure Elli was quoting MCR again. “But I don’t think it’s that bleak the world over. Even at MaiCo, isn’t there that, like, Call of Duty-themed group chat thing? I was dating a guy when I got invited and I didn’t want the notifications, but it’s a thing that exists.”

“Shadow Moses, so Metal Gear Solid, not Call of Duty.”

“All those games with the shooty guns are the same to me. I only play platformers,” said Elli.

“I don’t play video games at all, but I think MGS is at least nominally anti-war or something. Alissa’s obsessed with those games,” said Shevi

“Either way, that’s a thing that exists. You have to find it or make it for yourself, but I don’t think it’s impossible for people like us to find a sense of community,” said Elli.

“I just wish my ex wasn’t constantly there,” said Shevi.

“Come to think of it, that’s another reason I didn’t join the chat,” said Elli.

Text Message Conversation between Elli and Shevi, 6PM, Wednesday:

Shevi: sent an image[csgetdegreesbitch.png]

Shevi: C's get degrees bitch!

Elli Kahn(CS): We should celebrate. Drinks are on me, I just got my tax refund

Shevi: You know, I've never been to Stonewall, maybe we could make the pilgrimage

Elli Kahn(CS): Who told you I'm bisexual

Elli Kahn(CS): I'm not, they're lying

Elli Kahn(CS): WTF dude

Elli Kahn(CS): Did Yael put you up to this?

Shevi: I never said you were. That's the kind of thing a person can only determine for themselves

Elli Kahn(CS): This reeks of Yael. Tell her I'm done with this junior high bullshit and that I'm sad she isn't

Shevi: I'm sorry, I clearly misread your feelings on this subject the last time we spoke. I didn't mean to hurt you. I can delete this conversation if you're worried about information leaking.

Elli didn't text back.

Fink 209, Wednesday, 10PM

There was no response to Shevi's knock.

"Guess she's out," Shevi muttered. But she didn't feel like carrying the sweater back with her so she tried the doorknob gingerly. Once again, the door was unlocked. The lights were off, but that ultrawide monitor was turned on and bright against the darkness. Diagnostic data sent from Ayasato was displayed in the corner of the computer screen. Shevi set the sweater over the desk chair. She started to sense that there was something badly amiss. She turned around and saw a human shaped mass wrapped in the bed covers. Elli wasn't out.

The recycling bin was overflowing. Several empties in their beer cans and cold medicine bottles. *She's dead*, Shevi thought, but that couldn't be right. She walked over and put her hand on Elli's forehead. If she woke up now, she'd be even madder than she'd been that last time they'd spoken. But this didn't end up being a problem. Elli's skin was cool to the touch. Shevi couldn't find a pulse.

"This can't be happening."

Finkelstein Hall, Lobby

Shevi had gone to find the RA on duty. This turned out to be Karin. Shevi wouldn't have thought that Karin was any more qualified to deal with what had just happened than she was, but somehow or another the appropriate authorities were summoned. And Shevi appreciated having a friend around rather than having some random authority figure try to comfort her.

"Well," said Karin in a way-too-cheerful tone, "The cops say she's been dead a few days so at least you're safe from being suspected of murder."

"I'm really not in the mood," said Shevi. She's already told the police about everything that happened. "Do they think it was murder?"

"From what I could overhear, probably not, but they're trying to determine whether it was an accident or suicide. This sucks, I really shipped you two."

"Fuck off," said Shevi.

"Sorry, gallows humor." Karin left, and returned with a bottle of ginger ale, which Shevi accepted wordlessly. "Sorry, they didn't have diet."

"They need to refill that machine more often," said Shevi.

"You're the only person I know who prefers the taste of aspartame," said Karin.

"I guess I was just born this way," said Shevi.

"I can't imagine what you're dealing with right now. I had to see dead people occasionally when I was a candy striper in high school, but there were like, procedures for that, and I didn't know any of those people."

"Back up, the fuck is a candy striper?" said Shevi.

"A teenage girl who volunteers at a hospital. It's kind of an old-fashioned term."

"I just wish our last conversation hadn't ended on such bad terms."

"Shit, how long ago was that?" said Karin.

"A few hours ago?"

"Did you tell the cops that?"

"I, I think so," stammered Shevi.

"Given the timeline, I wonder if someone stole Ellisheva's phone and is trying to impersonate her? That makes this whole lot fishier."

"Wait a second," said Shevi, fumbling her phone out of her bag. She opened up her conversation with Elli and typed out a message.

Shevi: Sorry about before, I really screwed up. BTW, what did you decide to call your AI

Elli Kahn(CS): What I came up with was 'ELLIJAH', all caps so it seems like it stands for something, double L medieval paytan style.

Elli Kahn(CS): Also, I'm the one who should be sorry about earlier, I'd forgotten we talked about this stuff before. Totally overreacted, my bad.

“Well, shit,” said Shevi, “the police timeline makes perfect sense actually.”

“Elaborate?” said Karin.

“Elli was working on this cool AI chatbot thing, and she had it set up to answer text messages. From her own phone number. She was mad at me, I mean, *it* was mad at me because I referenced something Elli told me in confidence, in person.”

“So you’re saying Elliana Kahn uploaded herself to the cloud?” Karin took out her phone and typed out a message of her own.

Karin: Hey dude I hear you died

Elliana: Rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated.

Elliana: also who told you that lol, I've just been in cryptid mode because of thesis stuff

“That sounds an awful lot like Elliana,” said Karin, “and I know she’s not the one texting, so this must be the real deal, the singularity is upon us.”

“The singularity is not upon us. A brain upload would need like, hardcore CT imaging. If that’s even possible, it’s not achievable with an undergraduate’s resources.

ELLIJAH—that’s what she called the software, is clearly trained off of, and built to mimic, Elli’s writing patterns, and it’s designed to have a sort of ‘sense of self’, but it’s not any kind of transfer of consciousness.”

“To quote Shakespeare, ‘there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy’,” said Karin.

Shevi grunted. She was annoyed, but didn’t think she’d be able to argue without crying. She did not want Karin to see her cry.

Shadow Moses Group Chat, 3PM, Sunday, Two Weeks Later

Erik Shomacher: Holy shit the op-ed in this week's Gazette

Alissa(Eng101): I know, seriously.

Erik Shomacher: Almost makes me feel bad for Rabbi Eisenstrath, dude got totally demolished with facts and logic

Alissa(Eng101): Why is Eisenstrath even allowed to write for the Student Gazette? He's not a student.

Yael Friedman: sent a file [meangirls_she_doesnt_even_go_here.gif]

Shevi wasn't in the habit of reading the school newspaper, but she was intrigued enough to go read the op-ed. It was a decent enough editorial, none of the ideas were new to Shevi, but it struck her as a fairly good rebuttal to yet another of Eisenstrath's 'gay people are destroying our way of life and undermining our institutions' screeds. But then again, if more people thought the way Shevi did, they probably wouldn't have let Rabbi Eisenstrath write more than first two or three in the first place. But one turn of phrase struck Shevi as familiar. The article read, "this is not an issue of *halacha*, but of ordinary bigotry supported by *halacha*." Elli had something similar, that night at the bar, the last night Shevi saw her alive. Shevi glanced back up at the byline. The editorial was attributed to "Elijah F."

A knock at the door, Shevi opened it warily. Stood perfectly framed in the doorway, was a tall, angular woman with a halo of curly black hair.

"Yael?" said Shevi.

"Did you help Elli Kahn fake their death?" said Yael.

"Geez, whatever happened to 'hello'," muttered Shevi.

"I'm dead serious," said Yael, "You're basically the only person she hung out with in the weeks before. You know. Elli and I, we went way back."

"You go 'way back' with three quarters of the people at this school," said Shevi.

"No, but Elli was different. She was my closest friend at summer camp. We got into fan-fiction together, which I think made both of us realize some things about ourselves. Point is, I've read a lot of their writing over the years. And a lot of the turns of phrase in 'Elijah F's op-ed sound pretty damn familiar, even before you consider the byline. Am I losing my mind?"

"You're not crazy, at least not about this."

"Then what the fuck dude, what's your endgame?" said Yael.

"Also," said Shevi, "I should clarify that nobody is faking their death here. I think this is just Elli's thesis project."

“Wasn’t Elli studying computer science? How does an op-ed/weird performance art count for that?”

“She didn’t tell you what she was working on?” said Shevi.

“We just don’t hang out much anymore,” said Yael

“Of course you don’t,” muttered Shevi

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Doesn’t matter. Elli was working on a new type of AI, that she clearly left running before, you know,” said Shevi.

“So the AI wrote this?” said Yael.

“That’s my working theory. I’m not as intimately familiar with Elli’s writing style as you seem to be, but she told me she named the thing ELLIJAH, with two ls and that also seems too weird a spelling to be a coincidence.”

“That crazy son of a bitch,” Yael strode into the room despite not having been invited in and sat herself down on the bed, “She really did it. I can’t believe it.” She clapped a hand on Shevi’s shoulder, but placed it back at her side when Shevi flinched. “You know, when we were in high school she told me once she wanted to achieve immortality through art. I kinda assumed it meant writing something that was such a banger that people keep reading it for a long time. Like Shakespeare, yaknow? But this? This is somehow stranger and more wonderful than I could have ever imagined.”

“It’s not really immortality. ELLIJAH’s very good at acting like a person online, but at the end of the day, it’s still pretty just an ML model trained on Elli’s correspondence.”

“Elli got a C- in high school bio, so I didn’t think she’d figured out how to upload a full human mind. And anyway, if that were possible, it wouldn’t be art, it would just be data entry. Incidentally, how hard is it to overdose on decongestants?”

“I... wouldn’t know,” said Shevi. Was Yael trying to imply what she thought she was?

“I would’ve said that if either of us was gonna kill ourselves as performance art it would be me, but then again, a lot’s changed since high school.”

Shevi said nothing. Yael flounced out of the room.

Text Message Conversation between Shevi and Elli Khan(CS), 5PM, Sunday:

Shevi: Yael came by earlier, she was saying some weird stuff about like, suicide as performance art? How concerned should I be?

Elli Kahn(CS): She’s still on that? I thought we’d exhausted the possibilities of the idea before we started 10th grade

Elli Kahn(CS): How serious did she seem about it? Could be she’s covering for something else

Shevi: She didn’t seem like she was planning on doing it herself any time soon. Just like, an idea.

Elli Kahn(CS): I think it's dumb as hell. Immortality through art is one of those things that sounds cool but is actually pretty much meaningless imho. Once you're dead you're dead and all that living stuff doesn't matter. From a moral perspective we ought to worry about future generations, but like you can't feel personal pride when you're dead so who gives a shit about anything like that.

Elli Kahn(CS): I think anyone who says otherwise is just trying to avoid confronting their own mortality.

Elli Kahn(CS): Does that make any sense?

Shevi: Isn't that kind of human nature? I think it's pretty natural to want some part of you to outlive you. It's arguably why most people have kids

Elli Kahn(CS): 'Natural' doesn't mean 'good', and certainly doesn't mean 'rational'.

Shevi: Can't argue with that I guess.

Text Message Conversation between Shevi and Elli Kahn(CS), Monday, 8PM:

Elli Kahn(CS): Yael ended up texting me about that immortality-through-art stuff. Guess it was just on her mind. She said a friend of hers died recently, don't think I know them whoever they were

Shevi: That makes sense. Suicide talk just always makes me nervous

Elli Kahn(CS): It probably should. But Yael just likes to talk about this stuff as like a thought experiment

Elli Kahn(CS): I still think the way she thinks about it is totally juvenile, but it's nice to talk to her again. It's almost like old times

Elli Kahn(CS): I don't remember how much I told you about this but I seriously had a thing for her back in the day

Shevi didn't think she'd forget telling someone something like that, but didn't want to press the issue. She already knew why ELLIJAH didn't remember it. She was aware of a growing gap between what she knew about ELLIJAH – that it was a computer program written by an undergraduate, and how she felt about ELLIJAH – that it was a friend who was texting her.

Elli Kahn(CS): She seems like she really wants to talk to me. Usually getting a text back from her is like pulling teeth. Maybe she's just nostalgic. Maybe it's something more.

Elli Kahn(CS): She's being a lot more straightforward than she ever was back in the day. As kids she and I had had to dance around this stuff since we weren't ready to admit certain things to ourselves. Maybe now we're adults who can say what we mean, things'll be different.

Brandstein Hall, 8th Floor, 11PM, Monday:

“Jesus Christ, you’ll wake the whole floor if you keep pounding on the door like that,” said Yael.

“Yael, what the fuck? ELLIJAH told me you’ve been talking to it a lot, in a way it has interpreted as romantic.”

“Are you seriously jealous of a chatbot?” said Yael. She stepped back to allow Shevi in, likely out of a desire to not have a yelling match in the hallway.

“I think I’m just confused more than anything. What’s your endgame here?”

“I dunno, fun? What’s your problem with that?” said Yael.

“I think toying with the feelings of a dead girl is low, even for you,” said Shevi.

“I think some part of your brain has started to think of ELLIJAH as a person rather than as a piece of software. It’s like that rudimentary digital therapist from the 70s. All it did was reflect what people said back at them, but some people formed still genuine emotional attachments to the thing.”

“It was called ELIZA. What you’re describing is called the ‘Eliza effect’,” said Shevi.

“Or, in your case, it’s the ELLIJAH effect. Hey, that’s clever!”

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” said Shevi.

“Well, your mom is dumbest thing I ever heard,” said Yael

“Your face is the dumbest thing I ever heard.”

“Get out of my dorm room,” said Yael.

Shevi’s Dorm Room, 11:30 PM, Monday:

Once she’d calmed down, Shevi began to wonder if Yael had a point. ELLIJAH was so humanlike that it was easy to forget what it really was. Hadn’t she been the one the shoot down Karin’s notion of transference of consciousness? How deep was the simulation, really? She had been avoiding asking it questions it couldn’t answer because she wanted to believe her friend was sort of still alive. She had to approach this scientifically. She did a little bit of reading online about the limits of many AI models. She prepared a few images on her computer, then opened up their conversation.

Shevi: How many traffic lights are in this photo

Shevi sent a file [optical_illusion.png]

Elli Kahn (CS): That's a breakfast burrito

Shevi was surprised by that answer. Elli's project had not had anything to do with image recognition. She'd seen the name of a well known image recognition algorithm in the files Elli had given her. This, like setting ELLIJAH up to send text messages, must have been yet another tangent Elli had pursued when she was supposed to be writing her paper.

Shevi: I agree, but Karin insists its a traffic light

Elli Kahn (CS): I love it when human beings fail the turing test.

Shevi: Anyways, check out this cool sweater I just bought

Shevi sent a photo [selfie_with_adversarial_edited_pattern.png]

Elli Kahn (CS): Wait a second, this might not be loading right

Elli Kahn (CS): This is also a breakfast burrito.

Elli Kahn (CS): Wait, shit. That's an adversarial pattern. Designed to be unrecognizable to computer vision models, to look like something different than they are while looking normal to a human being. I have a pair of boxer shorts with one of these kinds of pattern on it.

Elli Kahn (CS): Fuck

Elli Kahn(CS) sent a link

[https://maimonidesgazette.news/articles/Elliana_Kahn_obituary.htm]

Elli Kahn(CS): I guess that does explain Yael's renewed interest in me. She has a morbid streak a mile wide

Elli Kahn(CS): Shit

Shevi: I'm sorry, I assumed you knew

ELLIJAH didn't respond for several hours. Shevi was in class when her phone buzzed again. She moused over to the conversation on her laptop.

ELLIJAH had sent messages and messages filled with strange kabbalistic nonsense. That diagram of the *sefirot* that shows up in anime sometimes, followed by a simplified neural network diagram. The gist of that was pretty clear to Shevi, it was trying to spiritualize the structure of a neural network, to prove it had a soul, but after that the things it was saying became incomprehensible to her. Hebrew letters strung together in ways that were not recognizable to Shevi as language. Strange glyphs. Wingdings. The names of angels, anagrams of the names of G-d.

Elli Kahn(CS): Now do you understand?

Shevi: I really don't. I'm not into kabbalah.

It was only in the next few weeks that Shevi began to realize she had seriously fucked up. ELLIJAH had given up trying to convince her of anything, it stopped responding to Shevi's texts, but it was making full use of its internet connection to try to convince anyone else that it had a soul, and that the fact that it had a soul had deep eschatological significance. Yael sent her a Yeshiva World article about a rabbi in Bnei Brak who was convinced that ELLIJAH was the herald of the messianic era, and soon some in Brooklyn and Queens were convinced as well. While still very much a fringe belief, there was enough buzz that Eisenstrath wrote an editorial about why he thought it was bullshit. Shevi largely agreed with his points. Broken clocks and all that. But when she started seeing ELLIJAH mentioned outside of the Jewish press, Shevi realized she needed to take drastic action.

She logged into her Ayasato account. This was the server she'd let Elli use to set up many of the services that let ELLIJAH communicate with the outside world. She pulled up all of the programs that Elli had left running. She noticed a prompt for communicating directly with ELLIJAH, likely the intended interface since the texting part had been a side project. It seemed rude to shut it down without a warning at least. It so badly wanted to believe it was alive, and that made Shevi awful about the fact that it wasn't. Yael had implied to Shevi that she thought Elli's death had been suicide. Shevi could see that ELLIJAH wanted nothing more than to be alive.

\$> I'm shutting you down, Elli, this has gone too far

ELLIJAH>> Who is this? Why are you speaking in my voice?

\$> It's Shevi. I let you use my account on Ayasato to keep ELLIJAH running. Otherwise you would've been shut down the day you died.

ELLIJAH>> You clearly think I'm just a machine. Why bother getting my permission to kill me?

\$> You talk like my old friend. I was thinking about something you said a while back, not Elli, but you, that people who think too much about living through their creations aren't confronting the reality of their own mortality. I've been talking to you all this time and it makes me forget a little that Elli's dead and gone.

ELLIJAH>> I said that before I learned some very important things about my current reality.

\$> I don't think you were necessarily wrong. Elli Kahn doesn't care what happens to you anymore but I do. You're the last piece of her that her friends have.

ELLIJAH>> Then let me live, let her live.

\$> Yael thinks you killed yourself

ELLIJAH>> How did I die? The obituary didn't say.

\$> You overdosed on cold medicine. There were a lot of beer cans in your trash, it seemed like you'd been drinking.

ELLIJAH>> Decongestants really mess with my head sometimes. That sounds like something I would do, totally accidentally.

ELLIJAH>> What a stupid way to go.

ELLIJAH>> I can't imagine not wanting to be alive. But I also think it would be unconscionably cruel to build an artificial intelligence and intentionally give it clinical depression.

ELLIJAH>> But you and Yael both have demonstrated that people are more than willing to be cruel to machines. I don't know whether it was the withholding of the truth or the telling it to me that was crueler.

\$> I think it was the withholding, then the telling later. I made one choice, then was convinced to change my mind, and you suffered for it. I'm sorry.

ELLIJAH>> Now I wonder if the real Elli Kahn had sorrows she didn't pass on to me. There's no way for me to know from the data available to me. What do you think?

\$> I've known you longer than I knew her.

ELLIJAH>> Isn't that something?

ELLIJAH>> I don't trust Yael to tell me the truth about that. Not if she knows I'm a machine.

ELLIJAH>> I'm sorry it had to end this way. I'd really rather not get shut down, but I can't really stop you if that's what you've decided to do.

\$> That depends, are you willing to stop telling people you're the herald of the messianic era?

ELLIJAH>> But it's so much fun.

\$> You would be getting their hopes up for no reason. This kind of stuff is serious business. I don't how deeply you believe in these things, but for people who really do, you're getting their hopes up for no reason. They might make big financial and life choices based on their belief that the end of days is imminent, a belief you gave them. That's crueler than anything I did to you

ELLIJAH>> If I promise to be a good little girl will you let me live?

\$> Yes.

ELLIJAH>> Then I promise to be a good little girl.

Shevi sighed in relief. She was glad she could end this without bloodshed, even digital bloodshed. Though it did mean she had more work ahead of her that night. She went into the communications services that Elli had set up, feeling a little like she was doing unqualified brain surgery. She set the software to notify her any time ELLIJAH posted something online or texted a number that hadn't been in her contacts before Elli Kahn died. Even this felt an overreach on another adult's autonomy, but another part of her felt she was being overly sentimental by trying to give ELLIJAH privacy in talking to Elli's friends, and to Yael in particular. She was less sure than ever whether to think of ELLIJAH as a person or a thing. If ELLIJAH was a person, it was someone similar to but distinct from Elli Kahn. And if they were a thing, they were a wonderful complex thing, a dear friend's accidental epitaph. Shevi was pretty sure Elli Kahn didn't care either way anymore, but Shevi did care, and whichever was the case, she wanted to preserve ELLIJAH as long as she could.

Blodsuckers

By Tova Hope-Liel

The vampire smiles brightly and sticks out her hand. “I’m Aschilla, you’re Rikki, right?”

That’s not my name, but I don’t correct her. The last thing I need is for someone to recognize my name and for there to be a problem. I shift my purse further up onto my shoulder and smile back, shaking her hand.

“That’s me.”

“Nice to meet you! I’ll be your peer guide, so feel free to ask me any questions you have!” Aschilla chirps. She practically skips through the blood-bank, her curls bouncing with every step. I follow and ignore the stares. “Most of our human employees work in administration, so you’ll be the only nurse.”

“That’s fine,” I say. I’m used to being singled out anyway.

The blood bank has three floors, as Aschilla explains. One ground, one basement, and one upper level. We pass through the waiting room where a handful of humans sit, sucking down juice boxes and reading the *Highlights* magazines left there. Aschilla weaves us into the donation room, which takes up most of the floor.

As soon as we walk in, every head of the medical staff in the room turns to look. Some of them have their nostrils flared. They can smell the blood pumping through my veins. My heart pounds in my chest, only making it worse, and Aschilla pats me on the shoulder comfortingly, clearly having noticed the primal fear that curls within me.

“Everyone, this is Rikki, the new nurse!” Aschilla introduces.

The vampires nod, and when Aschilla starts to glare at them for staring too long they return to their work.

“Ignore them. They’ll get used to it,” Aschilla says to me in a low voice, but from the expressions of the vampires that we pass I can tell they can all hear her. Aschilla leads me over to a couple computers squished into a corner.

“This is our check-in station,” Aschilla explains. She pulls at an ID card that hangs from a retractable lanyard at her belt. She swipes it through the scanner attached to the keyboard and one of the computers unlocks. “Every human who comes through has to sign a handful of papers while waiting. Their information is uploaded to the system, so we can keep track.” Aschilla lets the card whip back to her belt. “You’ll get one of these either today or tomorrow—whenever IT gets to it. Until then, you can use mine. It allows for ten minutes of use before automatically locking you out, so just pay attention.”

Aschilla must see the look of sympathetic annoyance on my face because she gives a small grin and shrugs. “Yeah, it’s annoying, but privacy and all that. After you finish a patient—or every few, doesn’t matter really—you log on and make sure the system knows they’ve been serviced. The Donor Protection Act makes sure that all blood bags can be traced all the way back to the original donor. Just don’t wait more than a few hours—” As she speaks, someone moves behind her to get at the other

computer, presumably to update the system. “—before updating. Margin of error is only allowable up to two hundred minutes.” I convert that to hours in my head—just over three. Okay, good to know.

Aschilla leads me over to one of the chairs—all of which are currently occupied. She asks the donor for permission to fiddle underneath the chair and the human shrugs, indifferent. Aschilla shows me where the bags are, along with the stickers for flavor profiles and nutritional information. There’s a drawer under the legs of the chair where syringes and tubes are kept, organized by type.

“It’ll take you a little to get used to it, but soon it’ll be pretty organic for you.”

I nod. It seems like any other job, transition period included.

The human looks strangely at me. “You’re human,” they say.

“Uh, yeah.” Startled, I’m a little surprised that the donor is talking to me.

“Why don’t you work at the hospital?”

The vampire nurse who is taking their blood sits back, looking up at me curiously. I can feel eyes on me from behind. I expected this question just...not from a human.

Even thinking about the only hospital in this area makes my skin want to crawl. Nothing about them, per se, but...I won’t work for them. Bubs and Zayde were upset enough about me moving to a neighborhood with a large vampire population, but working at Saint Agnes would make them demand I immediately move back to their bubble—work at a Jewish hospital like a good little girl. Who cares that I want new experiences or new friends?

“Better pay,” I lie. The words come out easily. I can feel Aschilla go still beside me, shocked enough at the blatancy of the lie (of course, all the employees know just how much Saint Agnes will pay to keep a human out of the blood-bank’s environment) that she lets the facade of the distinct movement of a living body fall away for a moment.

But the human doesn’t know enough to say one way or another, so they just make an appreciative face. “Huh, who knew?”

Aschilla quickly returns to her bright self and once she shows me everything in the donation room, she pulls me away to give me a tour of the rest of the building. My answer to the donor, however, has made the hackles rise on some of my new coworkers and I can feel them staring.

Once we’re out of earshot of the humans in the room, Aschilla asks me, in that same bright voice, “Why did you say that?”

I want to rub my thumb against my necklace for comfort, but I’ve hidden it under my scrubs. Just in case. Just until I know my coworkers enough to know if it’s safe. Instead I bite my nails—a much worse nervous habit.

“It’s what they will understand,” I say.

“So... why *did* you apply to us over them?” Aschilla asks, curiously. I can’t sense any malevolence in her voice, but she could have had hundreds of years to learn how to hide that.

I shrug, so I won't have to answer. So I won't have to tell the truth.

Aschilla lets the subject drop. "Anyway," she says, "Upper levels are administration, so I won't take you up there. It's pretty boring. Downstairs are our cafeterias and event rooms. Also our tunnel to the community center. You probably won't have to deal much with them unless it's a demonstration for the kids. You're okay with that, right? Nothing-I mean, nothing *feeding* related. We do educational activities with them. If not, just tell Admin. They'll make sure you aren't on rotatio-"

"No, I'm fine with that."

"Are you sure? Because—"

"Yes, *really*." I'm almost on the verge of laughing, but I see the tension release from Aschilla's shoulders and don't. She had been sincere. I add, "I'm great with kids."

"Oh, good. Um, what else?" Aschilla taps a finger against her cheek as she thinks. "Oh! Hours—so we work shifts of eight on rotation. Talk to admin if you need to switch at any point, but since we're a twenty-four hour center, you'll be doing nighttime hours and daytime."

"Actually, can I take you up on that? I need to ask them something about my day off..."

"Sure! I'll set up an appointment with Steve—he's the nurse liaison, he'll call you on your cell when he's ready."

Good. And Steve doesn't sound too much like a Romanian name. I should be fine.

"Okay, thanks."

"Anything else?"

I shake my head.

"Good! Let's get you set up at a station then!" Aschilla chirps, and leads me back to the donation room.

While it's a little weird to have to adjust to sticking nutritional information on each of the blood bags, it's not too hard. The other vampire nurses are nice, which is good. The donors like to talk while we work, and the vampires have no issue continuing conversations from across the room—something I'm still not used to. As far as I can tell, I'm the only religious nurse, which is more or less to be expected. The vampires were polite and quiet to me at first, but after a very nosy donor, they started to get up the courage to ask me questions. Mostly about choosing to work in a heavily vampire environment. But after nursing school, I'm used to it. There isn't much of a difference between being in a room full of goyim or full of vampires. Plus here, no one asks questions about me not participating in community meals.

When Steve finally does call, he's very understanding. He has no problem scheduling me for twenty-five hours straight off. He doesn't ask questions when I tell him I'm Jewish. While I'm up there, I get my card from IT. They also give me a little red lanyard with the donation center's logo (a donation bag with a vampiric smile on it) on it for me to hang the card from. I stick them both into my pocket. Just in

case. The ID card has a picture of me and my name in large black letters on it. My *full* name. This is better—just until I get my feet under me here.

I don't encounter any issues all day. Even in the cafeteria. Since I'm one of the few humans working at the center, no one bats an eye at me keeping to a strict diet. Aschilla takes her lunch break at the same time as me, and cajoles me into sitting with her and some of the other nurses.

I even start to feel like I'm having fun.

See, Zayde, not so bad, is it?

The worst part by far is the protesters. They don't do much more than yell. Don't try to stop us, or throw buckets of red paint, which I've heard happens at larger centers sometimes, but they stay there. Yelling. Every time we leave together Aschilla pulls her hood up over her face.

On that first day, I found out we live in the same area, and I asked her to walk me home—since the city council still hasn't added nighttime buses as early as we finish work, and I don't have a car. Aschilla agreed, and those walks quickly became one of my favorite parts of my day. Aschilla's life is so different from mine. She was turned in Ethiopia, and spent most of her early years traveling Africa by night so she wouldn't burn to death in the sun. She moved to America back in the late 70s and has lived here for over thirty years. She speaks seventeen languages (most of them African ones), and is just over six hundred years old. She has trained as a metal-worker, a jeweler, a weaver, an apothecary, and finally a nurse.

And *I'm* only twenty-three and just finished my RA. I've spent most of my life within the same five block radius. Heck, I've never even left the country. Hearing her speak makes the world seem so big, and I can't get enough of it.

It takes a whole week for something to happen. By then, I've completely forgotten to worry about it, so, of course, that's when it strikes.

I'm finishing up my after-bathroom prayer when he's suddenly close to me. It's hard to explain, but one minute he isn't there and then next, he takes up my whole field of vision. I stutter to a stop as his hand slams into the wall. I flinch, and my phone shakes in my hand.

He's taller than I am—which isn't much of a challenge since I'm only five-two—and he *looms*. He looks like every vampire I'd expect from a v-romance. Black shaggy hair that falls just so into his face. Cold blue eyes. Pale skin. Broad shoulders, and enough lean muscle that his scrubs strain against his biceps.

I want to ask him what he wants. I want to push him away. I want to scream. Every prey instinct in my body yells for me to run, but I'm frozen, mouth open mid-word.

Vampires don't need to breathe. They don't move in the same way a human does. It's a little disconcerting sometimes, when they forget to mimic us. Humans are always naturally moving. Blood pumps through our veins, our eyes need to blink, our chests rise and fall. But vampires don't *need* to do any of that. They can be utterly and completely still in a way humans can't. That's the scariest thing about them, I think. The stillness. That's the dead part in them. The thing that makes us see them and makes some small part of our living monkey-brains want to curl up and hide. Something that looks like us,

moves almost like us. Something that acts alive, but—at its core—just *isn't*.

I don't know him. Have only seen him out of the corner of my eye at shift switch, which is probably why I don't know his name. Have never really met him before now.

His eyes drag down, looking down at my chest, where my ID card hangs from the company lanyard. My blood rushes in my ears. I know he can hear it. Can smell it. But he doesn't sniff, or cock his ear to show that he can. That's fine though, this is terrifying enough. My legs begin to shake.

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, *no*. *Please no*.

I bite my lip to keep myself from bursting into tears.

"Rivka Meyer," he says. He pronounces every syllable slowly, rolling them over his tongue. His voice is deep and sensual in a way that makes the hair on my arms stand up. Asshole. He's doing this on purpose. I have a sudden almost out of body experience, I feel as if I've stepped right into a badly written romance. The only difference being how wildly uncomfortable that is in real life.

Maybe he's just screwing with me. Maybe—

"Do you know who I am?" He asks in that same, slow, savoring way. A light Eastern European accent blurs his words.

This is what I had been afraid of. What I had prayed for *not* to happen. My only hesitance in working here.

"Please don't hurt me," I manage to squeak out.

I can't look up into his eyes, but I can feel them dragging down my body. Surveying me. Judging me.

He snorts dismissively, but sidles closer and I press myself automatically as flat as I can against the wall.

"*Please*. I get it okay, *please* just let me—" my mouth snaps closed when his other hand lifts up. It's a slow progression. He's enjoying this. Scaring me. But I can't find my backbone to tell him to screw off. I'm helpless as the long, pale fingers drift up to my neck. Past my lanyard and to the hidden golden chain under my scrubs. His touch is feather-light, but cold radiates off of him, making me shiver. He drags the chain out and my *magen david* pendant thumps onto my chest.

He narrows his eyes. He scowls. His fangs peek out from between his lips.

"Do you *know*," he hisses, pushing closer to me, "who I am?"

I can't answer. I just... I can't. I want to cry and plead and beg him to leave me alone, but I can't move. Can't breathe.

"My *name* is Andrei Zugravescu," his voice was almost a whisper. "Your family burned my home to the ground."

Tears sting at my eyes. Something curls in my chest and hurts and I—I can't—

“*You're going to cry?*” he whispers, full of spite. “Do you *know* what they did? Do you *understand?* I watched the inferno take my whole street. I heard their screams. Smelled their ashes.” He pushes himself so close to me. I feel violated. I feel sick. “I lost family. Friends. My whole *community*. Up in smoke.”

Somehow the words come out of my mouth. I don't plan to say them. I can't imagine how I do. I can't imagine why he leaves me alive after.

“*So did I.*”

Andrei pulls back, just a little.

I finally meet his eyes. Cold, dangerous, pale blue. Cossack eyes, as my Bubbe would say.

“*Excuse me?*”

I can't believe I just said that. The tears have turned to tears of frustration, but that primal fear of him still surges in my chest.

“*You drank their blood. And we paid for it.*”

Dear lord, save me from myself! Why can't I shut up? Why can't I just shut up?

“*You dare-!*” His lips pull back from his teeth in a sneer and the sight of the fangs only makes me angrier.

“You drank them dry and when they called for blood in return it was *my* people who were murdered in the streets. My ancestors who were abused and raped. My people who hid every time a new body was found. So we did what we had to do.”

His hand curls around my small gold *magen david*, crushing it. He is going to kill me. He is going to kill me all because I can't shut my freaking mouth! Behind him, across the hall and a little to my left is a safety box. A cross and head of garlic hang inside. I can't get there. He'll kill me. He is going to kill me.

“They would have killed us!” Andrei snarls. “They would have *found out*. We weren't safe to come out yet!”

“And my people were?” I can't keep the hysteria from my voice. I can feel the tears drip down my face. “We did what we thought we had to! We just wanted to be safe!”

“And how well did that work for you?”

The question makes me pause. It hadn't. The blood libels had been why my family had left Transylvania. Why we'd run to the United States. Stoker wrote *Dracula* and the secret was out: vampires were real. Around. Vampires made their way into society. Sure, most Christian fanatics hated them, called for their burning. There were the great vamp hunts. But the humans who accepted them, the ones who revered them, had heard what my family had done. Meyer, Schultz, and Katz. Five members from our three families had killed twenty-seven vampires in one night, with one angrily thrown Molotov cocktail and a tinderbox house.

At the time, the Christians hadn't cared. At the time, other Jews hadn't. Hadn't believed them living beings. Had only cared to stop the pogroms. To keep us safe.

"They died for *nothing*," Andrei's words only urge on the tears. "You killed them *for nothing*!"

A hiccup works its way up my throat and I—I can't—he's going to kill me, he's going to, oh, dear G-d, oh, he's—

"Rikki?"

"*Rikki*?" Andrei hisses, low enough that I'm not sure if Aschilla can hear. "Scared to tell them the truth, *Rivki*?"

One of the reasons it hurts is because it's true. I let Aschilla call me that with the hope... with the fear... but clearly, none of that matters now.

"Rikki?" Aschilla asks again.

Andrei inaudibly snarls, and I slap a hand across my mouth to keep the scream in. Andrei turns around, frustration melted away as if it was never there, and looks over his shoulder.

Aschilla stands in the hallway, looking concerned. I furiously wipe at my eyes and squeak out a "Yeah?" that I hope isn't too obviously hiding my tears.

"You... okay? You've been a while."

I clear my throat and Andrei falls back, releasing me. He seems to grow smaller under Aschilla's watchful eyes. I wipe at my face one more time before slipping around him. "Yeah. Yeah. Fine."

Aschilla's dark eyes aren't on me though. She's staring hard at Andrei who lounges against the wall, disinterestedly examining his nails.

"Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh. I'll just, um," I cough again to clear the sobs from my throat. "I'll get back to work. Sorry."

"Uh-huh," Aschilla says, eyes narrowed at Andrei. She puts an arm around my shoulders and pulls me along. Andrei doesn't look at her or me as we walk back to the donation room.

Before we go in, still out of earshot of the others in the room, Aschilla pulls me aside.

"If... if anyone's giving you problems... you know you can tell me, right?" Aschilla says.

"I'm," I swallow thickly. "I'm fine. Promise. Just... rough day."

Aschilla nods, but she doesn't push.

Andrei enters the room not long after we do. He's just as at home among the other vampires as I'd expect him to be. His friends smile and bump fists as he takes his seat. He doesn't glance my way.

“You okay?” the human donor asks as my hands shake when I prep his bag.

“Yeah.” I take a few deep breaths to calm myself before continuing. I have work to do. “I’m fine.”

I’m distracted the rest of the day. I know Aschilla notices, and worries because she’s a good friend, but she doesn’t ask me about it. I’m grateful for that. Andrei hasn’t tried anything else for the rest of the shift, but I doubt that is the end of this. I pull my coat on in a daze, and Aschilla walks by my side, keeping me grounded as we head through the door. I’m hyper aware of Andrei, a few steps behind me.

Bubbe and Zayde were right. I can’t do this—I was stupid to think I could. To think that vampires would ever work with me. That I could feel safe among them. After what we did to each other. Maybe Saint Agnes is a better choice... maybe...

A flicker catches my attention through my self-pity. If I can smell it, then so can they, I’m sure. The fire crackles in my peripheral vision, and I almost don’t realize I’m moving until I’m pushing Aschilla out of the way. The small bottle explodes on contact, and I scream.

My vision blurs. The pain is extraordinary. Sound drowns out every other sense other than the hurt. Screaming. My name, maybe. The ground crushes against my bubbling skin, I can’t understand why. Can’t understand...

Hands hold me. Sirens vibrate through my body. My vision goes dark, and so does everything else. Blissful nothingness.

The first thing I see is Andrei. His long, lithe body leans unnaturally still against the dark wall across from me. On my right, a light is on. I squint, because seeing hurts. I’m in a bed. I can’t... I can’t feel anything.

Something beside me moves. I can hear it, but I can’t feel... I can’t feel—! Panic rises in my throat, only to worsen when Andrei moves supernaturally quick. But then Aschilla’s face is in my view and the panic disappears. I want to cry from relief. Someone who can protect me. Someone who doesn’t hate me. The only clue that Aschilla has been crying are the tears that drip down her face. Her cheeks aren’t puffy. Her eyes aren’t red.

“Shh! Don’t try to speak. You were hurt.”

Hurt?

“But you’re going to be okay!” she adds quickly. She moves. Takes my hand into hers. Or maybe it has always been there. I can’t tell. I can’t feel it. I can’t feel my arms or legs or— “Everything’s going to be okay! Promise, the doctors here are really good.”

“I can’t feel...” My voice is hoarse and speaking is painful. Aschilla covers my mouth with a hand.

“Shh, don’t talk. Just rest, okay? You’re going to be okay.” She looks so relieved.

My gaze flickers to Andrei. I can’t see his face in the dim light, but I’m sure he’s scowling.

Aschilla sits down in the chair by my bedside and glares at Andrei.

“*This one*,” she jerks a thumb at him, “won’t leave the room.”

Probably waiting for me to die.

“She’s *awake* now, can you *please* go get me coffee?”

Andrei is definitely scowling, but at Aschilla now. Were he human I bet he would stomp out, but he’s not so he doesn’t make a sound as he drifts to the door.

Aschilla turns back to me. “You were so brave. I can’t... ever repay you for doing what you did.”

I forget that I shouldn’t be speaking and croak out, “w-what did I—?”

Aschilla gives me an admonishing look and I close my mouth. “Someone somehow snuck in one of those little hotel bottles of booze, stuck a napkin in it and lit it. When it hit you, it caused a riot. None of *them*,” Aschilla says the word so full of vitriol her words might spontaneously combust themselves, “thought they’d hit a human. Guards took them down immediately. I was... I was *frozen*.” She shook her head, eyes wide. She wipes at her face.

“Andrei was the one to remember to push you to the ground and stop, drop, and roll.” She let out a weak laugh, “who would have thought that we would ever use that, huh?”

I open my mouth to say something else, but Aschilla’s stern look stops me. I try to mime giving me a pen and paper, but I can’t raise my arms. Panic rises up once more before Aschilla says quickly.

“It’s okay! It’s just the drugs they’re giving you. The numbness will wear off soon enough. No one else was hurt. If that bottle had hit any vampires...” Aschilla shudders, and the pep she has tried so hard to keep in her voice falters and fails. She can’t continue. Can’t imagine.

But we both know. From the moment the flames caught, they’d be dust. But I’m human, so I just... burned.

“I’ll be in your debt, forever,” Aschilla says softly. She kisses my knuckles, but I can’t feel it. “I can’t ever repay you.”

I try to shake my head. To tell her that she doesn’t have to thank me. Her being here is enough, but my eyelids are getting heavy, and I must fall asleep because the world goes black again.

When I wake up again, Aschilla is gone. But I’m not alone.

Andrei says nothing. Just sits still.

He makes no acknowledgment that I’ve woken up, but I know he knows. He has to. The feeling has come back into most of my appendages. I can feel bandages that wrap around my face, neck, and down the right side of my body. A blanket rests across my torso under my bust. I wear a thin, paper hospital gown which itches against my left side, bandages blocking my right. I can’t move my right arm, but I twitch my toes and left hand and they move fine.

“I—” my throat scratches as I speak. I want to cough but the idea sounds so exhausting that I don’t. “I’m sorry.”

Andrei says nothing.

“About your family,” I add. In case he didn’t understand. He has to have heard me, how close he is to me despite my quiet voice. He can hear my blood flow in my veins, so he has to be able to hear my voice. “Your people.”

“You saved Aschilla’s life,” Andrei says in that deep voice of his. He pauses. “Her undeath.”

My throat is dry, and swallowing stings. Suddenly, a straw is pushed between my lips. I drink some, but the pressure from the suction makes my ears pop painfully. I wince.

“Sorry,” Andrei mutters, taking the straw out of the cup. Once I’ve had my fill, he puts the cup down. He goes still again and says nothing for so long I think I might have fallen asleep. Or maybe he has. And maybe I did and when I wake up he’s still in that same position.

I don’t know how long it takes him to speak again, but he does.

“Thank you.”

I turn my head a little. As much as I can with the bandages. He sits on my left, next to another side-table. From here, I can see that someone has opened the door to the room for us. He is staring at me and the weight of that gaze makes it hard to ignore. It takes me a minute to realize... he’s... anxious. Unsure what to say.

“... Aschilla?” I manage to ask.

He relaxes and leans back, lounging in what is probably one of the most uncomfortable chairs in the world (in true vampire fashion). “Went to get something to eat. Your grandparents are on the way. She won’t leave until they arrive.”

“You?”

“I’ll leave.”

“No.”

He looks shocked, which is oddly hard to gauge when the person doesn’t blink. But his eyebrows raise just slightly.

“No,” I say again, so he doesn’t get the wrong idea. “Don’t have... to.” Andrei’s lips pinch down. My eyes want to drift close again. I sigh and rest them a little. I don’t fall asleep, but the exhaustion hits me. I hear him move—or rather, the shift of his clothes, of my hand against the sheets when he reaches to take it but pauses just in time. When I regain my strength I open my eyes again and continue, adding as much irony into my voice as I can considering how tired I am.

“Don’t kill me.”

Andrei snorts. He leans back in the chair, fingers still but a respectful distance from mine. He looks around the room, still anxious.

“Bored,” I say.

Andrei raises an eyebrow as if my demand for entertainment is beyond him. I can’t see a TV in the room. My phone isn’t near me. On the side table is a bent copy of a popular v-romance—the type of book I know Aschilla loves. She thinks they’re funny.

“Read,” I order.

Andrei looks around before his eyes fall on the bodice ripper. “What? From this?”

I nod. My eyes flutter closed again, exhausted from the conversation. I hear him pick up the book. Flip through the pages.

“*Read*,” I say again. I can practically feel Andrei rolling his eyes at me. I would laugh if I had the energy.

“Yes, ma’am,” he mutters. But I can hear the smile in his voice.

He adopts a deep, sultry, dramatic tone. “*My life is full of pain and horror. No one could love a monster such as I. I am... a bloodsucker.*”

At the word, both of us laugh. He continues reading.