WHAT’S IN YOUR LIBRARY?
THE CJN COMPILES A JEWISH READING LIST FOR THE AGES

PLUS: Inbal Arieli on Israeli chutzpah
Jerry Grafstein on Bora Laskin
And fiction for young readers
MORDECHAI BEN-DAT

Mordechai Ben-Dat is the former editor of The CJN and a frequent contributor to these pages.

Exodus
Leon Uris (1958)

When I read this book in my second decade of life, it seized my heart, even as it informed my mind. This is the story of the human and historic sacrifice that gave birth to the State of Israel. Leon Uris fought in the Second World War and went on to become a reporter. He wrote in the manner of most journalists – with the detail of the story foremost in its telling. And of course, he wrote from a perspective close in time to the events he described and from a framework of values pressed into his conscience in part by the events of the Second World War.

A People That Dwells Alone
Yaacov Herzog (1975)

In my third decade, I read this anthology of essays, lectures and speeches. It even includes the transcript of Yaacov Herzog’s famous debate at McGill University with British historian Arnold Toynbee. Edited by Misha Louvish, the collection provides a powerfully inspiring portrait of a diplomat fighting on behalf of the Jewish state. Permeating the book is the notion that the founding of Israel was not merely a life-sustaining assertion by a people determined to live; it was also an intervention in the flow of time and the history of nations wrought by human will and Divine resolution.

A Soldier of the Great War
Mark Helprin (1991)

At the beginning of my fifth decade, I read this tale told in retrospect by an old man to a young one. It deals with the immutable virtues of human life, such as commitment, self-sacrifice, honour, love, dignity and respect. All of these, Helprin teaches, when incorporated into daily “struggle,” yield a life fully lived in the thrall of beauty and purpose. Helprin writes with flowing beauty and his insights remind us that individual lives can be deep and meaningful.
Ralph Benmergui

Ralph Benmergui is a television and radio personality, writer, and a spiritual director.

God is a Verb
Rabbi David Cooper (1997)

I have taken the central message of this book to heart. Among other things, I am an ordained spiritual director. I speak with people about their spiritual and religious journeys, trying to help them navigate that complex path. Cooper is all about the mystical way of Judaism. What captured me was his idea that God is not a noun, a thing, a personage. It is a process of constantly pulsing creation that is beyond our measure. Our job is to be available to it and bend our knee to that universe, creating limitless energy. In so doing, we may find our humility and make of ourselves and this planet a small but sacred contribution to that which we call God.

The Jew in the Lotus
Roger Kamenetz (1994)

In The Jew in the Lotus, Louisiana English professor Roger Kamenetz describes a meeting between Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, one of the pillars of the Jewish Renewal movement, and the Dalai Lama. They each want some wisdom from the other. Rabbi Schacter-Shalomi wants to find a way to marry the mystery and ecstatic spirit of the Hasidic movement with the expansive eastern sky of the Buddhist path. How do we merge Jewish rationalism with the power of our mystic tradition? The Dalai Lama, living in exile in India, wants to know how his Tibetan Buddhist followers can survive as a diasporic people. The answer is by tapping into the genius of Jewish resilience.

The Book of Jewish Values
Rabbi Joseph Telushkin (2000)

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has written many books that tie Jewish practice to everyday living. This one is great for family or friends to read in small portions and discuss. The rabbi provides scenarios that require us to flex our ethical muscles and employ a compassionate lens. For example, instead of muttering in frustration as the ambulance pushes us out of the way, making our trip longer, we are asked to have a different Jewish response based on teachings: to think about who is being taken to the hospital in that ambulance and wish them only good things.

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3 MUST-READ BOOKS

**Nemesis**
Philip Roth (2010)

Philip Roth’s final novel about the polio epidemic that gripped the Jewish community in Newark, N.J., during the war years grabbed me by the kishkes in the very first paragraph and didn’t let go until the searing image of the final page. I told this to Roth himself, who I met one day quite by accident. He shrugged his shoulders and told me he thought the book was a little depressing.

**The Metamorphosis**
Franz Kafka (1915)

Franz Kafka’s story is about Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one morning and discovers that he’s been transformed into a giant hideous insect. It’s filled with dread, angst, dysphoria and, although I’m sure the Samsa family would disagree, comedy. The story is a sustained magic act. Kafka never feels compelled to explain anything. How did Gregor turn into a bug? We never find out. It doesn’t matter. For a bonus treat, I recommend Haruki Murakami’s post-*Metamorphosis* story, “Samsa in Love,” from the collection *Men Without Women*.

**Maus (Volumes 1 and 2)**
Art Spiegelman (1980, 1991)

A novel depicting the Holocaust using cartoon Jewish mice and Nazi dogs would have been considered unthinkable and way too irreverent … until *Maus*. Art Spiegelman’s tiny black and white drawings describe the horrors of the Holocaust and its aftermath. I remember reading it with my daughter when she was fairly young. Who would have guessed that reading a comic book could be such an intense and harrowing experience for both of us? It’s a masterpiece with universal, accessible reach. It justifiably earned a special Pulitzer and pretty much single-handedly ushered in the current golden age of the graphic novel.

**Gary Clement**

Gary Clement is an artist and illustrator. His editorial cartoons appear regularly in the National Post.

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In this unique Jewish self-improvement book, Yair Caspi, a secular Israeli psychotherapist, merges psychology and Judaism. Bringing Jewish sources like the Bible, Talmud and Hasidic literature to everyday life, he provides added meaning and higher purpose to life, which modern psychology lacks. Inquiring of God – finding answers to personal and social dilemmas in Jewish sources – helps Caspi move the centre of the universe from one's self to a broader scheme. Using psychological methods and Jewish quotations, the book touches on questions readers are encouraged to explore and understand, in order to help them find their true place and mission in the world.

This Hebrew-language book is an insightful perspective of the Jewish people's journey in the Diaspora, where the centrality of the Land of Israel was questioned and disputed. The establishment of Israel ended the debate and consolidated Judaism's nationhood, culture and religion into one. In the Israeli century, Israel is becoming vital to world Jewry in many aspects, resulting in the Israelization of Jews in the Diaspora. Author Yossi Shain believes Israel's evolution towards either a progressive state or a halakhic, anti-modern state will determine the vitality, culture and future of the Jewish people.

A brief 4,000 year history of the Jews is celebrated with admiration and exceptional insight. Max Dimont examines the unique secrets that enabled the Jewish civilization's survival, which he attributes to their adaptability, the ideas they generated to respond to the ever-increasing challenges and their continuous transformation – starting with turning a God of stone into a portable, spiritual one. He also credits the Jewish people's evolution in the Diaspora, while maintaining strong beliefs in their distinct rules and culture, as well as their ability to stay outside of mainstream society and become universalists and cosmopolitan.
The Red Tent
Anita Diamant (1997)

The Red Tent is one of those page-turner-can’t-put-it-down-sorry-when-it’s-over books that are perfect for summer, or any time you can really settle into reading something substantial. It’s a modern-day mid-rash that imaginatively fills in the gaps in the story of Dinah, Jacob’s only daughter, and, at the same time, fleshes out the world of women in biblical times. It’s captivating. It’s a book that I’ve reread a number of times and love recommending to friends. However, what makes it most significant for me is that after reading it the first time, I flipped to the author biography at the back and read that Anita Diamant is also the author of a number of books about contemporary Jewish life, one of which is titled Choosing a Jewish Life. I remember holding the book in my hand and thinking, “You can choose a Jewish life?” That’s what started me on the path to conversion.

My Glory Was I Had Such Friends
Amy Silverstein (2017)

I picked this up earlier this winter at our local used bookstore, but didn’t get around to reading it until I was on holiday. It’s a memoir by the author of Sick Girl, who tells the story of waiting for, and miraculously receiving, her second heart transplant. Although not explicitly Jewish, other than a brief cameo appearance by a Chabad rabbi, it’s an amazing real-life example of the power of bikur holim (visiting the sick). Silverstein’s friends are with her every minute of every day in the transplant ward. They relieve her husband so that he can continue to work, decorate her room, sneak her out into the courtyard for some fresh air and bear witness to the exceptional pain she experiences as her heart rapidly fails. It’s a very moving book and a heartwarming tribute to the healing power of showing up for people, especially when it’s hard.

The Detective Ari Greene series
Robert Rotenberg (2009-2013)

I love a good detective series any time of year and these ones are so good, they hardly even qualify as a guilty pleasure. Ari Greene is a dysfunctional, neurotic, whip smart Toronto detective who seems to attract trouble wherever he goes. His methods frequently raise the ire of his superiors and he can’t seem to catch a break in his personal life, either.

Throw in a daughter whose existence he only discovers after her mother dies and a Holocaust survivor father, and Rotenberg has created a character who is as sympathetic as he is compelling. The city of Toronto is so vividly described in these books that one feels like one’s been plunked in the midst of the gaping condo development holes and crumbling, but coveted, duplexes. In addition to being an author, Rotenberg is also an experienced criminal defence lawyer and his deep knowledge of the justice system makes the books even more captivating. If you’re looking for a new series to dig into, I highly recommend this one.

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SEYMOUR
EPSTEIN

Seymour (Epi) Epstein is a teacher and a former director of Toronto’s Board of Jewish Education at UJA Federation.

Song of Songs

Song of Songs is surprisingly part of the Hebrew Bible. Surprising, since it is essentially erotic love poetry. What I love about them is our response to them as Jews who read the Bible into our lives, and read our lives into the law and lore of Tanakh. The rabbis of the Talmud challenged the placing of this book in the sacred canon of the Bible, but Rabbi Akiva saved the book for eternity by stating that if the other books were holy, Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies, since it is to be read as an ongoing love affair between God and the Jewish people. The original text was kept, which left Jews to read it over and over again, each time finding new meanings, from the plainest peshat to the wildest derash.

As a Driven Leaf
Rabbi Milton Steinberg (1939)

In 1939, at one of the lowest moments in Jewish history, when despair ruled, Rabbi Milton Steinberg sat down and wrote As a Driven Leaf, a historical fiction based on the real life of a Talmudic heretic, Alisha ben Abuya. As with Song of Songs, one could imagine the rabbis deleting any record of this scholar, but the fact that he remains in Talmudic discourse informs us that we can both understand opposition and live with it without abandoning our own profound beliefs. Every questioning Jew (that’s all of us) should read this novel.

John Lennon and the Jews: A Philosophical Rampage
Ze’ev Maghen (2011)

Ze’ev Maghen’s book, John Lennon and the Jews, is another must read, especially for the “just Jews” who show up on all the recent surveys. With great humour, Maghen proposes preferential love over universalism and romance over rationalism. I’m a fan.
3 MUST-READ BOOKS

Sarah Fulford

Sarah Fulford is the editor-in-chief of Toronto Life magazine.

My Promised Land
Ari Shavit (2013)

Ari Shavit is one of Israel’s most influential columnists. My Promised Land is a sweeping culmination of his life’s work, integrating stories about Israel’s stunning triumphs and catastrophic failures. I admire the reporting in this book, its vivid storytelling and its ambitiously broad scope. But the thing I love best is Shavit’s disposition: he is a fiercely committed Zionist, with an intense love for his country and a passionate, romantic view of his homeland’s heroic genesis, who is nonetheless unafraid to look at Israel with eyes wide open and identify its missteps and moments of self-sabotage. No other book provides such a broad, honest, heartfelt, vivid portrait of Israel.

The Sabbath World: Glimpses of A Different Order of Time
Judith Shulevitz (2010)

Judith Shulevitz, an American journalist I admire, didn’t grow up observing Shabbat. The Sabbath World is about the meaning and history of the day of rest and is largely a spiritual memoir: Shulevitz yearns for the beauty of Shabbat and explores her subject in practice and through research. She lays out the history of Shabbat, tracing its footprint through religious communities all over the world and revealing many fascinating surprises. The Sabbath World is a dense, rewarding book that has the potential to change the way you think about each week.

The Plot Against America
Philip Roth (2004)

This novel is an alternative history in which Charles Lindbergh becomes the U.S. president in 1940 and instead of fighting the Nazis, promises not to interfere. I found the experience haunting, as the fictional Lindbergh presidency bears many similarities to U.S. President Donald Trump’s. The novel is brilliantly told through the viewpoint of a young Roth watching the world collapse into political madness: neo-fascist, anti-immigrant rhetoric blares out from the highest office in the land and anti-Semitic riots erupt in the streets. Sinister and chillingly prescient, it’s the best book one could read about the era in which we now live.

My Promised Land
Ari Shavit (2013)

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Dave Hazzan

Dave Hazzan is a PhD student in history and a freelance writer in Toronto.

The Merchant of Venice
William Shakespeare (1597)

Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice is synonymous with anti-Semitism, and Shylock, Shakespeare’s greedy, vengeful Jew, is synonymous with the early modern Jewish stereotype. At my high school, the play would be withdrawn and reassigned at the whims of the administration, and it was often defended by the English department as a tract against anti-Semitism – Shylock, after all, bleeds. But it’s Merchant of Venice’s anti-Semitism that makes it required reading for all Jews. We learn from this work where the universal Shylock comes from, his literal pound of flesh, and how one of Shakespeare’s most humane comedies dehumanizes the Jewish “other.”

Joshua Then and Now
Mordecai Richler (1980)

Mordecai Richler’s funniest novel, Joshua Then and Now, tells the story of Joshua Shapiro, a Montreal writer whose mom is a stripper, dad is a thief, and father-in-law is an upper-crust senator who can’t believe his daughter married not just a Jew, but this Jew. Richler’s heroes are all bastards, and Joshua is particularly bad: ripping off the War Fund, stealing a woman’s pearls, plagiarizing and otherwise bringing disgrace and disrespect to the St. Urbain Jews. But he is redeemed by his love for his wife, Pauline, and his reverence for the heroes of the Spanish Civil War.

The Political Economy of Human Rights
Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1979)

This two-volume work was so controversial, it was pulped by its original publisher, Warner Communications, after an executive got wind of it. A brutal takedown of American foreign policy and the intellectuals who support it, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman apply the rigorous research and humanist principles that Chomsky, at least, learned from his radical Jewish forebears. Chomsky always argued that his first education was not at school, but on the Jewish streets of Depression-era Philadelphia and New York, where his extended family taught him to dream big, distrust power and always support the underdog.
MARTIN LOCKSHIN

Martin Lockshin is professor emeritus of Jewish studies at York University. He made aliyah in 2015.

**A Journey to the End of the Millennium**

A.B. Yehoshua (1997)

 Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua wrote his historical fiction masterpiece, *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, just before the turn of the last millennium, setting the action 1,000 years earlier, in 1000 CE. The plot is exciting in and of itself, but Yehoshua's careful historical research also brings the medieval Jewish world to life. The tensions between Sephardic Jews who, back then, looked down upon Ashkenazic Jews as primitive and uneducated, are meant to make us think of the contemporary Jewish world, where the same prejudice, in the opposite direction, is still found. It really helped me imagine medieval times more clearly.

**The New Jewish Publication Society Commentary on the Torah**

Baruch Levine, et. al.

This is my favourite contemporary Bible commentary. The five volumes were written by four leading Jewish Bible scholars, professors Baruch Levine and Jeffrey Tigay, and the late professors Jacob Milgrom and Nahum Sarna. (Sarna wrote two of the volumes.) The commentary combines the best of traditional Jewish interpretation with selections from modern critical scholarship. For me, its first-rate literary and historical insights are indispensable, making the ancient biblical text accessible, meaningful and often inspiring.

**Commentary on the Talmud**

Rashi

The Jewish book that I use daily to great benefit is Rashi’s commentary on the Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud existed for approximately 500 years before Rashi, but it was essentially a closed book to most Jews, since its style made it nearly impossible to study independently. Ordinary people needed a master to tell them what it meant. Rashi democratized this process. Although many updated aids are available for studying Talmud today, Rashi’s elegance and amazing economy of language put his commentary in a category of its own.

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3 MUST-READ BOOKS

CARL S. EHR LICH

Prof. Carl S. Ehrlich is the director of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies at York University.

Gimpel the Fool (1953) and Short Friday and Other Stories (1963)
Isaac Bashevis Singer

Exactly half a century ago, I spent a magical year reading my way through many of the classics of (mainly English) literature. At the same time, I was also beginning to explore my Judaism. One Jewish author I discovered that year was Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose translated short story collections Gimpel the Fool and Short Friday and Other Stories found on my parents’ bookshelf.

I became obsessed with Singer’s fantastical recreation of eastern European Jewry and subsequently read as much of his oeuvre as I could find. The fact that I was in early adolescence when I read these stories, which Singer imbued with a sexuality that was unfamiliar to me from the 19th-century literature that I was reading, certainly contributed to my adoration of his works, among which the short stories situated in prewar Poland have remained my favourites.

Suesskind von Trimberg
Friedrich Torberg (1972)

A few years later, I encountered the writings of Friedrich Torberg (1908-1979), one of the last exponents of the great Austro-Hungarian Jewish literary tradition. Although pretty much unknown in the English-speaking world, Torberg was a major literary figure in the German-speaking world, where his brilliant translations of Ephraim Kishon’s satirical works helped ensure that Kishon became the most widely read author in German lands for quite a few years.

Among Torberg’s own works, the one I have long considered my favourite novel of all is Suesskind von Trimberg, a fictional account of the life of the first Jewish poet writing in a Western language. Structuring his novel around the six extant poems attributed to the 13th-century Suesskind, Torberg has written an absorbing and brilliant meditation on the identity of Jews caught between the demands of their own community and those of the non-Jewish world. Unfortunately, this novel has never been translated into English.

Ecclesiastes

Finally, as a biblical scholar, I feel obligated to mention something biblical among my faves. Since my childhood, I have delighted in inventing a German proverb I learned from my refugee parents: learn to suffer without complaining. In my reformulation, this has become: learn to complain without suffering. In other words: be happy while kvetching. What could possibly be more Jewish? And where does one find a purer expression of this cynical ethos than in the book of Ecclesiastes?

Fantasy and identity, cynicism and sex – this book is a powerful Jewish cocktail for this avid reader.

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JOE KANOFSKY

Joe Kanofsky is a rabbi at Kehillat Shaarei Torah in Toronto and holds a PhD in literature.

“Before the Law”
 Franz Kafka (1915)

This parable was first published by Franz Kafka in a Jewish newspaper in 1915 and later included in a collection of short stories, and then in The Trial, a book he never quite finished that was published after his death. This story is the flawless articulation of the modern Jew’s dilemma. He or she contemplates entry into a discipline that’s as enticing as it is elusive, yet entrance to even the first introductory gate seems out of reach. The imposing people guarding the portal are no help. I’ve given this tale the ultimate reverence: I have it printed on a coffee mug.

Psalms

Sadly, I appear to conform to S.Y. Agnon’s definition of an intellectual as “someone who can read Tehillim (Psalms) without shedding tears.” With each daily foray into Tehillim, new valences of meaning, reference and emotion surface. I also become more aware of how frequently it’s quoted without attribution and how deeply its words have penetrated our language and consciousness. Studying this book with members of my shul line by line, chapter by chapter, with commentary and discussion, has revealed more of the infinite in every word.

Five Germanys I Have Known
 Fritz Stern (2006)

It’s worth reading the whole book just for Marion Doenhoff’s comment on West Germany’s renunciation of its claims to historically German territory in her native Poland: “I do not believe that hating those who have taken over one’s homeland necessarily demonstrates love for the homeland. When I remember the woods and lakes of East Prussia, its wide meadows and old shaded avenues, I am convinced that they are still as incomparably lovely as they were when they were my home. Perhaps the highest form of love is loving without possessing.” When Israel’s neighbours can articulate a similar sentiment, peace might have a chance.

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JOSHUA LIEBLEIN

Joshua Lieblein is a writer in Toronto.

Ego and Hubris: The Michael Malice Story
Harvey Pekar (2006)

Author and commentator Michael Malice is a Jew, albeit not a very religious one, and he has some pretty awful opinions that he’s come by honestly, and which he argues for eloquently. This makes him a fascinating subject for an autobiographical comic book, because he seems easier to approach as a drawing, rather than a fully formed human being. Malice’s Jewishness raises the question of how accepting a Jewish community should be of its most distasteful members, and whether he would be any less rude and blunt if he’d been embraced and loved by his fellow Jews.

A Confederacy of Dunces
John Kennedy Toole (1980)

It’s safe to say that Jews are preoccupied with how people outside our community see us. Can a non-Jew depict real and believable Jewish characters without descending into anti-Semitic caricatures? Toole resolves this dilemma by presenting what would otherwise be stock Jewish characters – the idle-rich factory owner and his nagging wife, the far-left professional agitator – and showing how much they have in common with his deeply flawed non-Jewish protagonist, Ignatius J. Reilly. It’s comforting to the Jewish reader to know that everyone else is struggling with twists of fate that seem incomprehensible, but reveal a greater, and possibly divine, plan.

The Finkler Question
Howard Jacobson (2010)

It seems absurd for ex-BBC producer and virtual nonentity Julian Treslove to become the victim of what appears to be an anti-Semitic attack (despite not being Jewish himself). Regardless of his many professional and romantic connections within London’s Jewish community, and his own exhaustive research into Jewish history and community life, he never gets any closer to an explanation for why he was targeted. The point of Howard Jacobson’s novel appears to be that a resurgence of anti-Semitism in the modern age seems ridiculous to many, until it affects them personally.
Rochelle Krich gave fans of her Molly Blume mysteries just four titles, but each shines with spirited Molly, a divorced Orthodox writer turned sleuth who navigates society’s underbelly with the street smarts of a Nancy Drew who’s capable of koshering a kitchen. Molly and her L.A. family (including her bubbe, a Holocaust survivor) are instantly recognizable. Now You See Me ends the series with Molly hired to find a teenage runaway whose religious family fears a scandal. To keep continuity (and suspense) with Molly’s own dilemma in the romance department, read the series in sequence.

The literary choices we make as young adults may flunk the test of time, but My Name is Asher Lev manages to stay relevant more than 45 years later. Young Asher’s formidable artistic talent is permitted to flourish by his Hasidic parents, with devastating consequences. The clash between freedom of expression and allegiance to a prescribed way of life is even more timely now, as technology, led by the Internet, threatens the barriers that protect insular cultures. Anyone who has ever struggled with competing loyalties will see themselves in this book.

Historical fiction in the right hands is a gift, as it’s both entertaining and educational. Sleep in Peace Tonight by British author James MacManus ticks both boxes. As London reels from the German bombing blitz in 1941, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt dispatches advisor Harry Hopkins overseas to engage with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. A young woman in the British intelligence is assigned to be Hopkins’s driver, and the turn her life subsequently takes, both personally and professionally, is riveting and shattering. I’d be remiss not to mention that MacManus dug deep into what would befall Europe’s Jews with his next book, Midnight in Berlin.

Dorothy Lipovenko is a writer in Montreal.
The Shlafman Family extends Rosh Hashanah Greetings to its many friends and clients.

Mark Breslin is an entrepreneur, comedian and founder of Yuk Yuk’s.

Portnoy’s Complaint
Philip Roth (1969)

I could have put any number of Philip Roth books on this list, but I chose this one because it’s the funniest, and most controversial. Structured as a long stand-up monologue, which turns out to be a rehearsal of what a troubled Jewish man is intending to tell his psychoanalyst, the novel plays havoc with topics like Jewish mothers, sex with non-Jewish women, the pressures to succeed in a middle-class family and more. Some Jewish critics at the time were incensed at what they thought was an anti-Semitic text, but it’s one of the three great works of its type.

Our Crowd
Stephen Birmingham (1967)

This non-fiction account of ultra-wealthy Jewish families in 19th-century New York is the surprising story that offers a counter-history to the idea that all Jewish immigrants lived in hovels on the Lower East Side.

The German families that emigrated as early as the 1850s with names like Loeb, Seligman, Guggenheim, Strauss and Lehman, would create empires in banking and retail, and go on to become pioneers in philanthropy and arts support. There are anecdotes about a Jewish golden age that was both innocent and haughty, communitarian yet aloof, which we usually don’t think of when we think of New York Jews.

Some families were no more moral than the gentle robber barons of the day; others shared their wealth and positions for public good. But all were shamelessly united in ignoring the needs of the later European Jewish immigrants, when they flooded the city decades later.

An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood
Neal Gabler (1988)

The ultimate Jews in showbiz book. Gable’s tome traces how a bunch of rag-pickers, pushcart peddlers and other outlaws created the foundations for show business as we know it.

Stories of Louis B. Mayer, the Warner brothers, Adolph Zucker, Harry Cohn and their companies — MGM, Fox, Columbia, Warner Bros. — shine in this crazy rags-to-riches tale. Most of the moguls indulge in bad behaviour that would be questionable today, but make for colourful reading.

The book makes a good case that the Jewish background in storytelling, which is hardwired into our DNA, made these uneducated men the perfect people to create the Hollywood dream factory, but the book does not overlook their refusal to confront Nazism in its early days, or Mayer’s conversion to Presbyterianism, to help mainstream his company, MGM.

These days, we spend a lot of time denying the Jewish influence in TV and film; this book suggests that we should be proud of it.
The Winter Vault
Anne Michaels (2009)

The Winter Vault is as good as, if not better than, author Anne Michaels’ award-winning debut novel, Fugitive Pieces. Epic in scope and elegiac in tone, this multi-layered work focuses on the complicated lives of a married couple who witness the loss of communities displaced by shifting rivers – specifically, the Nile and St. Lawrence. The narrative maps different, but overlapping, temporal and spatial frames, including Toronto and Warsaw after the Second World War. Michaels explores architecture, archeology, engineering, botany, painting and music.

Daniel Deronda
George Eliot (1876)

George Eliot’s final novel combines Victorian and Jewish plots. Freud wrote that Eliot’s depiction of Jews was one that “we (Jews) speak of only among ourselves,” so it is no surprise that Eliot’s proto-Zionist portrayal led to the naming of Rechov George Eliot in Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Uncertain about his parentage and Jewish roots, Deronda grows up in upper-class English society and meets Mirah Cohen, whom he marries. Eliot draws fine portraits of synagogue life in Germany, and presents intimate snapshots of a Jewish musician, Herr Klesmer, and Mirah’s visionary brother, Mordecai. Ultimately, Deronda sets sail to establish a promised land in the Levant.

Ulysses
James Joyce (1922)

While Shakespeare’s Shylock sets the stage for the image of the Jew in English literature, and Daniel Deronda creates a far more nuanced view, James Joyce’s Ulysses further humanizes its protagonist, Leopold Bloom, in a merry bond with modernism. We follow Bloom’s wandering through Dublin, over the course of a single day. Where Shylock raves about his pound of flesh, Bloom cooks breakfast: “mutton kidneys, thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart.” This smorgasbord of offal hints at Joyce’s verbal play and Irish stream of consciousness. A minor character, Herzog, resurfaces in Saul Bellow’s classic.
RABBI DOW MARMUR

Rabbi Dow Marmur is rabbi emeritus at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto.

Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor
Yossi Klein Halevi (2018)

Israelis know that their long-term security depends on peace between them and the Palestinians. They also fear that politicians aren’t likely to bring it about, but ordinary folk might. I believe that’s the sentiment behind Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor by Yossi Klein Halevi.

Not surprisingly, the book is a New York Times bestseller, because it reflects the Jewish position and, at the same time, recognizes the needs and rights of the Palestinian people. As Halevi puts it: “For the sake of allowing the other side to achieve some measure of justice, each side needs to impose on itself some measure of injustice.”

Chazara bli teshuva
Micah Goodman (2019)

Israelis also know that the future of Judaism depends on Jewish teachings being interpreted in the light of Jews’ religious needs, as citizens of the Jewish state. Much of today’s Judaism doesn’t meet those needs because it has been shaped in, and by, the Diaspora.

Several Israeli thinkers have addressed this issue. Arguably, the most interesting among them is Micah Goodman’s recent book, Chazara bli teshuva, paraphrased in English as “the philosophic roots of the secular-religious divide.” The book will soon be available in English. Anybody interested in how Judaism is being “Israelized” will benefit from reading it.

How a Poem Moves
Adam Sol (2019)

Being concerned with what’s going on in the Jewish world and in the Jewish state is no reason to neglect local talent. Adam Sol came to Canada more than two decades ago as the husband of Rabbi Yael Splansky, who’s now the senior rabbi at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto. He’s an award-winning poet and a talented professor.

His latest book is an indispensable guide to all who read, enjoy and try to understand poetry. As he puts it, “there’s a whole world of great poems out there to explore.” Adam Sol is a most reliable guide.
JOHN MOSCOWITZ

John Moscowitz is rabbi emeritus at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto and the author of Evolution of An Unorthodox Rabbi.

A Tale of Love and Darkness
Amos Oz (2002)

Amos Oz’s memoir of his mostly pre-state childhood illumines the inner world of a boy whose imagination afforded him a far larger life than the one bequeathed to him. Raised in a cramped Jerusalem apartment by parents haunted by demons and history, Oz freed himself from his confinements, to arguably become Israel’s greatest writer. The book captures life in 1940s Jerusalem – a city of cafes and writers, of strivers and survivors, that’s now largely forgotten. Thanks to Oz, one can get lost in this rich book and remember this time and place.

Konin: One Man’s Quest for a Vanished Jewish Community
Theo Richmond (1995)

The town of Konin, in western Poland, was occupied by the Nazis in 1939. Its Jews were murdered or scattered. Years later, Theo Richmond, a descendant of people from Konin, set out to map its Jewish history and reconstruct its fairly typical eastern European shtetl life. Richmond tracks down Konin’s survivors and their offspring over several continents, and then heads for the town itself – all the while providing a rich depiction of a vanished world that spawned many of us.

Africa: The Biography of A Continent
John Reader (1997)

Do you want to think more deeply about how we became human? Do you want to know more about the commonality of all humans (along with how much we share with our animal cousins)? Then this book is for you.

Several years ago, while on safari in Kenya, I asked an African-American in our group, “What is it like to be a black man in Africa?” Understanding the import of my question better than I did, he stared at me and said, simply, “We’re all from Africa.” Read John Reader’s rich history of Africa to appreciate the profundity of my co-traveler’s comment, as well as the human story itself.
There is no shortage of articles and books that explain the Torah, or contain valuable insights for everyday living based on the Torah. One of the relatively recent is a multi-volume work by Rabbi Aharon Yeshaye Roter, titled Shaarei Aharon al HaTorah. Very little in these volumes are the thoughts of the author. Instead, this encyclopedic 19-volume work addresses most of the obvious complexities in understanding the Torah. It gathers together a wide range of commentators who, transcending time and space, meet on the pages of Shaarei Aharon al HaTorah, addressing the issues and expanding our appreciation. It is a wonderful way to warm up to the weekly Torah readings. I would not be surprised if one day this work will be translated, and thereby made available to a much larger audience.

One of the most impactful books I have ever read is The Doctor and the Soul by Viktor Frankl. This is not the most famous of his books. That accolade goes to Man’s Search for Meaning. But it is in The Doctor and the Soul that Frankl spells out his approach to life, more specifically to love, work, suffering and death. All of these life contingencies are approached within the context of meaningfulness. The book is full of fascinating insights and helpful advice on the things that matter the most and are challenging to many. It is easy to read, and guaranteed to educate and guide.

Of a more contemporary nature, a truly inspirational volume is Saving One’s Own: Jewish Rescuers During the Holocaust, by Mordecai Paldiel. It is almost 600 pages, including notes and index. It is full of heroics — the true heroics of Jews in a wide range of countries, including Germany, Austria, Poland, Belarus, Hungary, Croatia, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland, among others. The common thread is that these heroes saved many lives, against incredible odds and with dire consequences if caught. Nothing in the wild imagination of Hollywood compares with the mind-boggling achievements of these authentic heroes. It is impossible to come away from reading this book without being overwhelmed and inspired. Nothing refutes the canard that Jews went like sheep to the slaughter as powerfully as this extraordinary compilation.
3 MUST-READ BOOKS

**The Ruined House**
Ruby Namdar (2014)

I'm not surprised that this book won the Sapir Prize, Israel's top literary award. It's a fascinating novel, which takes place over the course of a year, about a sophisticated New York University professor who suddenly has to deal with strange visions that force him to question even his most deeply held beliefs. His depiction of cultured Jewish life in Manhattan is spot on. The professor's midlife crisis explores materialism and faith in an original manner that's befitting of a man who teaches Jewish literature focusing on biblical and talmudic narratives.

**Lake Success**
Gary Shteyngart (2018)

This is a superb novel about a narcissistic hedge fund manager who flees New York because he cannot deal with his three-year-old son's diagnosis of autism. The razor-sharp digs at the ruthlessness of capitalism and unbridled materialism in America is just perfect for the Trump era. It is a biting satire that makes the reader want to know what will happen to the hero, even though he gets more annoying by the page. Author Gary Shteyngart covers identity politics and lays bare the challenges of parenthood that are often left unsaid. *Lake Success* manages to be hilarious and heart-breaking all at the same time.

**The Weight of Ink**
Rachel Kadish (2017)

This work of historical fiction set in 17th-century Jewish London is filled with a generous reverence for words, but it is no dull intellectual tome. It is a tale of exquisite literary intrigue that will keep you in suspense, weaving back and forth from a blind rabbi's scribe to an ailing researcher with a love of Jewish history. It is a 550-page literary mystery that is meticulously researched and riddled with surprises. I took my time, read it very slowly and savoured every morsel. It was well worth the effort.

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**TOMMY SCHNURMACHER**

Former radio talkshow host Tommy Schnurmacher is the author of the memoir, *Makeup Tips from Auschwitz: How Vanity Saved My Mother's Life,* which is now available on Amazon.

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The challenge of diversity in Israel’s tech sector

Arabs and other minorities are underrepresented in the country’s booming high-tech industry, but some are working to change that

Inbal Arieli

Israel’s tech sector has gone from strength to strength in the past three decades, to some extent carrying the rest of Israel’s economy with it. Israel is third (after the United States and China) in terms of the number of companies listed for trading on Nasdaq. Foreign direct investments in Israel (in all sectors) reached about US$19 billion ($25 billion) in 2017, an all-time peak. That’s a staggering increase from 2014, when US$6.7 billion was invested from overseas. Indeed, the conditions for foreign investment and international trade in Israel are extremely convenient. Low tariffs and an improved domestic regulatory environment have helped make international trade possible. Reforms to enhance the market openness of Israel’s regulatory framework for trade are regularly put forward. The adoption of international standards (or basing new standards on international ones) is encouraged by law, and a recent resolution seeks to further harmonize existing Israeli standards with those held internationally. In addition, Israel took it upon itself to follow a certain standard set by the international economic community. By setting up its fiscal and monetary macroeconomy to adhere to the guidelines of the Maastricht Treaty and the Washington Consensus and instituting important foreign currency reforms, it managed to make the shekel, its domestic currency, a tradeable one. Besides building the infrastructure needed to attract foreign investors, the government also encourages internationals to invest or operate in Israel by offering grants, advantageous tax structure, and exemptions to help companies offset expenses in capital, R&D and wages. All these efforts brought on very positive results. Between 1998 and 2012, Israel’s tech industry grew at more than double the rate of the nation’s GDP, expanding by an average of nine per cent annually. In 2015, 2,355 start-up companies were active, employing just over 20,600 people (35 per cent more as compared to 2014). Of the 2,775 companies that opened between 2010 and 2015, 420 (15 per cent) had closed by 2015. This is significantly less than the world average. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics and to the Small Business Administration, 33 per cent of businesses fail within the first two crucial years. While the number of surviving businesses is consistently 50 to 60 per cent, having a 33 per cent chance of failure is still extremely high and demands high risk tolerance. Despite the gloomy chances startups display in the United States, the startup capital of the world, the number of Israeli startups that open each year exceeds the number of those that close. Between 2010 and 2014, the number of startups in Israel grew on average 4.4 per cent annually. However, since 2014, the number of new startups launched has dropped by 6 per cent on average annually. While the numbers recorded by the statistics bureau represent a possible downturn, 2016 saw more people join the sector – a seven per cent increase compared to 2015, and an increase of six per cent on average in wages for those employed in the Israeli tech economy.

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In 2017, Israeli startups collectively raised $5.5 billion in venture capital funding, 50 per cent higher than three years before. In 2018, Israeli high-tech companies raised $6.4 billion in 623 deals, marking a record following six years of consecutive growth. The total capital raised in 2018 was 17 per cent higher compared to 2017, but a remarkable 120 per cent higher compared to 2013.

Thanks to years of thriving tech sector activity, Israel still has more startups per capita to show for than anywhere else in the world outside of Silicon Valley. Relative to its size, Israeli startups received nearly two times the funding of American startups and have long ago surpassed Europe and China. Again, an all-time record. Finally, in recent years, Israel has seen a significant increase in the number of foreign investors, and the establishment of multiple venture capital firms looking to invest in innovative startups. Some of the more impressive examples include Disruptive VC, TLV Partners, 83North and Aleph. Israel is also leading the world in investment in R&D, most of which is private, not governmental.

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Israel still has more startups per capita to show for than anywhere else in the world outside of Silicon Valley.

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Eugene Kandel, former head of the National Economic Council, the former economic adviser to the prime minister, and the current CEO of Start-Up Nation Central, a non-profit organization connecting governments, corporations and investors from around the world with the innovation ecosystem in Israel, believes that the main comparative advantage of the Israeli economy is its ability to provide innovative technological solutions to a variety of problems increasingly facing the world. Kandel says that these problems Israel has been dealing with for 100 years, and by force of circumstances, traditional ways of addressing them were insufficient. Israelis came up with innovative solutions only by way of trial and error, and gradually managed to prosper and provide water, food, energy and health care to Israeli citizens.

The role Start-Up Nation Central is playing – providing accessible information about the Israeli ecosystem as well as personal access to its players – isn’t exclusive to it; the government and other organizations are working tirelessly to make connections, provide data and help navigate the country’s regulations. I myself am asked on a nearly daily basis to present and talk to foreign delegations visiting Israel, including heads of states and executives from the world’s largest corporations, investors in emerging economies and tech entrepreneurs, as well as business students. They are all interested in understanding the nature of the Israeli tech ecosystem, but, more important, what they can learn from it.

Nothing is perfect

Indeed, the Israeli tech ecosystem is a successful one that sets examples in so many ways to rising hubs of entrepreneurship around the globe. However, it is far from being perfect. One of its most critical challenges, and some might say opportunities, is its current lack of diversity in human capital.

Imad Telhami was born to a Christian family, which forms a minority group in the Druze village of Isfiya, which forms a minority group within Israel, which in turn forms a minority within the Middle East. Thanks to his father's worldview, Telhami came to see the fact of being a minority as a strength. His father took up teaching rather by chance; he went to Lebanon to study medicine, but when the War of Independence broke out in 1948 he came back to the village. Seeing the state of education, or rather lack thereof, of the village's children, he made it his life mission to educate the village's youth and help put them on the right path. His teachings were marked by love, and money was not important. If a child's family could not afford books or school trips, Telhami's father would cover the cost. He would not let a child out of his grasp until he had learned, and not having money never factored into his decision to help. What he taught Telhami was the invaluable lesson that with love and absolute faith one can move mountains.

If we were to choose one word to describe Telhami's upbringing, it would be shalom. Perhaps the most well-known and highest-frequency word in Hebrew (used both as “hello” and “good-bye”), shalom literally means “peace.” It is one of the most charged words in the language, denoting a state of harmony and acceptance between enemies – what many would describe as a utopia. But for Telhami, shalom is simply a way of life.

This might be baffling to some. How could a minority love the decision-making majority without feeling bitterness, as those who are oppressed are so often inclined to feel? To Telhami, following the example set by his father, the secret to living in shalom is to foster respect for and acceptance of the other. In Telhami's village, it was not respectful of the Druze customs and traditions for men to wear certain customs and traditions for men to wear. Telhami's childhood centered on acceptance, consideration and his family did not follow the same traditions, meant to accept the other's worldview, to play by their rules not out of indifference, but out of adapting oneself to an environment so as to enable life to exist side by side. Telhami's childhood centered on acceptance, consideration for the other and adapting not as sacrifice but out of love and respect. It was thanks to this childhood, difficult or not, that Telhami became the industry leader he is today, and an example of how shalom can truly be realized.
At 18, Telhami was planning on becoming a doctor, but with the advice of his father he went on to study industrial engineering and design at Shenkar College in Ramat Gan, a central city in Israel. Once a week he would return from the bustling centre of Israel to his home in the village. Although he never officially graduated, he excelled in his studies and was remarkable enough to be spotted by Amos Ben-Gurion, who invited Telhami to work for him in his textile factory company, ATA. In ATA his talents were again noted, this time by Yossi Ron, who owned Beged-Or company, and who invited Telhami to be his plant manager in 1981. Telhami did not receive a warm welcome at his new job. The Jewish workers went on strike in the hopes of avoiding having to work with an Arab.

But Ron was adamant, and with persistence, love and respect, a skill set that Telhami perfected as a child, within one year he became one of the most beloved managers in the company, so much so that after three years, when he left the job, they went on strike again, this time to prevent him from going. They failed both times. The harsh experience of having to bulldoze his way into the business world taught Telhami a valuable lesson. The Jewish-Arab conflict is not a fact but rather a result of circumstances. People are similar, he thought. “We all breathe, eat, laugh, cry and behave the same way,” he told me. “We share the same fears, difficulties, and joys of life. But when we do not come into contact with one another it makes it too easy for us to categorize each other, put everyone into black boxes and eventually drift apart, to the extent of hating each other. Once we do get to know each other, we realize we’re all just people, and things usually fall into place,” Telhami explained.

His next stop was Delta Galil, an Israeli manufacturer and marketer of private-label apparel products for men, women and children, employing today more than 10,000 employees worldwide. When Telhami arrived at Delta, he saw Dov Lautman apply this doctrine in every aspect of his company. Lautman made Telhami the first Arab plant manager, after which Telhami’s career soared. What defined Telhami’s great leadership were the same principles he learned as a boy – love and acceptance. Throughout his career in Delta he would find simple ways of reaching out to people. Whether it was in Europe, the United States, the Middle East or anywhere else where he supervised a plant, he would look for a language that everyone could understand. He calls this language “motivation,” and he certainly does not mean money. To promote co-operation and inclusion, Telhami came up with the slogan “love working with you.” “Love is something everyone understands,” he says, “which makes it an intercultural language. This does not mean a manager should declare his love for an employee, an approach that is likely to end in an expensive lawsuit. It means that both employees and managers should manifest compassion, as in the Arab word hamun, ‘to include, to contain.’”

The secret to Telhami’s success in Delta lies in the thought of how to find the balance between what motivates the employee and what’s important to them, on the one hand, and the needs and wishes of the company, on the other. In 2007, after spending 25 years in Delta, Telhami and Lautman decided to retire from the company. As he was considering his options, Telhami came across disturbing statistics – 82 per cent of Arab women in Israel were unemployed. He decided to take responsibility and soon he built Babcom Centers, which was meant to be a door to employment, success, coexistence and excellent service. Babcom’s business model was to be the leading company in the country when it came to quality of service. To achieve this, Telhami realized, Babcom must first achieve true diversity.

Telhami testified that he “structured Babcom like a bundle of colourful and diverse flowers, all brought together to make one gorgeous bouquet.” By bringing out the best of every culture and religion, Telhami managed to create a company that served everyone. It has become such a powerful business model that it is now being taught as a case study at Harvard Business School, called “Babcom: opening doors.”

Although the success of Babcom is undeniable, Telhami still felt his dream of driving true coexistence and inclusion was not being fully achieved. “I’ve been doing this for five years,” he said in 2013, “and what new businesses have sprung up thanks to my efforts? Who has followed my example the way I have my father’s? Why are Israeli Arabs not part of the startup nation, despite comprising 20 per cent of the population?” What he was doing was terrific, but it was nowhere near what he had in mind.
Israeli Jews have lined up. The importance of having a strong network to support an entrepreneur along the way cannot be stressed enough. The business models on one hand, "Telhami included. The lack of experienced mentors and inspirational figures is only exacerbated by the fear of networking. The success rate seen in the Jewish sector.

Finally, there’s the fear of failure. The second fear is fear of government. The Israeli government is at fault more often than not when it comes to the Arab sector, which understandably makes Arabs believe they would not receive the support any entrepreneur needs. The third fear is of the banks. Like the government, they offer little support to Arabs in the form of interests, loans and credit, often requiring people to take out a mortgage on their land or house, something many, Arabs in particular, find very difficult to do.

The fourth fear stems from lack of success stories. “We could count the number of Israeli Arab entrepreneurial role models on one hand,” Telhami included. The importance of having a strong network to support an entrepreneur along the way cannot be stressed enough. The business and professional network Arabs have comprises, in most cases, the village’s head of council and school principal. It may be a valuable relationship, but it is a drop in the ocean compared to the 8,200 alumni network, Silicon Valley connections, universities and other relationships Israeli Jews have lined up.

With the problem well defined, Telhami was now able to turn to solutions. He founded Takwin Labs together with Chemi Peres and Erel Margalit, and together they help combat the five inhibiting fears that are plaguing Israeli Arabs. Beyond financial support, they offer Arab entrepreneurs networking opportunities, professional support, access to technology, mentors and strategic consultants. Above all, they help them expand their dreams tenfold. “Dream big,” Telhami would say. “It’s where it all starts.”

The diversity in human capital in the Israeli tech ecosystem is not limited to the Arab population. There are other groups underrepresented, such as the ultra-Orthodox, women and people over the age of 45 – each group for a different reason and root cause.

However, given the constant growth of the Israeli tech industry, creating demand for recruitment of skilled personnel at an accelerated rate while competing for these resources with various players, a notable shortage in talented, skilled personnel is felt. This important challenge is now turning into an opportunity. It has become urgent to fully realize the innovation potential of all segments of Israeli society, in order to generate inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Hence, both governmental initiatives and many private ones are put in place to support the growth by tapping into these underrepresented groups of potential talent.

**Optimism and entrepreneurship**

Business journalists and industry experts alike are looking to understand the factors behind Israel’s remarkably successful tech ecosystem. This is also the purpose of this book: to break down exactly what in Israeli culture breeds so many powerful entrepreneurial minds. There is a thriving entrepreneurial culture that underpins Israeli society, not only the business sector. From infancy to adulthood, Israelis are driven toward experimentation, failure and learning; mental and physical risk taking; and a positive, some would say blind, belief that things will be all right, or in Hebrew: yiheyeh beseder.

A leader must be a leader

Jerry S. Grafstein

One morning in the late 1940s, my father was reading the London Free Press or a Toronto or New York Yiddish newspaper – I can’t remember which – when he became very animated and visibly upset. He followed Hasidic training to be moderate in all things and seek resolutions, not become mired in anger, so this display was rare for him.

He read that the Ontario Supreme Court of Appeal had approved a lower-case decision upholding a restrictive clause in a property case on a vacation cottage area north of London, Ont. The leading Jewish merchant in London, Bernard Wolf, a friend of my father, had sought to buy a cottage property in a small enclave on a lake north of London. His purchase was stopped because an adjoining owner sought to enforce a restrictive covenant in the small vacation community that said: “No Jews allowed.” The Supreme Court of Ontario upheld the restrictive covenant. On appeal to the Ontario Court of Appeal, it was upheld again. Wolf, a principled man, appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada, where the clause was finally set aside, allowing the sale to proceed.

My father turned to me solemnly and said, “In Canada, these attitudes can be changed.” I was a high schooler at the time, but my father knew that the law profession was one of my career goals.

“If you ever have a chance,” he continued, “you should try to change that court in Toronto that discriminates against Jews.

“It is not right.”

Years later, in 1965 to be precise, an opportunity to fulfill my father’s early advice appeared suddenly. By this time, I was a Liberal activist and had acted as an advance man and as a youth representative on the Liberal National Campaign Committee and on both the National and Ontario Campaign Committees. My main mentor and key promoter was Keith Davey, then the national director of the Liberal party.

Lester Pearson’s minority government was struggling to obtain a majority. Pearson and Davey had high hopes, but with little forward traction in the polls. Both were keenly aware that every vote counted. Except for the Toronto Star, the press, including the Globe and Mail and Toronto Telegram, was not supportive in the city. Toronto contained a small number of key seats that were tightly divided.

Suddenly in the run-up to the federal campaign, there was a vacancy on that reactionary Ontario Court of Appeal. I immediately went up to the University of Toronto law school to seek advice from Dean “Caesar” Wright, another of my mentors, who I continued to see regularly on a weekly basis for an hour or so on Friday afternoons after my graduation and call to the Ontario Bar.

Wright saw me at once as I indicated I needed his advice on a pressing political matter. (Wright’s close friend, Sidney Smith, a former president of the University of Toronto, had an abortive political career as Conservative member of Parliament and minister of external affairs in Diefenbaker’s time. Smith died suddenly of a stroke in 1959. So “Caesar” was a close student of politics.)

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Deep down, Wright was a Liberal, and a friend and admirer of Mr. Pearson. I told him of my idea to get a liberal appointed to the reactionary Ontario Appeals court and felt it could be a great game changer in Ontario.

My first choice was Bora Laskin, with liberal instincts who had friendly social ties with Tories like Charley Dubin and Eddie Goodman. Wright immediately responded that Bora should be my candidate, admitting that he had antagonized too many establishment lawyers and judges and politicians with his reformist ideas. This was my idea in the first place. But I owed it to “Caesar” to have the opportunity to say no, which I anticipated he would.

Bora was Jewish and there was not a Jew on any of the high courts of Ontario. There had been Jews on county court and magistrates, but no Jews on the Ontario high courts despite the high quality of many Jewish legal practitioners. Bora, a constitutional and labour expert, was well respected – as Wright pointed out, especially by both labour, management and constitutional academia – well known and held in high regard by the Toronto Star, the Liberal paper and the Tory Toronto Telegram run by John Bassett, a former Conservative candidate, who was great friends of both Goodman and Dubin (who acted for Bassett and who were Bassett’s minor partners in CFTO TV).

In his role as labour mediator, Bora had acted to resolve disputes between the newspaper unions and the press ownership, so he was in every key newspaper player’s good graces. The fact that he was Jewish and would be the first Jew on the Court and a liberal, I agreed, was a great idea and viable.

Wright said that Bora was in his office down the hall, but he cautioned me that Bora was above partisan politics and would not do a thing to advance his own cause. So, he counselled that I ask him only one question: “If the appointment was offered, would he accept?”

I immediately went down the hall at the law school building to interrupt Bora, who was deep at work editing the Dominion Law Reports and didn’t like to be disturbed when he was working. By happenstance, he knew and admired my father-in-law, Harry Sniderman, who was a great all-round athlete. Bora was a great athlete himself at University of Toronto and as a result had been invited to my wedding (as were all my other law professors at my father-in-law’s insistence). I took all his courses and found reasonably. So, when I popped my head in his door, the usual impatient scowl turned to a smile and he asked what he could do for me. I asked for a minute of his time. He paused and invited me into his book-lined office, desk piled high with cases he was reviewing to include in the Dominion Law Reports. “Bora,” I began timidly, “if you were asked to fill the vacancy on the Ontario Court of Appeal, would you accept?” Bora had taught me property law, labour law, and constitutional law and I remember he had eviscerated the courts for their decisions, especially the Ontario Court of Appeal, upholding that invidious privative restrictive clause.
In that moment, as “Caesar” had acutely predicted, Bora rose, came around his office, desk piled high with cases, he paused and invited me into his book-lined office, and grinned, “I would kill for that. What’s your idea?”

“I won’t do anything,” he said. “It’s not proper.” I told him I wasn’t asking him to put his hand in cold water or do anything. But if he was called by the federal government to appoint him, would he accept. The government no doubt would want assurances so as not waste time or face.

“Yes, of course, under those conditions,” he agreed, he would accept, but repeated he would do nothing – nothing! – to advance his candidacy. I told him that I would work on it immediately.

I returned to Wright’s office, congratulating him on his astute analyses of Bora’s attitude.

Then we reviewed the ministers from Ontario that would be called by the prime minister to make recommendations. Again, “Caesar” showed his political smarts as we went through the ministers from Ontario who were lawyers like Joe Green, Judy LaMarsh, and especially Paul Martin Sr. who would always have a preferred local candidate from Windsor to propose. I should hurry up before other candidates loomed up, he suggested, especially one proposed by Paul Martin Sr.

The following day, I flew up to Ottawa to see Keith Davey, who was then deep in election mode planning for the next federal campaign. There was a crisis in Ottawa that day: a national railway strike was on the brink. Certain ministers were involved in seeking to avoid a massive nationwide rail strike that would be devastating to the Pearson government’s flagging political fortunes.

I caught Keith’s attention by asking what he would do if I could get a lead editorial in all three Toronto daily newspapers praising Mr. Pearson and the Liberal government. Keith said with a big grin, “I would kill for that. What’s your idea?”

“What would you say,” I replied, “if the Pearson government appointed Bora Laskin to the Ontario Court of Appeal?”

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“Bora is a great liberal and non-partisan and highly regarded by labour, management, the press and all parties, Liberals, Conservatives, and CCF,” I continued, adding that “he has good ties especially with David Lewis and Tommy Douglas for his enlightened views on labour.”

Keith’s eyes gleamed. “Great idea,” he said. “Let’s get working on it right away.”

The guy who was handling the file, Davey told me, was the Solicitor General, Larry Pennell. Larry was an outstanding criminal lawyer who was a true liberal and opponent of the death penalty, but he was tied up that day as he was the cabinet point man trying to bring unions and management together on the rail strike.

I told Davey I was only here for the day and time was of the essence before other candidates got a head of steam. He quickly agreed to intervene, picking up the phone and calling Pennell’s office to set up an immediate appointment for me. He told me to hightail it to Parliament Hill that morning before Pennell and other ministers would be preparing for an explosive Question Period.

While I was an activist and knew many ministers by this time, I did not know Pennell except by reputation. When I arrived at his office, it was crowded with rail union reps and management waiting to see him. I quickly introduced myself and told him I was brought up in London not far from his riding in Brantford, Ont. “Well, what is it?” he impatiently asked, “and be quick about it.” I said it was about the Ontario Court of Appeal vacancy. As solicitor general and from Ontario, Pennell was chair of the Cabinet Committee to vet and choose these appointments.

The chief justices of the provincial high courts and Supreme Court of Canada appointments by tradition were left to the prime minister’s discretion. But provincial Supreme Courts were vetted by ministers who were lawyers from those appropriate provinces. Quickly Pennell’s mood changed. He was interested.

“Who do you have in mind?” he replied. “Bora Laskin,” I responded.

He paused, smiled, and after a moment of thought said, “That’s a great suggestion. Come around to my desk and let’s review the other candidates and who could canvas the Ontario lawyers who were ministers and who were on the Cabinet Selection Committee.”

We quickly reviewed each minister and he asked me who Keith could handle and who could canvas the Ontario lawyers who were ministers and who were on the Cabinet Selection Committee.

Keith said he would follow-up as I should, and he would co-ordinate with Pennell.

That was in the winter of 1965. I heard a little after I reported to Pennell that while Joe Greene, who had been taught by Bora at Osgoode Hall was on side, Judy LaMarsh was less forthcoming. I heard nothing from Ottawa till late June of that year. One Friday midmorning, I received a call from Pennell in Ottawa who advised me that the matter we discussed a few months ago would be dealt with at the last cabinet meeting before summer adjournment later today, but it wouldn’t happen as the candidate cannot be reached for his consent to the appointment.

“Minister,” I responded, “you are the solicitor general and the head of the RCMP. What do you mean you can’t reach him?” Pennell explained that the candidate is apparently overseas and cannot be reached. “Leave it to me,” I said. “I will get back to you in a couple hours.”

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I immediately got on the subway from my office downtown to College Street station, and raced across Queens Park to the law school on Queen’s Park Crescent. The Law School was almost empty as I ran from office to office. Finally, I found Horace Krever, a friend and law professor, who was working in his office. I told him it was a matter of life and death. “Where is Bora?” I asked frantically.

“Oh, Bora is in England for lectures at Oxford,” he replied.

“How do I get hold of him?”

“Well,” Horace said, “perhaps John, his son, might know. As a matter of fact, John was just here a few minutes ago. He was headed across campus.”

I tore out of the building and ran towards the Convocation Hall on the open square, and there was John Laskin leisurely walking across the wide expanse of grass. I shouted to him and he turned and waited for me. “Where’s your dad?” I asked again. “How do I get hold of him? It’s a matter of life or death.”

“I don’t know,” said John. “He is travelling with Charlie Dubin and your classmate Marty Friedland.

“Wait a second,” he added, “what’s today?”

“Friday”

“Every Friday, he comes to London for dinner with an old friend.”

“How do I get this friend?”

John pulled out his small telephone book and gave me Bora’s friend’s address and telephone number in London. I thanked him and hurried back to my downtown office on Richmond Street. There I called the number but there was no answer, so I sent Laskin an urgent cable saying, “Expect a call from the solicitor general and make sure you are available for the call.” I immediately called Pennell and gave him the address and the telephone number. Amazed, Pennell asked how I got it so fast. “Minister, you might be the solicitor general and head of the RCMP,” I said, “but I am a Toronto Liberal,” to which he burst out laughing and said, “Keith Davey told me you were incorrigible,” and hung up.

I heard nothing until the following Tuesday afternoon when I received a call from Charles Dubin who had travelled to the U.K. with Bora to attend law lectures. Dubin said, “I am sworn to secrecy, but I can tell you that the call was received and accepted.” Knowing the announcement was imminent, I immediately arranged to see Belland “Bee” Honderich of the Toronto Star, told him in confidence about the possible imminent appointment and asked him to help fulfill my pledge to get a lead editorial in the Star praising the Pearson government for this creative appointment. “Bee” smiled and immediately agreed. He liked and admired Bora.

The next stop was “Big” John Bassett Sr., a leading Toronto Conservative and owner of the Toronto Telegram. He was a social acquaintance of Bora’s and admired his work as a labour mediator for the newspapers. Big John loved the idea. He said he would write the editorial himself and it would be on the front page of the Toronto Telegram, and so it was.

The last visit, the one I felt would be the most difficult, was with the publisher of the Globe and Mail, also an avid Tory. But, he too, was delighted, especially when I told him of Bassett’s promise to write a lead editorial himself. Actually, he seemed more bemused by my audacity and undertook to have the Globe and Mail issue a lead editorial. The appointment, when announced, was well received across the country and the Pearson government got lead editorials in all three Toronto dailies which I clipped and delivered to Davey and to Pearson.

In the fall of that year, the Law Society of Upper Canada hosted a lunch in the great hall at Osgoode with leading lawyers and judges and academics in attendance, the elite of the profession. Paul Martin Sr., when asked to speak, said that Bora had been his candidate and how thrilled he was to attend such a historic event. (Ever the political realist, I was later told he joined the unanimous vote of the Cabinet Committee and Cabinet to support Laskin’s appointment.)

Two weeks later, Maclean’s magazine wrote a strange article stating Bora’s appointment was due to the influence of his friend and Tory activist Eddie Goodman.

History was made again when later Pierre Trudeau as prime minister appointed Bora, the first Jew, to the Supreme Court of Canada. I never heard from Bora except at a communal dinner in his honour when he became chief justice of Canada. I was at a table at the rear. Bora made a beautiful speech using the Hebrew expression from an ancient prayer to recount his climb to history.

“If I had just been a professor of law at the University of Toronto, Dayenu, it would have been sufficient,” he began. “To become a member of the Supreme Court of Ontario, Dayenu. Then to become a member of the Supreme Court of Canada, Dayenu. And finally, to be appointed chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Dayenu.

“And as I think about this,” Bora concluded, “it would not have happened but for a former student of mine who wishes to remain anonymous, Dayenu.”

And I too say, ‘Dayenu.’

Excerpted from A Leader Must Be A Leader: Encounters with Eleven Prime Ministers by the Hon. Jerry S. Grafstein.
Broken Strings

Eric Walters and Kathy Kacer

CHAPTER ONE

The bell sounded. People jumped to their feet and gathered their things. “And don’t forget there’s a unit test on Friday!” Mr. Herman, our math teacher, called out over the noise.

A collective groan rose up from the class. Some people started to argue for a postponement till Monday to give them more time to study. On any other day I would have stuck around and joined in the argument. But not today. Today I needed to get out of the classroom as fast as I could. I had something more important to think about than a math test.

I threw my books into my bag and joined the crowd funneling out of the room. I’d gone only a few steps when I almost bumped into Natasha, my best friend. She flashed me a big smile. Smiling was the last thing on my mind.

“Are you ready, Shirli?” Natasha asked.

“No!”

“We don’t have to go,” she said. “We could go to the mall, get a soda instead, maybe buy something.”

“And just not look at the cast list?” I asked. “It’ll still be there tomorrow.”

“Tash, I’ve waited all week. Do you really think I can wait another day?”

She flashed that smile again. “Patience is a virtue.” “This coming from you, the least patient person I know?” I asked.

“OK, you’re right, and I was just joking. Let’s go and look.”

The hallway was packed, and it felt as if we were salmon fighting our way upstream. We were the largest junior high in New Jersey, but the building didn’t seem big enough to hold all 1,600 of us who called this place our home away from home. We squirmed and shuffled our way forward.

“Oh, I’m not worried, Shirli. You know that,” Natasha and I had been friends, and pretty much inseparable, since third grade – like two peas in a pod, or peanut butter and jam. But there was a big difference between us. Natasha had never been in a school show before. In fact, she had only tried out this time because I’d practically dragged her to the auditions. It really didn’t matter to her whether she got a part or not. The problem was that for me it mattered way too much.

“Ms. Ramsey really likes you,” she pointed out. I knew she was trying to reassure me. “She likes everybody,” I said.

“It’s more than that. I think she sees herself when she looks at you.”

I laughed. “Like she’s looking in some sort of fun-house mirror?”

Ms. Ramsey was our drama teacher. She was in her early 30s but looked a lot younger. She was blond and slim and moved in this slinky, smooth way like someone who’d had years of dance training. We couldn’t have been more different in appearance, but I guess I had the same way of moving, thanks to my own dance classes. “I didn’t mean the way you two look,” Natasha continued. “Ms. Ramsey is so beautiful.”

“Gee, thanks.”

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“Come on, you know what I mean. You're really pretty, but not like her. You look more like me!”

Well, true, we did look a lot alike, even though my family was eastern European and Jewish, and Natasha’s was Portuguese and Catholic. But where the heck was this going?

“I mean she sees you as being talented like her.” “Thanks, Tash.” Now that was a compliment.

Before becoming a drama teacher, Ms. Ramsey had been in some Off-Broadway productions. She had great stories to tell, like the time she auditioned for Harold Prince, one of the greatest Broadway directors of all time. Or the time she met Kristin Chenoweth in an audition and got to ask her what it felt like to win a Tony Award for her role in You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown. Ms. Ramsey tossed those stories out like pieces of confetti and I grabbed each one of them. She could act, she could dance, and she could sing—a real triple threat. It was great to have her here teaching us. And awful at the same time. If somebody with that much talent couldn't make it as a professional actor and ended up teaching junior high school drama, what chance did anybody have? What chance did I have? Especially if I didn't get the part today.

My dream was to perform in front of thousands of people. Something always happened to me when I stepped in front of an audience. Sure, I was nervous. Every performer I'd ever talked to got butterflies—some worse than others. But for me, the nerves would fade and a rush of excitement would take over—like being at a fireworks display, or being a part of the fireworks. The first time I felt that, I knew I wanted to be a performer. My father always joked that I could dance and sing before I could walk or talk. I had been taking dance classes, singing lessons, and piano lessons for as long I could remember. And for the last two years I'd added acting lessons as well.

My parents had been so encouraging, not just paying for everything and driving me to lessons and competitions and recitals and plays, but always being there. They are the best. They really are. Still, I was pretty sure that they would have been happier if I'd been leaning toward something a little more traditional in terms of career. My brother Adam, who's eight years older than me, was following in my mom's footsteps and was in pre-med at Rider University. My father was an accountant. He'd taken over his father's—my zayde's—business in Manhattan. But my father was also the musical one in the family. He said he'd always wanted to learn an instrument, but my grandfather had said no. Dad claimed he was the only Jewish kid on the planet whose parents hadn't put him into violin or piano lessons. And he didn't have a bad voice—well, he didn't have a bad untrained voice. I guess I got the musical bug from him.

We turned down the hall toward the drama department. The cast list was supposed to be posted on the wall outside the auditorium. Up ahead I saw a crowd gathered around the bulletin board. I came to a dead stop, my heart pounding out of control.

"OK, Shirli, take a deep breath and relax," Natasha said.

"Easy for you to say!"

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We joined the crowd at the back. Some many people had tried out. Some schools were football schools. Some were basketball schools. Ours was a musical school. Of course, we had all those sports as well, but we were known as the junior high that put on big musicals. We had a great reputation, and that was one of the reasons why Ms. Ramsey had come to teach here.

Last year we had put on *A Chorus Line*. Of course, I didn’t get one of the leads, but I did end up with a featured spot, which was pretty amazing for a student in seventh grade. And I’d also ended up being the understudy for two of the supporting roles. I didn’t actually get the chance to play either part during the run, but people who heard me sing in rehearsals said I was better than the people who did perform. This year’s production was going to be *Fiddler on the Roof*. And the part I wanted was Hodel, one of the daughters. Not only did she sing “Matchmaker, Matchmaker” in the sisters’ trio, but she had the most beautiful, haunting solo in the whole production as far as I was concerned—a song called “Far From the Home I Love.”

Yup, Hodel was the part I was holding my breath for.

As we shuffled forward I watched the people in front. Some would look at the list and come away looking pretty upset, while others jumped up and down and shrieked. With each joyful scream I knew a part was gone. And with each disappointed face I knew another person had been eliminated from the competition for the remaining roles. Was it wrong that I was secretly happy to see those faces? Not that anybody could tell what I was thinking or feeling.

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We got closer to the front, closer to the list. I started to think that I understood what it would be like to walk along the corridor on death row, moving toward my execution. OK, a little dramatic, but I was more than a little dramatic.

Mohammed let out a yell—“I got a part!”—and pumped his fist in the air. I couldn’t help but smile. Mohammed and I had acted together before, and he was talented. I wasn’t surprised at all. He worked his way back through the crowd as people slapped him on the back and offered their congratulations.

“What part?” I asked as he came up to us.

“Perchik. I’m playing Perchik, the scholar!” he said excitedly, running a hand through his jet-black hair.

“You’ll do a great job.”

“Thanks, thanks so much, Shirli.”

If I got the part of Hodel, then he would be playing my stage husband. It wasn’t like there was any big romance between the two characters, just some hand-holding and staring into each other’s eyes, but I could do that. I liked Mohammed. He was funny, and pretty smart.

We were getting closer to the front, and I realized that I was now shoulder to shoulder to shoulder with Mindi McConnell. We gave each other a perfunctory nod and a slight, polite smile. Mindi was a year older than me, but we were in the same dance company and we took private lessons from the same vocal coach. She used to be nice to me, but that was before we started competing for the same dance parts, and my applause at recitals began to rival hers.

At our last recital she had sung a Destiny’s Child song. Why does everybody think they can do Beyoncé? Well, really, she did a pretty good job. Me, I went old school and sang an Aretha Franklin classic, and the audience went wild. I even got a standing ovation. That was when Mindi pretty much stopped talking to me completely.

The crowd was moving forward again and suddenly we were right in front of the list. I felt sweat running down my sides and my hands were getting clammy. Tash was wrong. I did have a lot to worry about.

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Oh, why had Ms. Ramsey chosen *Fiddler on the Roof* when there were so many other incredible musicals with so many more good parts to choose from? I knew I shouldn't complain. At least we were getting to stage a show. In the first months following 9/11 some people said we shouldn't have a production at all this year. I wasn't sure if they thought it was disrespectful or because they didn't think large groups of kids should be together in the same place—like we made too good a target.

It had been almost five months since the attack now, since the towers had fallen. In some ways it seemed like yesterday. In others, like it was forever ago, or, in a way, as if it had never happened at all. Then you'd turn on the TV and see people still cleaning up at Ground Zero—cranes loading dump trucks taking away concrete and tangled metal beams... and other things.

Most of the time I didn't really think about it much, but there was still an uneasiness in people. It hung in the air like the black smoke that had risen from the site. People wondered if things would ever be the same again. I guess that's what putting on the show was really about for us—trying to make things the same as they were before. In the end, our school had decided that the show would help us heal from the sadness of that terrible time.

Someone flipped the pages of the list and—

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“I’m in the ensemble!” Natasha cried out, and then she added a delighted little shriek.

“Congratulations!” I was happy for her. I just wanted her to get to the sheet that showed the rest of the roles—including the one I was after.

Natasha lifted up the page and now the featured player roles came into view. First the lesser-known male roles, and then two female parts that, technically, I could have gotten—Hodel’s youngest sisters. I let out the breath that I was holding, grateful and relieved not to see my name beside either role. Somebody turned another page and more roles appeared, bigger ones, including Tzeitel and Cha-va—the two other sisters. My name was absent again. Those had been my safety spots—they also got to sing “Matchmaker”—but they had gone to other people.

That left only three major female roles. Come on, I prayed. Somebody turn the page! I could feel my heart pounding, and I started winding my long, curly hair around my fingers, a nervous habit.

And then I heard another shriek. I knew that voice. It was Mindi. She was jumping up and down like she had just won a Tony Award instead of some part in a junior high school musical. Her friends crowded around her and hugged her and added to the shrieks. That was when I saw her name beside the role—beside my role. Mindi had been given the part of Hodel—the daughter with the very best solo.

I felt numb. I wasn’t the lead. I wasn’t one of the lesser sister roles. I wasn’t in the ensemble. I was nothing. How could that possibly be?

“Shirli, you’re in! You got a lead!” Natasha screamed and threw her arms around me.

Had I read it wrong? I peered at the list again, and finally saw my name, Shirli Berman, come into focus.

“You’re Golde!” Natasha yelled. “You got a lead role!” Golde! Golde was the mother, the wife of the male lead, Tevye—yes, technically she was also a lead. But while she sang in a couple of duets, she had no solo and no real standout moment on stage. I’m playing Mindi’s mother. I’m playing everybody’s mother. I’m playing an old Jewish woman who has no solo.

Natasha was still squealing and jumping up and down. But I wasn’t nearly as happy for me as she was.

CHAPTER TWO

My mother’s car was in our driveway. I hadn’t expected that. In fact, I never knew when she was going to be home. Mom was an obstetrician, and she worked the most unpredictable hours. As she always said, “I’ve never delivered a baby that was wearing a watch.”

She was sitting at the kitchen counter sipping coffee when I came in. Most days, she practically inhaled caffeine. It was her way of compensating for the interrupted sleep that came with the job.

“I was starting to get worried.”

“You’re a bit late getting home,” she said. “Just a bit.”

“I was starting to get worried.”

“Shirli, you’re in! You got a lead!” Natasha screamed and threw her arms around me.

“Shirli, you’re in! You got a lead!”

“Shirli, you’re in! You got a lead!”

“I was starting to get worried.”

“There was nothing to worry about,” I said.
"I know, but worrying is what I do. You know that." That was partly because she was a mother, and partly because she was a doctor. But her worrying had gotten worse since 9/11. Everybody seemed more worried.

I took a seat across from her.

“So?” my mother asked. “So what?”

“It was today, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it today that they were posting the cast for the play?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. I guess I forgot,” I said.

My mother stared at me for a minute, and then started to slowly clap. “I’m glad those acting lessons are paying off. You almost convinced me!”

I made a slight bow.

“So, what part did you get?” “I got a lead.”

“Congratulations!” She reached out and took my hands in hers. “So, shall I start calling you Hodel?”

“I got the part of Golde.” “Golde?” There was a half-second delay. “That’s wonderful.” She exclaimed. “That’s even better.”

“I don’t know if it’s better, but it is different.” All the way home I’d been practicing hiding my disappointment, so she wouldn’t feel disappointed for me.

“As I recall, she’s in a lot more scenes.”

“But she doesn’t have many songs.”

“That just means you get to show off your acting chops more than your singing.”

“I guess so.”

“And in many ways Fiddler is really more a play than a musical.”

That was such a good line, even if I wasn’t sure it was true.

Mom stood up and moved over to the fridge. She rummaged inside and pulled out a jar of peanut butter, turning to hold it up to me.

“I nodded and she grabbed a box of crackers and a couple of plates and knives, putting them on the table. We munched in silence for a little while.

“Rehearsals start in a couple of days,” I said. “I just wish I could talk to Bubbe and tell her about it.” My bubbe was my grandmother—my father’s mother—and she’d recently passed away. Sometimes I still had trouble believing she was gone. “It would have been great to get her help to understand the character I’m playing.”

My mother laughed. “She would have had a fit if you’d asked her. She wasn’t that old! Fiddler is set well before her time.”

“I know that. I just meant her being a Jewish mother and all.”

“Last time I checked I’m also a Jewish mother, but I wasn’t there either! It was your zayde’s mother who would have known all about it. She lived through the pogroms, when Jews were massacred by the Tsarist Russians.”

Mom offered me another cracker, but I shook my head. Then I took our plates and knives to the sink and put the peanut butter back in the fridge.

“I wish I could have met her,” I said. “I didn’t know about that family history.”

“She wasn’t there for the first pogroms, of course,” Mom continued. “Those go way back to the 1820s. But there was another wave of violence that started in 1905.”

“That’s when Fiddler is set,” I said. “But I thought Dad’s family was from Poland.”

“The family fled Russia and ended up in Poland. Your zayde was the baby of the family. I think his mother was in her mid-30s when she had him. He was born in 1930, so she was probably born around 1894 or ’95—she would have been 10 or 11 when those pogroms took place.”

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"Do you think Zayde would talk to me about what he knows?" I asked. "Maybe his mother told him stories."

She shrugged. "Sometimes he talks; sometimes he doesn't. The memories are hard, especially since your bubbe passed away."

The death of my grandmother had been hard on all of us. It wasn't just that we missed her, but we knew how much she missed her. We could see the pain in his eyes, and the way his body had become stooped and slow, like his breath was being sucked out of him. I think if he'd had his way he would have died instead of Bubbe, or along with her. It had been almost six months. For us the pain was fading. For him it was just as strong.

"All you can do is ask him," my mother replied. "Aren't you supposed to get him some groceries tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow or the next day."

Once a week, I'd stop into the little grocery store near his house and get him a few things. It was a store we'd shopped in our whole lives. The owner, Mr. Merkin, let me pick up the groceries, and he paid later. Grocery shopping was one of the things that my bubbe always did. I don't know if my zayde had ever gone shopping in his whole life. I actually liked doing it, and really, it was less about getting the groceries and more about visiting him, helping him feel less alone.

"Go today. He'll be happy to see someone," she said. "Besides, you probably need props for the play."

"We do! Ms. Ramsey mentioned that during the try-outs."

"You know, his attic is filled with old things that might work."

"Really?" "Everything he or your bubbe ever owned is stuffed in that attic. I'm sure he'd let you borrow things if you asked. You know he'd do just about anything for you."

I pulled the collar of my coat up as I turned onto the path to Zayde's house. The wind was pretty fierce, and snow was blowing up from the garden and into my face. Underneath the snow were the sleeping flowers and shrubs that my grandparents had loved and tended with such care. I could never walk that path without being flooded with memories. When I was little, my bubbe and zayde used to babysit me at their home once or twice a week. We'd have bubbe's special chicken noodle soup, talk, or watch TV. Sometimes they'd take me out to the mall for an outing. The mall had an indoor amusement park, and I got to ride the merry-go-round and the ferris wheel. I loved it. Later, when I started school, their house was where I often came at the end of the day. My parents worked such crazy hours that I could never rely on them being home. And Adam had a busy life and couldn't—or often wouldn't—babysit his little sister. So, I came here, did my homework, and hung out with Bubbe and Zayde.

Before I even got to the back door I could hear the TV blaring. Zayde was a little hard of hearing, but he also just loved to have the TV on loud. I had my own key so I let myself in through the kitchen. I could imagine Bubbe standing at the sink, washing dishes, and then turning around to greet me, drying her hands on her apron and giving me a big hug and... she wasn't there, but the dishes were done and drying on the rack. Everything was tidy, but not as clean as when Bubbe was alive. I know some people think of their grandmothers when they smell gingerbread or chocolate chip cookies, but I thought about Bubbe every time I smelled Pine-Sol or Mr. Clean.

My parents had been bugging Zayde to have a cleaning woman come in, but he wouldn't hear of it. "I don't want a stranger in my house," he said. Zayde tried his best to keep the house tidy and care for the yard. When Adam was at home he would help out, and my father dropped by whenever it snowed to lend a hand. Doing the grocery shopping was my way of chipping in.

There was talk about Zayde coming to live with us, but he insisted that he didn't want to be "a burden." Besides, he liked living here. He told me he couldn't leave because he'd have to leave behind his memories of Bubbe, and that was really all he still had.

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Zayde was watching TV in the living room. I couldn't see it, but I could hear that he was watching wrestling. My Zayde loved wrestling.

I walked in and gave him a kiss on the forehead, then used the remote to turn down the volume. I knew better than to turn it off. He was wearing a shirt and tie and a suit jacket. He always dressed in a suit jacket. He always dressed in a suit jacket. He was watching wrestling. My Zayde loved watching wrestling.

Zayde was watching wrestling. “That’s Stone Cold Steve Austin,” he continued. “They know exactly what they’re doing.”

Zayde was getting excited now. His hands were twitching and his face was animated. “They know when to hold back. And when to push more—they are real athletes.”

Zayde spoke with a kind of soft European accent that made him sound like Arnold Schwarzenegger, except that Arnold was from Austria and Zayde was from Poland.

But some things were the same. Every w sounded like a v. And saying th for Zayde was impossible. It sounded more like a soft z. So when Zayde said the word athlete, it sounded like he was saying azzlete. He caught me trying to stifle a grin.

“When you’re able to speak five languages as I can, zzen you can laugh at me.”

“Sorry, Zayde.” I knew he wasn’t angry. This was just another of our games.

“Wrestling is like ballet and gymnastics and acting all rolled into one. Next week it will be 40.”

I hope they’re not too big,” he said.

I chuckled. It was our standard joke. “Not 40?” “No, this week it was only 30. Next week it will be 40.”

“I hope they’re not too big,” he said. “They’re the perfect size and perfect ripeness.”

“It’s just that I can’t eat too much and I don’t want food to go to—”

“To waste. I know. One half banana each day is what you want, and that’s what I brought you.” He would slice them and put them on top of his oatmeal. He smiled. “You’re such a good girl.”

“I try.”

“Sit and watch wrestling with me.”

I smiled. This was a conversation we’d had many times—sort of like his grocery list. What was there to like about a bunch of half-naked men running around in a cage and pummeling each other?

“Not really.”

“Strange. How can you not like wrestling?” “It’s, well . . . it’s just that it’s fake.”

“What are you talking about? It’s real! You see that man there? He’s one of my favourites.”

I looked at the set and saw two large men grappling in the ring.

“That’s Stone Cold Steve Austin,” he said. “He was the wrestler of the year in 1998 and ‘99. He was robbed when he didn’t win in 2000, but I hope 2002 will be his year again.”

I knew enough to know that he was the wrestler with the shaved head. As I watched, he flipped the other guy over the ropes and right out of the ring!

“These guys are very skilled,” Zayde continued. “They know exactly what they’re doing.”

Zayde was watching wrestling. “You want to go up into the attic?”

“I’m just looking for some stuff that Mom said you might have up there.”

“What is it you’re looking for?”

“We’re doing a play and we need props,” I explained. “Is your play about an old Jewish man living in New Jersey?”

“Not New Jersey, but there is an old Jewish man. We’re putting on Fiddler on the Roof. Do you know it?”

“Know it? Of course I know it. Did you know that your bubbe once saw Fiddler on the Roof on Broadway, starring Mr. Zero Mostel?”

“Wow! I didn’t know that.”

“He was the first Teyve—the original star of the show.” “And did she like it?”

“Like it? She loved it. She went on and on about it. She even tried to get me to go and see it with her.”

“And you didn’t go?”

He shook his head. “You know that sort of thing never interested me.”

Zayde was watching wrestling. “Sorry, Zayde.”

He caught me trying to stifle a grin.

“When you’re able to speak five languages as I can, zzen you can laugh at me.”

“Sorry, Zayde.” I knew he wasn’t angry. This was just another of our games.

“Wrestling is like ballet and gymnastics and acting all rolled into one. Now that’s something you should understand.”

Zayde sat back in his armchair and folded his arms across his chest.

“I guess that’s another type of triple threat,” I said. “By now I’d had enough of discussing the merits of wrestling, and I had a question of my own. “Zayde, do you think I could look in your attic?”

“Want you to go up into the attic?”

“I’m just looking for some stuff that Mom said you might have up there.”

“What is it you’re looking for?”

“We’re doing a play and we need props,” I explained. “Is your play about an old Jewish man living in New Jersey?”

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He shook his head. “You know that sort of thing never interested me.”

I sighed. I did know that. Bubbe had gone to almost all of my recitals, but Zayde had never been to one.
“So, since Bubbe told you about it, Zayde, you know this show is about what happened to Jews in Russia at the turn of the century.”

“I know what it’s about. That’s what confuses me. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were persecuted and killed. That’s nothing to sing about. What’s next, a musical about the Holocaust?”

That caught me by surprise. I knew Zayde had been in a concentration camp, but the Holocaust was something he never talked about. Once in a blue moon, if he rolled up his shirt sleeves, you could catch a glimpse of the line of blue numbers that had been tattooed onto his left forearm. When I was still little I asked my father about those numbers—even then I had a feeling I shouldn’t ask Zayde directly—and he explained what they meant. Of course, you couldn’t grow up in a Jewish home and not know something about the Holocaust. Besides, we’d learned about it at school, and I’d read some books, and we marked Holocaust Remembrance Day every year. But somehow that number on Zayde’s arm was what made it all seem real. Too real.

Sometimes I wondered if that was why he always wore long-sleeved shirts buttoned at the wrist.

“It’s okay, Shirli,” he said. “You go up to the attic, look, and after wrestling is done we can have tea. Would that be good?”

“That would be perfect.”

I got up and gave him another kiss on the top of his head, smoothing down the fluffy tuft of hair that always managed to stand straight up like it had a mind of its own.

“You be careful on those rickety stairs,” he said. “I will.”

“It’s been years and years since I’ve even been up there. If you find a couple of gold bars you be sure to share them with me,” he said.

“Fifty-fifty.”

Before leaving the living room, I turned the sound way back up on the TV. He gave me a little thumbs-up and another smile and I left him and the wrestlers behind, with the noise from the match following me out of the room.

I climbed up the stairs and hesitated at my grandparents’ bedroom door. Bubbe had spent the last few months of her life there, and I hadn’t been in their room since she died. I peeked in, somehow expecting her to still be there. But nothing, not even the smell of Pine-Sol or Mr. Clean.

The attic was accessible only from their bedroom, with a set of pull-down stairs. I went in and grabbed a flashlight that I knew Zayde always kept by his bed, flicked it on to make sure it worked, and stepped into the walk-in closet.

One side was filled with my zayde’s things: white shirts, dark suits, and a row of almost identical shoes on the floor, all polished and waiting for him to slip them on. These were the components of his “uniform,” the clothing he had worn to work every day. He said that an accountant had to always look like an accountant.

On the other side was my bubbe’s entire wardrobe, still there waiting for her, as if she’d never died. My parents had offered to help Zayde clean everything out but he’d refused. I guess I understood. Getting rid of Bubbe’s things would probably feel to Zayde like he was getting rid of her memory once and for all. And that was way too difficult for him to do.

I reached up and grabbed the cord that pulled down the little set of stairs. They were stiff and stuck, and I had to pull hard until they popped open, releasing a spray of dust as they descended and hit the floor.

I looked up into the darkness. I’d only been up there a few times, and always with somebody else—usually my bubbe or my father.

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Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea, I thought. Maybe I should wait until my grandfather was done watching wrestling and he could come up with me. No, actually, Zayde trying to climb these steep old steps was an even worse idea. But he would have tried if I’d asked. He hardly ever said no to me—or to anybody. That was part of who he was.

Slowly, one shaky step at a time, I started up, led by the beam of the flashlight. When I was almost at the top I stopped and lifted up the light, letting it play around the dark space. There were boxes and big, bulky shapes that looked like old furniture, covered with plastic or sheets. There were a couple of old trunks, and some framed paintings leaning against the wall. The attic was big and crowded and kind of spooky-looking . . . Stop that! I told myself. There was nothing to be scared of . . . unless the murderer was hiding under one of those sheets, or behind one of the trunks! OK, enough! I was willing to be dramatic, but stupid wasn’t in my repertoire.

Up I went until my head and shoulders were through the trapdoor to the attic and I was able to climb in and get to my feet.

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Down below—way down below—I could still hear the wrestling match going on. That was reassuring and disturbing all at once. With the TV that loud my zayde would never be able to hear me scream! Swinging the flashlight around, I spotted a string hanging down from a bare lightbulb in the ceiling. I grabbed at the string, missed it the first time, grabbed it a second time, pulled, and the attic filled with muted, dusty light. Now I was finally able to look around and see more clearly what was what.

Even with the light on, the whole attic still felt kind of creepy and unwelcoming. How did Zayde even get all this stuff up here? I wondered. I couldn’t imagine lugging cases and paintings and tables up those rickety steps, although judging by the thick layer of dust most of it had been up here since he was much, much younger. The bulb above my head was swinging gently from side to side, lighting up first one half and then the other half of the attic. One side seemed to disappear into a dark corner where the roof sloped at a steep angle.

Even when I aimed the flashlight in that direction, it was impossible to make out anything except some shadowy objects. The other side opened up into a larger space that was crammed with boxes and covered furniture. Back and forth the lightbulb swung, inviting me to pick a direction. Dark corners?

Open space? I was no fool, I was going to stick with the open space.

“OK if you were props, where would you be hiding?” Talking out loud seemed to help. The sound filled the space and made me feel less alone. I lifted up a striped bedsheet, yellowed with age, and found two small tables and a couple of my bubbe’s antique wooden chairs underneath. They would be perfect for Tevye’s house—in good condition, but old enough to look like they could have come from the early 1900s. It was a good start. There were two suitcases on the right that looked pretty new. Those must have been the ones that Bubbe and Zayde used when they made their last trip, that cruise to the “old country.” Perfect! Now that was bound to have some treasures inside.

I had to push aside some heavy cases, and I heaved a big dresser out of the way—and that’s when a giant spider crawled out from underneath it and scurried over my foot and into a corner.

“Eeeeeek!” I dropped the sheet I was holding. I hated spiders, probably more than bees or even snakes. Well, snakes were pretty bad too. But this spider looked absolutely prehistoric! I realized the attic was probably crawling with spiders. I grabbed at my hair and started winding it around my fingers, trying to calm myself. Now, when I looked around, I could feel a million creepy little eyes staring at me from behind every object.

But I was on a mission—I had to pull myself together. I swallowed my fear, let go of my hair, willed myself to stop shaking, and shoved the dresser fully out of the way, exposing the old trunk.

The buckles that held it together looked as if they hadn’t been touched in decades. They were stiff and rusty, and it took all of my strength to twist and bend and unbblek until they finally gave way and dropped to the side. I pushed open the lid. It took a minute or so to recognize the smell that wafted out from inside. And then I remembered. Mothballs.

They were small white balls of chemical pesticide that were used to keep mold and moths—the ones that would eat through clothing—away. They looked like round mints, the kind my parents kept in the candy bowl.

Bubbe used to put them in with her sweaters and other woollens when she was packing them away for the summer. Then one day, when I was really little, I found some while I was playing in her bedroom. I was just about to pop one into my mouth when my grandmother discovered me and probably saved my life! The mothballs had a strong smell, kind of like gasoline and bleach and nail polish remover mixed together.

It was about four feet wide and three feet high, and it looked like something Tevye might have brought to America from the ‘old country.’
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There was a flat tray inside the trunk at the top, which I lifted out and set aside. And underneath was a treasure trove—exactly what I had hoped to find. Old skirts that fell to below my knee, flowery blouses with poofy sleeves and big collars, a dozen or more aprons—Bubbe loved to cook. There were even some old high-heeled shoes and a couple of hats, the kind you had to hold in place on the top of your head with a long, fancy hat pin. I wasn’t sure how much of this stuff would fit the period of Fiddler on the Roof, but I made a big pile to show Ms. Ramsey. She could decide. The top half of the trunk contained Bubbe’s old clothes, and underneath them were Zayde’s. There were old pleated trousers and a couple of faded brown jackets and some knitted sweaters.

And thanks to the mothballs they were pretty intact. There were even shoes and boots that were in remarkably good condition. I knew Zayde was a packrat and hated to get rid of anything, but this trunk was making him look like a hoarder. There was enough here to provide wardrobe for practically the whole cast.

I was completely focused on finding as much stuff for the show as I possibly could.

Under Zayde’s old clothes there was one more tray. I lifted it out, but there was no more clothing to be found. The bottom of the trunk was filled with papers and files and what looked like old legal documents. Interesting, maybe, but nothing that was going to help with our show.

And then, just as I was about to close the lid of the trunk, something caught my eye. Among the documents was a big sheet of paper—no, not paper, more like a poster of some kind, with tall black words printed on top. I pushed aside the other stuff and pulled it out, holding it up to the dim light to try and make out what it said. No luck. The writing was in a language I couldn’t read. Maybe Polish, I thought. Or probably Yiddish, which was the language that many elderly Jews from eastern Europe spoke. It was what Bubbe and Zayde had spoken at home. I hadn’t heard Zayde speak Yiddish since Bubbe died. Yup, this had to be Yiddish. Maybe we could use the poster in Fiddler as well, I thought. There was a tavern scene in the show, and maybe this could be hung on a wall.

Then I realized there was one word I did understand—Berman—our family name. And below that name was a faded black-and-white photograph of four men and a woman. Were these people distant relatives of mine? Each person in the photo was holding a musical instrument—a violin, a clarinet, tambourine, accordion, and double bass. The men—actually, two or three of them were just boys—were wearing dark jackets like the ones I had found in the trunk, and they had caps on their heads.

One face jumped out from the others, the youngest one in the picture, and I gasped when I realized that it was Zayde. I’d never seen a picture of him when he was young, but that face, that expression, those eyes . . . there was no mistaking him. He looked just like a combination of my father and Adam. He held a violin under his chin and a bow up to the strings. But that made no sense. Zayde couldn’t play the violin—he didn’t even play the radio! There wasn’t even a radio in the house. He never listened to music, not even in the car.

And who were those other people with him in the picture? Were they family members? I studied the older man to Zayde’s left—his father, perhaps? And on his right, could that be a brother? Suddenly I felt as if I was looking at a part of my own family tree. I knew I had to show it to Zayde and ask him to tell me all about it. I grabbed the poster. I’d leave the clothing until later, but this was coming with me.

As I stood up, one more thing caught my eye. It was a case of some kind, not very big, and it was sitting in the dark on the floor behind the old trunk. I pulled the flashlight from my pocket and shone it was—a violin case.
I picked it up and carried it over to the table so that I could have a good look. The case was old and battered around the edges. And, like everything else, it was covered in a thick layer of dust. I turned it over and noticed a couple of initials on the back: T.B. Those were Zayde’s initials! Tobias Berman. Was this Zayde’s violin? My head was spinning.

I flipped open the latches and opened the case. And there, nestled in a deep-blue silky lining, was an old violin. It was a bit beaten up and weathered, and a couple of strings were broken. But the wood, which was a dark, rich chestnut color, shone as if someone had polished it that very day. There were four small Stars of David carved in the corners of the front of the frame.

I looked at the photo on the poster and compared it with the violin in front of me. “It’s the same one,” I whispered. The mystery of where this had come from and its relationship to my grandfather was getting bigger and deeper by the minute.

Text excerpted from Broken Strings by Eric Walters and Kathy Kacer appears courtesy of Puffin Canada.
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