The CJN Prize

Award Winners

The walls of Israel  By Laura Goldfarb

Plus 10 more winning essays
The walls of Israel

LAURA GOLDFARB

It isn’t often that I overhear discussion of Israel or Judaism in my residence building, which happens to overlook the giant, monumental cross of the Waterloo Seminary. However, a few days ago, as I was walking back to my room, the word “Israel” slipped out from underneath my neighbours’ door. As though it was a commander’s order, I halted immediately.

“My cousin just told me that she’s going to Israel,” the first girl announced indifferently. “Israel...,” the other pondered, “that’s the Jewish one with all the walls, right?”

My curiosity was piqued, and as I leaves-dropped, ironically through the wall, I began to wonder if my neighbour’s perception was right; if the significance of Israel to those who had no connection to it could be distilled to just “the one with all the walls.” I ruminated on this point, and I believe that she was, in a way, right—but only half right.

Ever since kindergarten, I’ve been taught that Judaism cherishes shalom—peace—and achdut—togetherness. I can recall one seemingly endless Tanach class during which we deconstructed the phrase, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity,” suggesting that faith, and ethnicity, and language are immaterial to the question of whether they don’t shy away from it.

They told us about their younger brother, who served gallantly as a combat soldier for the IDF during the Second Lebanon War. Tears escaped from their eyes, dampening their dehydrated cheeks, as they described the events of their brother’s capture and his tragic death at the hands of Lebanese fighters. The younger of the two weeped silently, while the other recounted the utterly devastating details of their brother’s week-long captivity, culminating in his untimely death at just 19 years old. With his gaze unblinking and fixed in the distance, he explained that, sometimes, when they imagine the four dark walls that imprisoned their brother, they become sick with a sort of claustrophobia—“or maybe it’s just the grief creeping back,” he wondered. Regardless, that’s why they came out here, he said, because the desert has no walls, just “vast openness,” as our guide translated.

It’s true, in some areas, the Israeli landscape is expansive, spacious, freeing. But it wasn’t just the landscape that was unobstructed, it was our empathy, our connection, our understanding, too, that was unobstructed. On that day, in the desert, we encountered two men of a different faith, of a different ethnicity, and of a different language, but the barriers that existed between us disintegrated almost instantly. In that moment, they were our brothers, and their brother was our brother, too. We listened and we felt their pain, and no walls separated us.

I would be mistaken not to count this as a uniquely Israeli experience. In Israel, when you accidentally make eye-contact with someone on a bus, the person doesn’t dart his eyes away in embarrassment like a Canadian does, he stares. When people lock eyes, they accept the connection, they don’t shy away from it.

Admittedly, in spite of my anecdotes, there are walls in Israel. Literal walls. Walls that segregate people. Walls that hold great political significance. These are the walls that my neighbour was referring to. But, I can’t help wondering whether her perception would change if she knew that, in a sense, walls are also broken down in Israel quicker than in any place I’ve ever known. That an unmistakable infusion of openness imbues the stagnant desert air and engenders the overly candid, wonderfully forthright behaviour of the Israeli people. That the many religious and cultural walls, along with their appeal and cultural walls, along with their appeal to be knocked down, allow for those unavoidable connections and that spirit of brotherhood that permeates every city, town, and kibbutz in Israel.

It’s only in Israel that a group of English-speaking teenage girls can sit in the heart of a bustling market with a group of Arab women whom they had just met, and speak about food and the weather and current events like old pals. Only in Israel do partitions between people crumble like fistfuls of Bamba.

So, my neighbour was, in a way, right. Israel is the Jewish one with all the walls. But she was only half right, because Israel is the Jewish one with all the walls being brought down. In Israel it’s plain to see that those who choose to live together in unity, those who hold sacred the values of shalom and achdut, no matter their faith, ethnicity, or language, are brothers. Israel’s significance extends far beyond the walls that stand, its significance lies deep in the “vast openness” of its vivacious culture.

Laura Goldfarb is in her first year of communication studies at Wilfrid Laurier University.

The CJN Prize Event

CJN Prize winner Laura Goldfarb, third from right, with family and friends at the event reception.
When the fast is slow

As a child, the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur always bewildered me. I would watch my parents and grandparents abstain from food, and I observed a drastic change in their behaviour. They were quiet, withdrawn, and spoke of feeling light-headed and weak. I didn’t understand why we, the Jewish people, fast on Yom Kippur. Is it a self-punishing act, a way to atone for our sins? Or is it a method of cleansing? Perhaps for some it allows them to spend the day in services or in prayer, without any distractions. However, my young mind couldn’t fully grasp the spiritual purpose of fasting, and I was very confused by the whole concept.

Fast forward a few years and this very concept of abstaining from food became the centre of my universe. The type of fasting I began to engage in was different from the typical religious fast. It lasted much longer than 24 hours and there was no spiritual meaning to it. Instead it was a compulsion, a way to restrict my food and to exercise excessively in order to quell an unbearable anxiety. I have used food – or rather, the abstinence of it– as a method of feeling in control of my life since I was 11 years old. This was the beginning of my battle with anorexia nervosa.

Over the years, the Jewish holidays have been difficult for me. When Jews are not fasting, we are feasting. Most Jewish holidays involve sitting around a table of copious amounts of traditional food. As you can imagine, this can be quite stressful for someone who is food-phobic. For every Jewish holiday with my family over the years, my eating disorder tagged along as my guest. A popular analogy amongst those who suffer from eating disorders compares the condition to an abusive partner. It can feel similar to having a constant voice of a controlling monster in your head, shaming and berating you.

So while I sat at the table for my family seders or Rosh Hashanah celebrations, I struggled to focus on the conversations around me because I was so distracted by the cruel, abusive voice inside my head. I spent many holidays hiding in the bathroom, trying to breathe through a panic attack or just finding a safe haven from the chaos.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a time of renewal. We celebrate the new year and we are granted a fresh start. We reflect on the ways in which we have strayed from our values and we aim to do better than the year before.

This year, I spent some time considering how my disorder prevents me from living a valued life. Not only does it interfere with celebrating joyous occasions, but it interferes with my ability to be my true self. I am not fully present to engage with my community and participate in charitable projects, be a supportive family member, or pursue my passions.

As a child, I loved to write stories, poetry and essays. I spent every evening laughing with my sister, my parents and my grandparents. I volunteered at soup kitchens and assisted living facilities. I practised gratitude every day for the beautiful life I had, which was far from perfect (nothing ever is) but I was living in accordance with my values. I believe this is the key to living a life without regrets. Somewhere along the way, I lost the person I used to be to my illness. I know there is only one way to restore a valued life, and that is through the ultimate fresh start– beginning a new life that does not include the abusive partner called anorexia.

One of the barriers to recovering from anorexia, for myself and for many others I have spoken to, is feeling undeserving. Feeling trapped in this painful disorder can really take a toll on one’s self-esteem and self-worth. This is why the holiday of Yom Kippur has a very different meaning for me these days than it used to, and I have come to approach it in a non-traditional way. Instead of fasting on Yom Kippur, it is one day of the year when I will 100 percent commit to feeding myself. Yom Kippur is a time to repent and ask for forgiveness.

The truth is that we fast for many personal reasons, but many of us do it to focus on redeeming ourselves instead of feeding ourselves. However, when you spend most days of the year feeling unworthy and struggling to feed yourself, perhaps Yom Kippur should be a time to embrace compassion. After all, what is forgiveness but an act of compassion? Not only compassion towards others, but also towards oneself.

Anorexia is a very complicated condition with many biological, genetic, environmental and psychological factors involved. Recovery is not a simple or easy process by any means, but for me, it is composed of small and manageable steps. One step that I can take is to find meaning in the holiest of the holidays by choosing to forgive myself, to take care of myself, and to be the best version of myself. For it is through being compassionate towards ourselves that we can radiate compassion outwards and find the redemption that we seek.

Hayley Danziger earned her designation as a certified nutritional practitioner from the Institute of Holistic Nutrition in Toronto.

The CJN Prize Event

Michael Goldbloom, principal and vice-chancellor at Bishop’s University delivers the keynote lecture to attentive guests at the CJN Prize Event Feb. 22.
Jewish privilege: a poetic essay by the grandchild of survivors

DARA POIZNER

They like to say we own the banks. And by virtue of that we control the money. They act like our prominence in the entertainment industry is some sort of evil conspiracy – not the product of hard work and sacrifice. They like to discount our experiences and say that we have something called...Jewish privilege.

We’re all rich snobs, you see, and people give us special dispensation, because they feel bad for what happened to us in Europe for six years during the 20th century. Privilege.

I will tell you what it means to me, this privilege. Jewish privilege is the micro-aggressions that eat away at your sense of self. It’s people at parties thinking of you as a novelty. Without trying to be hateful, they treat the presence of your culture like it’s a joke. Oh, you’re Jewish? That’s so...funny! That’s a word I’ve heard used before. Funny. We control the media industry, and yet our representation goes little beyond the stereotypes that have been ascribed to us. We are swindling lawyers; we are doctors with funny accents.

It’s hate graffiti scrawled somewhere in a dorm hallway in your school. And no one cares, because Jews aren’t a real minority, even though we’re the most targeted group when it comes to hate crimes. Jewish privilege is when anti-Semitism and misogyny combine to form “JAP” an acronym for Jewish American Princess; a special language used to alienate young Jewish women.

It's the big Marvel plot twist that Captain America, fictional hero of the great United States, known for fighting the Axis powers, has been a Hydra agent (read: Nazi) all along! Isn’t it remarkable, how a character that was created by and for American Jews during World War II – people who needed that emotional outlet because of what was happening to their family in Europe and their powerlessness to fix it – was so easily appropriated for entertainment value? It’s the stomachaches, the anxiety; the history of constantly being driven out of somewhere. Being hunted.

They say we go on and on about the Holocaust. They say “let bygones be bygones.” And still yet some of them like to say it wasn’t real. Don’t you understand? We repeat “never forget” over and over to drown out the sound of a world that wants us to.

Jewish privilege is “none is too many,” or a number tattooed on an arm. It’s people saying “perished” and “passed” instead of “murdered” and “slaughtered”. If the Nazi officer who stopped my grandfather in the street had truly done his job, if he had taken one more moment to see that the boy he was talking to was Jewish, my family line would have ended there. So many did. It’s the idea that anti-Semitism was over after 1945.

Jewish privilege is knowing that my existence, and that of my whole family and so many of my friends, my whole community even, occurs in the wake of the genocide of my ancestors. I am alive today because my grandparents – who were terrorized, who lost their families – they were the lucky ones. The ones who lived.

But I will tell you what the real privilege is. In spite of a near-universal rhetoric that tells me I should resent it, I have fallen in love with my Jewishness. I am so in awe of how resilient my people are, and our refusal to be silenced. Our painful history informs our present. Our culture teaches us warmth and kindness. Watch us light candles and surround ourselves with love. Watch us find our version of happiness in spite of how cruel the world has been.

If you ask me one more time about my Jewish privilege, I will scream out the plight and the history of my people loud enough to drown out the sound of your ignorance. We will always defy the force that seeks to obliterate our existence. It is not new to us. We have been survivors for all time.

Dara Poizner studies English at the University of Guelph.

The CJN Prize Event

Prize winners, family, friends, CJN staffers and many more attended The CJN Prize Event held at the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theatre at York University on Feb. 22.
Combina, chutzpah, and a blooming desert: experiencing the magic of Startup Nation

Two Ben Gurion quotes jump to mind: “In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.” And, “It is in the Negev that the creativity and pioneering vigour of Israel shall be tested.”

Shvil HaSalat (The Salad Trail) farm is a perfect example of how Israel has made the desert bloom. All the water used here is reclaimed from Jaffa and pumped down to the desert where it’s purified. As a symbol for the country’s collective resourcefulness, the desert blooming proves an apt metaphor. From agriculture to robotics, medicine to security, Israel innovates to make something out of nothing.

It’s a sweltering June evening, and I’m unpacking in my new apartment on Dizengoff street. It’s one of the most desirable and lively areas of Tel Aviv, yet, I can see the pub where the 2016 New Year’s Day shooting attack took place from my doorstep. Suddenly, I notice my WhatsApp group chat start frantically flashing with messages such as “Was anyone at Sarona Market?”, “Is everyone safe?”, “I was there, but we ran and are safe now”. Pulling up YNet, I learn about yet another terror attack steps from home. The next day, like all Israelis, I go into work without a second thought. It’s business as usual.

In Israel, the only thing that’s certain is uncertainty. You wake up every morning and continue your routine, knowing that anything can happen, any time. This is another element that makes Israelis such great entrepreneurs. In entrepreneurship, and particularly in startups, uncertainty and risk are inherent, and you have to roll with the punches to succeed (or get up and keep trying if you fail).

In particular, the country’s mandatory army service teaches assertiveness, confidence and how to manage a team. Combina is a word that’s often heard in Israel. It’s the ability to improvise in uncertain situations, overcome obstacles, leverage your skills and contacts, and ‘cheat’ the system to get the results you want.

I’m on a rooftop overlooking the “white city” skyline and the sea. The sun is setting, and a drone is buzzing overhead. I’m sipping a beer and chatting with a charismatic guy who invented a construction robot. Around us, I hear a mixture of English and Hebrew, Russian and French – and those are just the languages I recognize.

We’re at an annual Startup Grind summer party. This doesn’t feel like a typical networking event, though. There’s a different energy here, with a mix of expats, Israelis, fellow startup folks, and even a few soldiers from the IDF intelligence unit. I see young interns pitching to the media and striking up conversations with CEOs – now that’s chutzpah for you!

There’s a collective feeling in Israel that anything is possible. The country itself is a startup, succeeding against all odds. Networking doesn’t feel like networking here – it flows easily and no person, no matter their accomplishments or title, is off-limits. Organizational structures tend to be more flat, and work environments more casual. It’s a breeding ground for creativity and new ideas.

I hobble out of the Gett taxi, limping towards the walk-in clinic. I can’t see exactly where it is in the plaza and my sprained foot is not up for a long search. There’s a man enjoying a smoke break outside a pizzeria. He asks if I’m OK, drops his cigarette and takes my hand to help me to my destination. Next thing I know, he sweeps me up in his arms, “This is easier”. He gently sets me down by the elevator, presses the button for the clinic floor and wishes me a speedy recovery. Completely dumb-founded, I can’t thank this kind stranger enough.

This sums up Israel: everyone feels responsible to help. The startup community is especially supportive and willing to offer advice, mentorship, and assistance. People say that in Israel anyone is only two phone calls away, and everyone has 30 minutes to help you think through a challenge. I found this to be spot on, both in my professional and day-to-day experiences.

Whether you’re standing together during the Yom Hashoah siren, completing reserve duty, raising kids, or growing a startup, Israelis are in it together in this crazy place we call our homeland.

Marsha Druker is marketing manager at Askuity, a growing Toronto startup. She completed her BBA at the Schulich School of Business.

The CJN Prize Event

Marsha Druker’s parents.
Sighet wakes to the sound of chanting

I am here, in the cemetery, picking up apples and walnuts that fall from the trees whose roots my ancestors are clutching.

TAMAR WOLOFSKY

I awake on the cold floor of an overcrowded minibus, my neck cramped and back sore from the angle at which I lean upon an aisle armrest. I haven't understood a word anyone has said for hours, and the flat farmland out the window has long since given way to impenetrable darkness. The drive from Timisoara was supposed to take six hours, but six hours came and went an hour ago and still, we are driving. Now, though, the road begins to wind around a mountain, and I am jostled together with the crush of Romanian teenagers we picked up in Arad. They started off talking and laughing and sharing snacks, but now all of them have succumbed to open-mouthed sleep. I have no idea where I am.

I am headed to Sighetu Maramatiei, to look for ghosts. The teenagers pile out of the car an hour later, in front of a dark house on a dark street. “Autogara,” the driver announces, and opens the door. I ask him to call me a taxi, I hold out my phone, but he shakes his head and shrugs and pretends not to understand. He pulls my backpack out of the trailer and drops it at my feet, gets back in the van, and drives off. It is barely eight p.m. but the darkness is total, the fog icy against my cheeks. I have directions prepared, I meant to walk to the city centre to find my hotel, but I am too afraid to walk into this night.

Two men stand smoking cigarettes outside of the dark station. I beg them to call me a taxi, and finally a red car pulls up out the side of the dark station. I beg them to call me a taxi, I hold out my phone, but he shakes his head and shrugs and pretends not to understand. He pulls my backpack out of the trailer and drops it at my feet, gets back in the van, and drives off. It is barely eight p.m. but the darkness is total, the fog icy against my cheeks. I have directions prepared, I meant to walk to the city centre to find my hotel, but I am too afraid to walk into this night.

My grandparents were born in Sighet, were deported from Sighet, found their separate ways home to Sighet, were married in Sighet, birthed a baby in Sighet, crossed the border under the cover of night from Sighet to crawl into the belly of a ship that bore them to Canada. And now, I am here, in the cemetery, picking up apples and walnuts that fall from the trees whose roots my ancestors are clutching. The stones are tumbled over and the Hebrew script is crumbled but I can still read names: Yoseph, Moshe, Chaim, Shalom, Israel. I try to look for the names I know – Herman, Menachem, Mendel, Faiga – but all Jews are blessed or cursed with a repeating set of names that makes them impossible to distinguish. The sky is clear today and I can see the mountains, mountains where my grandmother spent her summers swimming and playing. In my pocket I carry a list of names remembered, street names, school names, a cake shop on a main street, but these find no correlates on my map, leaving me lost. I stand very still on the street formerly named Doroșbunățior, hoping that, if I am quiet enough, I will hear a voice.

I meet Alina, a historian, who points out the former Jewish streets, the ghetto, the yeshiva caved in on itself. She invites me into her home, where I see the faded mark of where a mezuzah used to hang, but we cannot stay long because the people who live there don’t like her. She makes them impossible to distinguish. She invites me into her home, where I meet her grandmother, Maria, tiny and white-haired, who kisses me on both cheeks and asks me the name of my grandmother as if she might recognize it. She takes my hands in her shaking palms and apologizes for the circumstances that brought me back and the ones that took them away. We drink fiery palinca together and she anxiously touches my shoulders and my belly and asks why I don’t have a husband or babies. Alina laughs and tells her my age; Maria tells me then, no rush.

I play with Alina’s children, who know only one word of English and run around the house screaming, “hello! hello!” and kissing my shins, my shoulders, my hands. I eat sarmale, cabbage rolls, with them, and I tell Alina that my grandmother makes these too. She is surprised until I remind her, my grandmother is from Sighet too.

Sighet wakes to the sound of chanting. A gentle hum, at first, rising and gaining strength until the windowpanes start to shake. Through the open door, in the other room, I can see my grandfather wrapping the leather straps of his tfillin around his arms, his forehead. Cloaked in the white tallit, its fringes nearly sweeping the floor, he sways back and forth, singing the prayers just loud enough so God can hear. I open my eyes and sunlight floods the room, the chanting is birds, my grandfather is not here, but I close my eyes again and I have the feeling that half of this city’s population are ghosts, and I can hear them chanting Shema.

Tamar Wolofsky completed her BA in contemporary studies at the University of King’s College, and is currently studying community economic development at Concordia University.
Kvetching about Chrismukkah

EVAN DAURIO

I did not learn of the Exodus from a Haggadah. Nor did I learn it from my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, or rabbis. Rather, my first understanding of the Passover story came from a viewing of A Rugrats Passover. Yes, those Rugrats. The wise words of the classic Jewish tale rang in my ears and scanned across my eyes, transporting me from my childhood den to biblical Egypt into the midst of slavery. As the story unfolded on my television set, I watched intently as Grandpa Boris retold the classic Jewish tale of how Tommy Pickles, his precious einikel as a stand-in for Moses, freed the enslaved babies from the cruel hands of Pharaoh Angelica. Boris Pickles – a real Baal Shem Tov for millennials.

The Rugrats, the popular Nickelodeon cartoon, is only one in a long line of historical television programs that have featured Jewish characters in distinctly Jewish stories. Whether it is Rhoda Morganstern, Monica and Ross Geller, Seth Cohen, or Herschel Krustofsky (aka Krusty the Kloon), television has not shied away from warmly embracing Jewish characters and their distinctly Jewish narratives. These characters have celebrated Chanukah, mourned the loss of a relative in shivah, and become bar and bat mitzvah respectively. This otherness, while problematic, has been ambassadors of Judaism to an audience that may otherwise never be exposed to it, providing a peek into an otherwise unknown culture and religion. That is a feat worth shopping nachas over.

Unfortunately, a peek truly is all that most viewers have gotten to. As Jews have become increasingly prominent on television screens, Jewish identity has not. Token Jewish characters are often pushed into the A-plot one week to celebrate Chanukah, only to recede back into the ensemble the next week, their Jewishness never to be mentioned again. Jewish identity, the core foundation of one’s Jewishness, has been sacrificed on the screen in favor of assimilated convenience – embrace it when you need it, disregard it when you don’t. As Chrismukkah concludes on The O.C., so does any trace of Jewishness among the Cohen family.

On television, Judaism often masquerades as a stand-in for otherness, a character quirk in the same vein as an unrelenting love for waffles or a need to have one’s spot on the couch not be disrupted (Leslie Knope of Parks and Recreation and Sheldon Cooper of The Big Bang Theory respectively). This otherness, while providing a differentiation for a character, mines Judaism for a shallow character, providing a differentiation for a character, respectively). This otherness, while problematic, has been ambassadors of Judaism to an audience that may otherwise never be exposed to it, providing a peek into an otherwise unknown culture and religion. That is a feat worth shopping nachas over.

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The flat characterization of Jews on the small screen has led to a damaging number of Jewish characters portrayed as one-dimensional archetypes. Many of these archetypes we have grown accustomed to – the Jewish American Princess (JAP for short), the crazy Jewish mother (you really should call her more often), the money-hungry Jewish professional (insert lawyer/doctor/banker here), the nice Jewish boy/girl (your crazy Jewish mother is guaranteed to approve of him/her), and the self-deprecating Jewish schmuck (any character created by Larry David) are just a few that come to mind. The problem with these one-dimensional characterizations is that they pigeonhole Judaism into a single element, disregarding the multifaceted components of religion and culture that inform daily life as a Jew in favor of dangerous stereotypes.

With these challenges plaguing Jews on television, what can we as viewers do to remedy the problem? Well, much like consumer activism, we as viewers yield the power. Rather than taking a stand with our wallets, we can impact change with our eyeballs. Television companies are in the business of following and monetizing our attention – if we promise to watch complex Jewish narratives, then television creators will deliver.

Is it really that simple though – do we demand it and they create it? According to the most recent diversity report commissioned by the Ralph Bunche Center at UCLA, it is. Their 2015 findings demonstrated that greater representation of diversity in entertainment content continues to result in above-average ratings and greater financial performance across television platforms. As the report explains, television audiences are becoming increasingly diverse and are tuning out traditional homogenized storytelling in favor of stories that are more representative of the diverse television-viewing population. In the increasingly fractured television marketplace, increasing audiences and profits are an anomaly; diverse storytelling represents a clear solution to this problem. Audiences are engaged and businesses reap greater profits – that’s something for the Cohen family to celebrate weekly.

Television companies are finally starting to catch on, and complex Jewish narratives that are reflective of a multitude of Jewish experiences are finally being brought to the small screen. For example, there’s the examination of evolving Jewish identity in the wake of a parent’s gender transition on Transparent, the exploration of Judaism as an internally uniting and similarly externally isolating factor in Jewish friendship on Girls, and the process of Jewish conversion and redemption for an African-American inmate on Orange is the New Black.

What Transparent, Girls, and Orange is the New Black do so successfully is focus on portrayals of Jewish identity beyond the superficial. These shows move past the shallow gag of being a Jew in a world governed by Christianity and secularism and meaningfully explore how embracing, or denouncing, Jewish identity impacts each character’s perspective and personality. These shows disregard Jewishness as otherness in favor of using Jewish values as a prism for evaluating the societies and situations these characters interact with. Finally, these shows are funny and entertaining, and continue to garner success and acclaim for their respective creators.

Change is starting to take shape on TV, but it is still early days. The art of Jewish storytelling on television is in the process of becoming richer, deeper, more insightful, and more engaging. Complicated and layered depictions of Jewish identity are finally receiving the attention they deserve – that is something for Grandpa Boris to kvell over.
Sharing that which is most sacred: Friday night dinner with a Muslim

EZRA TANEN

Canada has forged for itself, in the past few decades, a reputation as a tranquil place of refuge in a tumultuous world. Our country is known for welcoming immigrants into a peaceful coexistence of nationalities which are sometimes hostile to each other in their countries of origin. It seems that age-old and recurrent feuds are forgotten on the Canadian shores in accordance with the dictates of a cultural mosaic society.

Take for example Thornhill. The community is often viewed from within one’s own cultural bubble but is in reality a series of bubbles within a few square kilometers. A Persian market could be found on Yonge, just north of Centre, and not too far away from the Sobey’s Kosher Market on Clark. The truth is that even Thornhill fulfills the ideal of the cultural mosaic with multitudes of ethnicities living side by side, yet few are willing to share the beauty of their tradition with outsiders or welcome those of different cultures as friends. The insularity of each group is maintained by intersections which serve as borders and cultural practices often used as barriers.

Of course the term peaceful coexistence only describes the overall state of our neighbourliness, there are times when our bubbles collide. The ugly debate over the Jaffari Village development in 2015 serves as one example of a not-so-courteous meddling in another’s affairs. Another venue which challenges ethnic and religious insularity is York University, an institution where the many cultures of the GTA could freely interact. It seems that only the minority of intercultural interactions at York University which go terribly wrong receive any attention. For many in the Jewish community York has become a rather contentious subject.

I wear a kippah at York just as my classmates wear turbans and hijabs. I have never felt remotely uncomfortable or victimized at any point in my student career. The truth is that York offers an opportunity rarely encountered in a cultural mosaic society. Herein lies the second risk, for families observant of kashrut laws, in inviting those belonging to different denominations or religions; the prospect of an invitation to eat in a non-kosher home. That being said, many in the Jewish community must respect the value of a place like York University which go terribly wrong receive any attention. For many in the Jewish community York has become a rather contentious subject.

The meal with this friend was marked by its normalcy. It was a typical Thornhill affair with lots of guests and lots of strollers walked back from shul. The only incident of note was my friend’s shock at the mildness of the Sabra “Turkish” salad we served and the fact that we had to fetch him grape juice for Kiddush instead of alcoholic wine.

Of course no Shabbat meal is complete without a controversial subject: a guest brought up the topic of agunot, or women freezing cold and blowing wind, they said that they always want to stop and offer a ride. It is easy to see how and why Shabbat is a Blur. Our religious mores do not need to be kept to ourselves, they are valuable places for cultural exchange. Shabbat is a time when many refuse a car ride from a Muslim, but it is also a time to invite a Muslim to a Shabbat meal.

I believe that sharing that which is most sacred can make neighbours more familiar and contentious subjects less hostile. Embracing our Muslim peers in particular is an important step in realizing that the tranquillity we enjoy in Canada is not only dependent on borders but on the ability to work together and for that to happen we must know each other.

Ezra Tanen is a health studies major at York University.
The Haida Gwaii Haggadah

MARLON DANILEWITZ

For many people the location Haida Gwaii stirs images of fishing, totems, kayaking or oil tankers. While I was drawn to visit Haida Gwaii, an archipelago of islands in the north coast of British Columbia, to learn about Haida culture, explore its forests and waters, one of the most pivotal memories of my time there was celebrating Passover.

I visited Haida Gwaii in the spring of 2016 as part of my medical residency training. I spent four weeks working in family medicine clinics and the local ER in Queen Charlotte City, Haida Gwaii’s largest city.

Working as a doctor in a small town of roughly 1,000 people introduced me to the fact that no person’s personal life is private. The man who might drive me as I hitchhiked across the island might be the same who might unexpectedly present a week later to the hospital. When a tragedy afflicted the community, I saw the physical and emotional wounds bleed into the daily clinic visits. Likewise, my patients quickly got to know my warm and outgoing personality.

During my time on the island, I volunteered at Skidegate Haida Immersion Program (SHIP), a program led by local elders to preserve and revitalize the Haida language. On these days, I could not help think about how similar the experience must have been a century ago when Eliezer Ben Yehuda was working to reignite the Hebrew language. At SHIP, I developed relationships with the Haida elders and began to learn about Haida language, food and culture. I met and shared meals with members of the community, joined the band’s chief on a fishing voyage, and earned the nickname the “Hebrew Haida.”

I also had the chance to share my background and culture with the local community. As Passover approached, I toyed around in my mind with the idea of hosting a communal seder. I shared the idea with community members and they became excited at the prospect of celebrating their first Passover. I was lucky that when I had flown from Vancouver to Haida Gwaii I was frugal with packing clothes so that I had room to bring matzah and a few other Passover staples. In preparation for the seder, I developed a personalized Haggadah for the evening. The Haida Gwaii Haggadah, as I titled it, incorporated the standard structure and liturgy of the seder, in addition to explanations from thinkers like Abraham Heschel, and meditative and narrative activities.

Finally, the first night of Passover arrived and it was time to start the seder. There were 10 guests at our Passover potluck meal, including one fellow visiting Jewish medical resident. At the centre of the table was our traditional seder plate, consisting of all local items. To my surprise, the group was enthralled by the traditional songs and were quick to join in using the transliterated Hebrew.

As the evening progressed, our conversations drifted to some of the parallel themes between the narratives of the affliction of Israelites in the desert and those of the Haida in Canada. During these debates, I watched as the matzah shifted from being a novelty of the night to the bread of our shared affliction. With the end of Had Gadya, we concluded the seder but everyone stayed to talk, delving into Passover and Jewish history. One person was so moved by the night that he chose to refrain from eating bread for the remainder of Passover, leaving me in the precarious position of gifting him one of my two remaining boxes of matzah.

When I celebrate Passover with my family, we have adopted the tradition over the passing years of taking pause during the night to remember our loved ones who have passed. While I continue this tradition, I also pause to remember the seders of my life, as a boy in South Africa, a teenager in Toronto, or a yeshiva student in Israel. This spring when I sit to tell the story of Exodus, I will be reminded by my time in Haida Gwaii that matzah is a bread of our shared affliction.

Dr. Marlon Danilewitz is a psychiatry resident and clinical researcher at the University of British Columbia.
Mameloshen

LEANNA KATZ

Wandering along a small street off Second Avenue in Manhattan, I came across a sandwich board sign that read: “Come inside and see what we’ve got!” I accepted the invitation. Inside, stood two young women, a brunette and a blonde, both with bangs, working behind a glass case filled with carefully iced cupcakes.

“Where are you from?” asked the brunette shop owner.

“Toronto.”

“Cool!” they cooed in unison.

“What are you doing in the city?” the blonde followed up.

“Studying Yiddish!”

“Wow. Cool!” They cooed again.

“But isn’t Yiddish a dying language?” asked the brunette.

I smiled at the irony of this question coming from a woman who had just opened a cupcake shop, long after the cupcake trend had gone stale.

Yiddish lives. Not on the scale it once did – at its height, before the Holocaust, the mother tongue (or mameloshen, in Yiddish) of over 10 million Jews, mostly in Eastern European shtetls. Yiddish today is a way into the past, a time machine of Eastern European shtetls. Yiddish today looks and sounds different from how it was before the Holocaust. But it is a way into the past, a time machine of Eastern European shtetls.

In our first language class we learned common responses to “how are you?” The answers include: “I have no news” (nishes-tokeynnayes), “It’s better you shouldn’t ask” (izbesernishfregn), and “I’m not well” (ikh bin nishtgezunt). My classmate Michelle commented, “This is the language I’ve been looking for. In English I’m expected to answer ‘fine.’ But I’m not fine. Fine is a useless answer. Yiddish has the answers I feel.”

By learning my grandparents’ language, I can access a deeper part of me. Knowing facts about the shtetls where they grew up or seeing a family tree does not tell me about how my family for generations lived and kvetched, how they insulted one another (may trouble come upon your head - a brodtsudayn kop), how they worried about one another (the evil eye shouldn’t be with you, then spitting three times - keyneynhorapfftpfftpfft), how they said goodnight to one another (sleep well and wake up refreshed in the morning - shlofgezunt un shteyoyfgezunterfrish). But Yiddish is not spoken in eastern European shtetls anymore. Those shtetls no longer exist.

Yiddish today looks and sounds different. My classmates are a microcosm of the ways Yiddish lives.

Some students learn Yiddish to uncover European Jewish history. My classmate Milena is a tour guide and genealogist in Lodz, Poland who helps Jewish families uncover their histories and leads volunteers to restore Jewish cemeteries. She is learning Yiddish to work with historical documents.

Other students are creating art and culture in Yiddish. Meng, a student from China, wrote and performed a Yiddish and Mandarin song at the closing ceremony of the summer program. Chloe, a master’s student in Boston, is exploring the relationship between Yiddishkeit and queer culture – both diasporic, cosmopolitan, and alternative communities.

Outside our classroom, Yiddish lives as a spoken language in New York, most commonly in chassidic communities. A Filipino waiter at a kosher restaurant in Williamsburg told me he learned some Yiddish to interact with customers who do not speak English. A four-year-old girl from a chassidic family approached me in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park. In the middle of our conversation about her favourite food (lakes with cheese), she exclaimed, “Du reddstayzoy funny!” (You speak so funny!).

Our conversation mirrored the divide, and sometimes tension, between Yiddish in religious and secular worlds. This gap was particularly visible to me during the closing ceremony of the summer program.

Why Yiddish? My desire to learn Yiddish is in part about finding my voice, one manifestation of a 20-something looking to carve out her space in the world. Yiddish lets me articulate certain thoughts in a way that English does not.

For example, I find Yiddish vocabulary and syntax better suited to how I feel. I like to refer to my friends and family by the diminutive forms of their names because it is warmer, more tender. My friend from Yiddish class is much more Rokhele than Rachel; my sister is Sorele, not just Sarah.

Yiddish has not only the diminutive, but also the imminutive, an even smaller, more affectionate, way of referring to someone or something. A girl is a mayvel in the diminutive or a maydle in the imminutive. We learned this in one of our first grammar lessons, a signal that learning the close, caring ways of referring to people and things is a foundational part of Yiddish.

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What it was like to be a Jewish immigrant in Victoria during the mid-19th century

Jewish migration to Victoria began around the time of the Gold Rush in 1858. Jews as well as non-Jews moved to the region as excited prospectors hoping to create personal fortunes. The majority of these prospectors originally came up from California as the gold reserves there were almost depleted. That being said, many of the Jewish immigrants in Victoria hailed from San Francisco and not directly from their ancestral homelands.

As the community grew its ethnic composition diversified. Most of the Jews in Victoria during the late 1850s were of Ashkenazi descent, comprised of mainly Austrian, Polish, Russian, English, and American Jews. The fact that the majority of these immigrants had already lived in the United States allowed them to have an easier time adjusting to life in Canada. This was because they were already well-versed in the art of Victorian living which was the dominant style of living in the British Empire and the United States at this time. Major Victorian values, such as modesty, charity, education, and sociability paired well with major Jewish values, for example, tzedakah (charity). This allowed the Jews to relate better to the dominant non-Jewish British culture of the times. Knowing the English language and understanding how the society around them functioned allowed them to have a very successful time adjusting to life in another new home.

Many of the Jews who arrived in Victoria at this time set up shops and businesses and became very successful in commerce and trade. Some of the Jewish arrivals entered the fur-trading business. Their endeavours in this line of work were very rewarding due to their willingness to leave the city limits and trade directly with the First Nations peoples, something that a lot of non-Jews would not do. Again, since many of the Jews in Victoria originally came from San Francisco, their adaptation to Victorian culture had already largely occurred. This helped them to understand how to run a successful business in this type of a society. Business was, at first, the only type of connection the early Jews of Victoria had with each other due to their coming to the city primarily as individuals rather than as families. This was all to change within the first few years of arrival.

As the community continued to grow, awareness of the lack of Jewish resources and institutions in the city and the increasingly desperate need for this infrastructure became apparent. Sylvester Frank, one of the first Jewish immigrants to Victoria, recounted his experiences as one of the first Jews in the city in his personal writings. Observing Shabbat was very difficult as there was no synagogue at first and keeping kosher was next to impossible. He recounts that he even had to resort to regularly eating pork and beans which would otherwise be prohibited according to the laws of kashrut. These difficulties were present for all of the first Jewish immigrants in the city.

This need to officially establish a Jewish community in Victoria was ever present and the Jews of the time took it upon themselves to do just this. After one year, by 1859, the Jews of Victoria had come together to organize services for the High Holidays. They purchased land which they designated for burying the dead according to Jewish custom. Well-versed in the art of Victorian sociability, they started to found benevolent societies such as the Victoria Hebrew Benevolent Society. What was considered the official start of the Jewish community in Victoria was the 1863 opening of the first synagogue in the city, Temple Emanu-El. Incredibly, 70 per cent of the funding for this synagogue came from non-Jews. This showed how Victoria had accepted Jews as part of the greater community.

The integration of Jews into Victoria, B.C., during the mid-19th century was one of relative ease. Considering that the Victoria Jewish community was comprised at first of mostly Americanized and Anglicized Jews, their transition into Canadian society was endured with few hardships. Acting quickly to build Jewish institutions helped this small community to officially establish themselves as part of the greater Victoria culture while eventually cementing their Jewish identity.

Later influxes of Jews, especially those of eastern European ancestry, into other parts of the country were difficult for the rest of the Canadian community to accept. Although this seemed to be the pattern of acceptance for Jewish migrants no matter where in the world they migrated, this trend was broken in Victoria. The Victoria community’s unique acceptance of its new Jewish community in the mid-19th century was a foreshadow to Canada’s acceptance and embracing of Jewish migrants during the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Jews in Canada now live with a freedom that was seldom experienced back during the 1800s and even beyond that, with the first Jews in Victoria being that glimmer of hope for the future of the Canadian Jewish community.

Megan Hollinger is finishing her undergraduate degree in religious studies at the University of Ottawa.

The CJN Prize Event

Pictured, from left, CJN Prize runners up Marsha Druker and Dara Poizner; Benjamin Levy with his parents; and Rabbi Michal Shekel.
Beware the single-issue Jewish vote

On March 21, 2016 almost all the leading candidates for the United States presidency addressed the American Israel Political Affairs Committee (AIPAC) at the organization’s annual general meeting. Naturally, the event focused on how each candidate would defend and support Israel as president, with topics ranging from peace with the Palestinians to the Iran nuclear deal.

Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, and Donald Trump all gave speeches reaffirming their commitment to Israel’s security to thunderous applause. However, one notable candidate was absent from the event entirely: the only Jewish candidate running for a major party’s nomination, Bernie Sanders.

Sanders’ choice to forgo AIPAC, and instead give his own speech on the topic of American-Israeli relations, was extremely significant. AIPAC is a potent lobbying group that routinely spends around $3 million (US) every year, not to mention its capacity to mobilize both voters and private donors. The organization’s agenda focuses on issues such as Iran’s nuclear program, opposing BDS, and continued assistance for Israel’s security. For many people, including myself, Sanders opting out of speaking at AIPAC was a serious wake-up call.

The mainstream Jewish political identity used to be one of social progressivism. Jewish leaders were instrumental in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, which won equal legal rights and protections for African-Americans. Israel was founded through the socialist egalitarianism of the kibbutz movement: the idea that the only way to realize a common goal is to treat all as equals. Fighting for the oppressed is in our blood, since so often in our history we have found ourselves under oppressive rule.

However, a problem arises when we allow a politician’s full and unwavering support for Israel to be enough to mask their shortcomings in other areas. When this happens, we risk becoming single-issue voters. This was most obvious at AIPAC, when two of the candidates – Cruz and Trump – ran on platforms against the rights of immigrants, Muslims, and LGTBQ people. Meanwhile, Sanders, the most progressive candidate by far, was nowhere to be seen. What kind of message does this send about where Jewish voters care about Israel’s security and well-being? It is time to reassert the Jewish political voice as one that calls for things to get better, one that supports the marginalized and disenfranchised, and one that tirelessly self-evaluates. If we allow our support to be monopolized by whoever supports Israel the most vocally, then we risk being absent from the discussion when it comes to issues such as indigenous and minority rights. One does not need to look very far back to see a time when we were such a highly oppressed group in desperate need of advocates. Now, even in a world of rising anti-Semitism and hate, it is our obligation as Jews to stand for more than just Israel’s security. Above all else, we need to stand for the values that are at Israel’s core: inclusion, peace, and innovation.

Conclusion: In Sanders’ own speech on Israel and the Middle East, which he gave on the same day as the AIPAC General Meeting, he continually affirmed Israel’s right to exist and to defend itself. But unique to Sanders’ speech was criticism of how Israel’s government has acted in recent years, including the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and a failure to help relieve the misery in Gaza. This was more than just Jewish guilt: it was a voice of moderation in a world of extremes and it was exactly what the Jewish community and the world needed to hear.

Benjamin Levy is a second-year student at the University of Toronto studying global health, statistics, and philosophy.

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