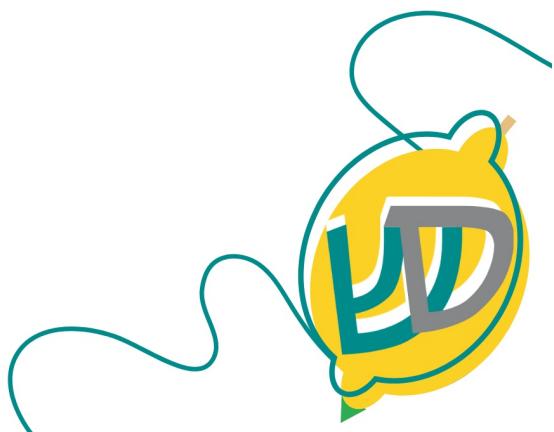




Winter 5786



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A Word from the Chair

“I write this knowing that
I will soon be stepping down as Chair”

Andrea Torres



I write this reflection after standing in the Edinburgh City Chambers, representing our community at the city's Chanukah celebration. As I lit the second candle of the menorah, surrounded by fellow Jews and civic leaders, I felt the weight of the past year

settle heavily on my shoulders. Chanukah is a festival of light and resilience, yet it also asks us to be honest about the darkness we face. At that moment, my thoughts were with the many tragedies our people have endured over the past year, including the horrific

events in Sydney during the first night of Chanukah, where Jewish lives were lost simply for being Jewish. Holding that flame, I felt grief, but also a deep sense of responsibility to stand visibly and proudly as a Jewish leader in Scotland.

This past year as Chair of our Sukkat Shalom has been one of profound complexity. We have lived through moments of anxiety and pain that have shaped how it feels to be Jewish today. Yet alongside this, there has been extraordinary warmth, growth, and connection. If there is one lesson I will carry forward, it is that Jewish life persists not despite difficulty, but through it.

Over the course of the year, we have celebrated bar and bat mitzvahs that filled our services with joy, laughter, and hope. Watching young people step into Jewish adulthood, supported by their families and community, has been a powerful reminder that our future is being actively shaped

in the present. We have also had the privilege of welcoming new Jews through conversion.

Together, we have marked the cycle of Jewish time. We stood in reflection during the High Holy Days, asking hard questions of ourselves and our world. We gathered in joy for festivals, shared meals, sang familiar melodies, and found comfort in ritual and community. In a year where many felt isolated or fearful, our community space became a place where people could bring both celebration and grief, certainty and doubt.

Serving as Chair has also shown me the quiet strength that sustains our community: the volunteers who set up chairs, lead services, cook food, and show up week after week. This year, I am especially grateful to our front door greeters at our Yom Kippur service. Leadership is never a solitary act. It is collective, relational, and deeply rooted in trust. I am endlessly grateful to everyone who gave their time,

energy, and heart to making our community vibrant and welcoming.

I write this knowing that I will soon be stepping down as Chair. While this role has been challenging (at times), it has been an immense privilege. It has shaped me not only as a leader, but as a Jew. I step away with humility, pride, and deep gratitude for the trust placed in me, and with confidence in those who will carry this work forward.

Although 2025 has brought painful moments, we do not define our year solely by loss. We define it by how we respond: by gathering, by celebrating life, by welcoming new members, and by choosing light again and again. As we turn toward 2026, I do so with hope for continued growth, deeper connection, and brighter days ahead for our community. May the light we have kindled together continue to shine into the year to come.

Chag Sameach!

A Hanukkah Photo Album

Lizzie Robertson and Andrea Torres





Bat Mitzvah: Maya Holliman

Parashat Vayetzei (Genesis 28)
29 November 2025 / 9 Kislev 5786

Dvar by Maya Holliman
Introduced by Gila Holliman



Maya was very excited to welcome her family and friends to her Bat Mitzvah. Her four grandparents Sam Chodosh and Joy Rosenberg, and Jim and Karen Holliman, and her uncle and aunt Jakov and Caissa Hadash came over from the States and she had many of her friends from school and dance at the ceremony as well. Maya's younger bother Liam dressed the scroll,

fulfilling a traditional role. For many of her guests (including two of her grandparents), it was their first time at a Bat Mitzvah so Maya set the standard - and set it high! It was lovely to have so many people from the Sukkat Shalom community and family friends as well. That evening, Maya hosted a Scottish-Jewish ceilidh (we found a ceilidh band who had experience at Jewish

weddings!) and her friends and family danced with enthusiasm to the music of both traditions.

Maya would like to thank Rabbi Mark, Rabbi Elisheva of York, her uncle and her mum for their teaching and support in helping her reach this day.

Maya's D'var

Today I am reading a well-known Torah portion, and I found some parts of it, or better, some parts that were left out of it, a bit disturbing. I want to take you on a journey to re-interpret some imbalances that I see within the text. Before I give you my controversial analysis, let's remind ourselves of the story. After Jacob gets his brother Esau's birthright blessing, he sets out for his uncle Lavan's house as his mother was worried Esau would retaliate. Just outside of town, he meets his cousin Rakhel by a well and rolled the stone of the well's mouth and watered his uncle's flocks. Then Jacob kissed Rakhel and started to cry (really, really loudly!). Falling in love rapidly, Jacob told Rakhel that

they were cousins, and she ran away and told her father.

Jacob meets his uncle and Rakhel's older sister Leah and agrees to work 7 years for the privilege of marrying Rakhel. All the plans for the wedding are made, and on the night of, the sisters are swapped. As the Torah states: 'when morning came, there was Leah!'. Disgusted, he demands Rakhel, who he was supposed to marry, and Lavan says he must work another 7 years to marry her, but this second wedding can take place after just a week. This sets up a very strange dynamic between the sisters.

While I have infinite points I would like to share, I'll only talk about 4 today: mothers, beauty, intent and control.

Mothers: missing and prominent

Leah and Rakhel's mother is never mentioned in the Torah. This could mean many different things: she might have left Lavan and returned to her parents' house, she could have died, she

might have opposed her husband in the way they wanted to raise their children and was silenced. Although she may not have made an obvious difference to the outcome of the story, it makes me wonder why her story is neglected. Was it deemed as unimportant by the men who created the stories of the Torah? Did she know Rivka, Jacob's mum? Were they talking about the family connection?

Interestingly, when Jacob and Rakhel meet at the well, he identifies himself by his mother's name, while asking after her father's family. In those days a man would identify himself with his father's name. This makes me think that Jacob's mother is a powerful figure in his life, not just from the story but also in his estimation. I wonder also if he may have done this because Rakhel reminds him of his mother.

Beauty

What do we know about the sisters from the description and omissions of the text?

Leah's 'weak' eyes are set in contrast to the immediate description of Rakhel's beauty. Leah's weak eyes could be interpreted as needing glasses or that she had hay fever. Leah's beauty is overlooked because she is described with a possible fault and her sister is not. There is no reason why Leah might not be as beautiful as her sister, or even more. 'Weak eyes' has never been used as an insult (as far as I'm aware). What would have happened if Leah had been the one at the well if she had been helping her dad? Was she also beautiful enough to gain Jacob's affection at first sight?

Intent

What was the intent of the swap? Here is something to consider when you think about the marriages: Jacob is 77 when he meets Rakhel at the well, and 84 when they marry. Rachel is 14 when they meet, and 21 when they marry. If I ask about why the sisters allowed for the exchange on the wedding night, this severe age difference might help us to

understand., Rakhel runs from Jacob, and does not return his kiss, and later she does not speak to him of love, but of children. Maybe Rakhel did not care for Jacob at all. I see this as reasons for why Leah might have endorsed the plan to swap brides.

Everyone assumes that Leah is charmed by Jacob and wants him for her own and to spite her sister teach Leah the signs and Leah who is obviously also in love with him. However when I read this carefully, I got the impression that perhaps neither sister loved him and Leah and Rakhel were working together to make the swap successful. Perhaps Leah married Jacob as an act of selflessness to protect her sister from marrying so young in her life. This protection is predicated on the idea that Leah and Rakhel may have thought that Lavan wouldn't marry the latter off to Jacob after he did so to the former.

In one of the most interesting midrash I read, the writer said that they thought Rakhel and Jacob were afraid of the swap being made so they made secret signs so that they would know it

was each other in the wedding tent. But, for the swap to have come off successfully the signs must have been given to Leah by either Rakhel or Jacob, the latter seems very unlikely because he is in love with Rakhel, so that in my interpretation means that Leah

wanted the swap for Rakhel to teach Leah the signs and Leah would have had to be willing to pretend to be Rakhel.

Who was in control of this story?

When I read this story, I notice that the sisters have no say in their story until they name their children. THANK GOODNESS! Leah does actually have some say in some parts of her life (naming her children). She names them after what she is feeling, says the text. But I wonder if she names them those names to try and get Jacob's attention and take it off Rakhel. But back to the positive, Leah has actually had a say in her life for the first time in the torah!

Conclusion

When I read stories like this it makes me realise that these injustices haven't been fixed until recently, my Baba wasn't

allowed to have a bat mitzvah when she was 13 like I am, she

waited until she was 70 years old and she threw the biggest party

for herself. I come from a long line admittedly long Drasha but it

of feminists and these girls definitely would have been longer

clearly don't even know what the if I had had my way because there term means. In this story the text were way too many things I

says nothing about the girl's wanted to say and not enough

decisions and mostly talks about time to say them! You all owe

the men deciding that Leah will thanks to Rabbi Mark for giving

marry Jacob or Jacob has to work seven years to get married to "the thanks I give much thanks to

love of his life" but these big Rabbi Elisheva for helping me

decisions are never for the women write and really think about the themselves. I think about the text and figure out what I believe

lessons people would have taken and think when I read the text. I

from the story years and years give thanks to my friends

ago, the message that girls should (especially Niamh) who listened be treated like a being that is only to me practice over many, many,

designed to be loved (by a man) many lunchtimes! Thanks to my

and have kids, it would have mum who said the same words

shown girls that they are not over and over and over. And

made to be strong and thank you all for coming here to

independent (like I am!) but that help me through today and those

they are made to be a man's who especially helped me to be

property. I know my drasha is able to do this for you today.

controversial but that makes it Shabbat shalom.

more ME. I am going to continue the line of feminists my family started for as long as I can and I'll continue what I started by reading this to you today.

Thank you

I promise to you all that this is the last paragraph of my

definitely would have been longer

if I had had my way because there

were way too many things I wanted to say and not enough

time to say them! You all owe

thanks to Rabbi Mark for giving

me a page limit. On the note of

"the thanks I give much thanks to

Rabbi Elisheva for helping me

write and really think about the text and figure out what I believe

and think when I read the text. I

give thanks to my friends

(especially Niamh) who listened to me practice over many, many,

many lunchtimes! Thanks to my

mum who said the same words

over and over and over. And

thank you all for coming here to

help me through today and those

who especially helped me to be

able to do this for you today.

Shabbat shalom.

Introducing...

Ezri Shoshanna mi-beyt Sara

Shlomo ben Avraham



On December 12th, we welcomed two new members into Sukkat Shalom. One of them is Ezri. Ezri and their partner live together in Cork, Ireland, but we caught up for a chat during Ezri's stay in Scotland for their admission ceremony.

You're currently a student. What are you studying?

I'm in my second year of a BSc

Hons degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy. This year I start as a student counsellor in a work placement.

Do you see Counselling as an act of *tikkun olam*?

Very much so. Being part of various marginalised identities myself, I want to work with others in these under-served areas if I can. Outside of helping clients, I plan to

advocate where I can for better policies and community development in this area.

And you said at your admission ceremony that your desire to help has inspired your chosen Hebrew name?

Yes. The last part of my name —Shoshanna mi-beyt Sara— comes from my not legal but essentially adoptive Jewish family, my Mama Bear and her mother. She has been a major part of my life and journey, and I wanted to continue keeping her name and lineage in living memory. In reflecting my non-binary identity I wanted to choose a traditionally masculine name to balance the feminine ones that also captures one of my core values: helping. So in choosing Ezri —“my help”—I was able to accomplish that.

Was it your Mama Bear’s Jewishness that first attracted you to Judaism or was it something else?

I have been interested in Judaism since I was young. My spiritually adoptive family did not come into my life until after high school, but I did have Jewish friends growing up. Being invited to some of friends’ celebrations, such as Pesach and B’nei Mitzvah, and always feeling a sense of welcome and belonging really stuck with me. It took me a while to come around to looking into it properly as I had previous issues surrounding religion and spirituality from my childhood.

What are your hobbies?

My hobbies tend to rotate, though generally around crafting of some sort. Currently I want to learn crochet. I’m also enjoying writing again now that I have some new fountain pens and fun ink to try out. I’m also getting back into tabletop role-playing: my spouse and I are starting to do some world building for a new system we want to make, and have it not only be tabletop but also have a LARP (Live Action Roleplay) version as well. And can’t forget

to mention face painting with my spouse as well (hence the photo). That is their work, but I dabble as well and really enjoy expressive makeup too. So I have various outlets in a creative mode instead of just studying.

Speaking of study, you and I studied together under Rabbi Mark. What were your favorite parts of the conversion process?

Honestly, being able to find a community and new friends even though I'm rather remote was the best part for me. Being able to ask questions, getting to know various views and experiences, and having other members of the LGBTQIA+ community as part of the process was very moving and impactful in seeing how I can be part of the Jewish community as well.

How did you discover Sukkat Shalom?

I found Sukkat Shalom via the European Union for Progressive

Judaism website. I originally looked in Ireland, but did not receive anything back from the congregation in Dublin. So I looked in Scotland as my spouse and I have always felt welcomed whenever we had travelled there previously.

Between Glasgow Reform and Sukkat Shalom, I found that Sukkat Shalom had classes, was very inviting in my first interaction via email, and I found the website helpful.

Do you have any Jewish community in Ireland?

I am involved in the Cork community when I can be, but it's a bit of drive. There are some smaller communities more nearby that I plan on looking into and seeing how they do things. I still feel Sukkat Shalom is my main home and will be visiting when I can, but it would be nice if I can find some local community as well.

Thanks Ezri. We all welcome you to Sukkat Shalom.

Introducing... Helen Searle

Shlomo ben Avraham



December 12th saw the admission of two new members of Sukkat Shalom. As a community we sang *Mazel Tov!* One new member is Helen Searle, who is currently a student of the Open University and lives in Edinburgh.

What are you studying, Helen?

It's called an open degree, in which you study a variety of subjects. I'm currently studying a second-year Religious Studies module. I'm studying for a BA. I wanted to do a postgrad degree but unfortunately I graduated in 2004 so everyone who taught me has either died, retired, or completely forgotten my existence, and I need new references.

Surely you don't need actual human references to advance to a postgrad? If you have a degree or diploma already, don't you just present it to them?

I tried to do a postgrad about ten years ago (dropped out because I had health problems) and you do need to get references if you're going to do a research degree. And quite honestly I need the refresher anyway...

Is it a comparative religion module?

Not exactly. We're studying what religions have in common rather than what distinguishes them from each other; specifically the way people live their religion, rather than what they believe. There have been complaints from other students that we don't do enough theology, but quite frankly if you're an adult living under Christian hegemony and you don't know what a Jesus is, that really is on you.

How did you choose your Hebrew name?

My Hebrew name is Tikvah Miryam. I chose Tikvah the morning after the 2024 US presidential election, which sounds counter-intuitive but as Edward Said said, “where cruelty and injustice are concerned, hopelessness is submission, which I believe is immoral.” Miryam is because I love the Pesach story, and the song that starts *Miryam hanaviah, oz v'zimrah b'yada*. The fact that the name means “rebellion” was a nice bonus!

Tikvah as in “hope” presumably. And it's in the name of our often-visiting Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah. Do you enjoy her sermons and/or writings?

Yes, I loved Rabbi Elli's sermons on Yom Kippur. I'm also reading her book *Trouble-Making Judaism*. She's a real inspiration to me as a feminist and a radical lesbian.

How did you find the conversion process?

My favourite part was the supplemental reading. Rabbi Mark's reading list introduced me to so many interesting writers on Judaism, when the only book I'd been reading was *I and Thou*, which is great but not what you need when planning a seder or deciding where to position your *mezuzah*.

Can you recommend a book from Rabbi Mark's list? Just a real stand-out title that you enjoyed and would suggest to other people—perhaps those not on the course—read?

Everyone of every gender needs to read *Standing Again at Sinai* by Judith Plaskow. It doesn't throw the whole thing out like Mary Daly, but it doesn't shy away from saying "actually this ancient tradition, sanctified by the House of Israel, has parts that are problematic" (or the early-90s equivalent of that).

What first attracted you to Judaism?

I found out Judaism existed when I was ten and immediately wished I'd been born a Jew, since I didn't know you could convert, but even now I couldn't explain why. I think this must be why people came up with the idea of a "Jewish soul." It's easier to say "I was born that way" than to delve into your own unconscious to try and find out.

How did you first find Sukkat Shalom?

I'd love to have a fascinating story full of serendipitous synchronicities but in reality I just googled "synagogue Edinburgh."

Do you currently join in with Jewish culture in Edinburgh or Scotland beyond Sukkat Shalom?

I like going to the Lit talks. I'm just sorry I missed Rabbi Mark on Meyerbeer. I also joined the Green Olive Collective, and

took part in a “promises auction” to raise money for their Sowing Solidarity campaign to replant olive trees in the West Bank. I spent a large proportion of the university holidays making cards and *kippot* for people and managed to earn £75 (and to get thoroughly sick of the sight of a double-layered six-panel kippah).

Have you been engaging with Jewish groups outwith Scotland?

I'm a member of PJJIP (Progressive Jews for Justice in Israel-Palestine) and Naamod, but I haven't had the chance to get involved yet. I'm looking forward to that.

Do you do Shabbat?

I try to do Shabbat every week, or at least light candles and stop work. It still feels weird to have a day when you deliberately refrain from working, but I think more people should be able to do that.

Are there any other Jewish customs you've come to practice and enjoy?

I enjoy havdalah. Sometimes I do this with my friends (eating soup afterwards) and sometimes I watch Rabbi Mark's online havdalah. I think Judaism really understands the utility of physical ritual and especially the use of sacralized objects.

Thanks Helen. We all welcome you to Sukkat Shalom.

Kol Nidrei

Supporting Women and Newborns in Times of War

Mirjam van de Giessen
Director of Outbrave Relief



Outbrave Relief is one of four charities you supported with your donations to Sukkat Shalom's Kol Nidrei 5786/2025 appeal. In this article, Outbrave's director explains how your money has helped.

I am deeply grateful to the Sukkat Shalom community for your support of Outbrave Relief. Your commitment to

human life enables us to reach mothers and newborns during some of the most vulnerable moments imaginable. I would like to share a glimpse of how your generosity translates into concrete support on the ground for families affected by war in both Israel and Gaza.

When war breaks out, attention understandably focuses on immediate survival:

safety, shelter, food, and medical care for the injured. Yet one group often remains largely invisible in humanitarian response: women who must physically recover from childbirth while sustaining their newborn's life amid displacement and crisis.

Outbrave Relief was founded with the conviction that every new mother needs care and protection, so that she can give the strongest possible start to the next generation. The words of John Bowlby, the founder of attachment theory, capture this belief powerfully: "If a community values its children, it must cherish their parents."

At Outbrave Relief, we provide maternal and newborn aid, training, and trauma-sensitive postpartum support in war-affected settings. Since the second half of 2025, our work has focused on supporting mothers and babies affected by the war and its aftermath in Israel and Gaza, through local partners and trusted supply chains.

The weeks after childbirth

are a critical period in any context. Physically and emotionally, mothers are recovering while learning to care for a completely dependent newborn. Research consistently shows that a mother's wellbeing during the postpartum period has lifelong effects on her child's health, stress regulation, and cognitive and emotional development. In times of war, these challenges are magnified by displacement, trauma, disrupted healthcare systems, and the loss of social support.

Our work is intentionally non-political. Working from Israel, we support mothers on both sides of the war line without allowing politics to interfere with the delivery of care. Even when this feels extraordinarily difficult, we are committed to showing up and maintaining integrity in everything we do.

In Israel's hardest-hit communities, we work with local midwives who provide postpartum care at home. One first-time mother gave birth



earlier than expected while her husband was serving in the reserves. She reached out to our program for support. Through home visits, a dedicated midwife provided practical guidance on newborn care, breastfeeding support, health screening for both mother and baby, and attentive listening. With this support, the mother was able to manage challenges such as jaundice and low birth weight at home, avoiding unnecessary trips to the doctor. Beyond the professional care, she described the experience as feeling truly

accompanied during a sensitive and overwhelming period. These visits are not only medical; they help restore a sense of safety and human connection.

In Gaza, the situation is far more acute. Many women are giving birth in overcrowded shelters or under-resourced field hospitals, often without basic supplies. After birth, families frequently return to tents or makeshift shelters where there is little privacy, no safe place for a newborn to sleep, limited access to hygiene items, and minimal

opportunity for rest or recovery, especially as winter sets in.

Through a field hospital in Deir al-Balah, Outbrave Relief distributes maternal and newborn hygiene kits, educational materials, blankets, and soon also safe emergency baby beds designed specifically for crisis settings. These lightweight, foldable beds keep babies raised off cold or wet ground and help reduce risks associated with unsafe sleeping conditions, such as infections and sudden infant death. In an environment defined by destruction, small interventions can make a meaningful difference.

Although the contexts in Israel and Gaza differ greatly, the needs of mothers and newborns are deeply human and remarkably similar. Across communities, parents want to protect their babies and ensure they are fed, cared for, and safe. Mothers seek reassurance that the anxiety they are experiencing is understandable, and that they are not failing under

impossible circumstances.

Our work is made possible through community support, including the generosity of congregations like Sukkat Shalom. Your contribution allows us to respond quickly, and remain focused on care that is evidence-based, and grounded in compassion.

At a time when division and suffering feel overwhelming, caring for mothers and newborns reminds us of what is shared: the responsibility to protect life at its most vulnerable, and to reduce the long-term harm that war inflicts on the next generation.

Thank you for standing with us in this work.

www.ourbraverelief.org



Obituary

Rabbi Arthur Waskow

Helen Searle



As Progressive (or just progressive) Jews we owe a great deal to Rabbi Arthur Waskow, who died on 20th October 2025. Those of us who converted under Rabbi Mark Solomon will know Rabbi Waskow as the author of *Seasons of our Joy* (a very beautiful introduction to the festivals, spiritual as well as practical), even if we haven't read any of the other 23 books he wrote or co-authored. Two

more are still to be published.

Many of his coinages are now in common use: his translation of the *Shema* as "listen up, Godwrestlers" for example, or his description of the mythical first human Adam as "the earthling" (*adamah*, of course, means "earth"), or the fact that he went ahead and spoke the Tetragrammaton. Of this he said: "eventually [...] I said, 'What would happen if I tried pronouncing *yud-hei*—

vav-hei as it's written in Hebrew, with no vowels? What would happen?" So what happened for me was—an out-breath. [...] Breathing is the substrate of all the names of God."

Waskow was born into a secular Jewish leftist family in 1933, and received a PhD in American History before working for the Institute of Policy Studies, a New Left thinktank, where he achieved the great honour of being illegally monitored by the FBI. It is well known that the American New Left had an outsized Jewish presence, but Waskow was one of the first to make the step (in his own words) "from Jewish radical to radical Jew."

The role in the New Left of groups like Jews for Urban Justice, which Rabbi Waskow co-founded in 1965 was explained in Michael Staub's *Torn at the Roots* (2002).

In 1971, he helped found the Fabrangen Havurah in Washington, DC. "Fabrangen [is] like Farbrangen," he

explained, "but the R is missing because there's no Rebbe." The idea was for small intimate groups of lay Jews to hold Shabbat services tailored to their own spiritual needs and moral values. "We sing and chant, dance and pray," he explained, and "we read the [week's Torah] portion [...] and talk about it."

He did not confine his activities to Shabbos. On Yom Kippur of 1969 he gave a sermon (despite the fact that he would not be ordained as a rabbi for another twenty-six years) demanding that the congregation of a Washington synagogue repent and perform *teshuvah* for "paying soldiers to burn Vietnamese babies alive... paying policemen who gas, shoot and beat Black people."

And, of course, there was the Freedom Seder. The first Freedom Seder was held in the basement of a Black church on Martin Luther King's first *yahrzeit*, with a mixed attendance of *yeshiva* students, Black militants, and hippies

wearing woolly hats for *yarmulkes*. Its *haggadah* was updated with quotes from “the prophet [Bob] Dylan,” “the *shofet* Eldridge Cleaver, who went into exile like Moses,” “the rabbi Hannah Arendt” and ‘the *tzaddik* [Alan] Ginsberg.’ It was a dramatic break with the past: even now, very few *haggadot* include the phrase “holy [are] the cocks of the grandfathers of Kansas.” Hebrew Professor Robert Alter described it as “the crude political rape of a religious tradition,” simultaneously complaining that it was too melodramatic. But for young Jews in the counterculture—the same people who were reading books like *The Jewish Catalog* or becoming members of *chavurot* like Fabrangen—it was revelatory. The *haggadah* was printed as a booklet and sold out. Dr Alissa Schapiro, of the Los Angeles Skirball Museum, asserts that “in the 1970s these other social justice, environmentalist, queer and feminist *Haggadot* [...] are coming out, but to have this one

in 1969, it is seen as the originator of that concept—launching the tradition of figuring out how to relate the Passover story to contemporary events.”

In 1984 Waskow founded the Shalom Center. At first its concern was with stopping the “flood of fire” (nuclear war) and later with the environmental devastation wrought by the companies he called the “carbon pharaohs” and their enablers in government.

He helped found Rabbis for Human Rights in North America (now called T’ruah) and pioneered the concept of eco-*kashrut*.

Waskow was arrested, aged 85, for demonstrating against ICE’s separation of children from their parents.

The photo that accompanies this article is from his own collection. It shows him planting a tree, but not just any tree. This tree was taken on a solidarity mission to the occupied West Bank. During the mission, participants replanted olive trees. Olive

trees have been maintained by Palestinians for generations but are routinely destroyed by Israeli settlers in direct contravention of the Torah (Deuteronomy 20:19-20). Those who exploit religion for their own material gain, those who impoverish their fellow earthlings, those who destroy our Parent the Earth wantonly, these are the pharaohs, big and small, against whom Waskow pitted himself.

Arthur Waskow is survived by his wife, Rabbi Phyllis Berman, their two children, two step-children, five grandchildren, the Jewish Renewal movement, the planet (at the time of writing, anyway), and thousands of DIY *haggadot*.



Israel/Palestine

Reflections on The People of the Book

Sue Bard

The term People of the Book, in Arabic *Ahl al-Kitab*, originated in the 8th century, coined by Muslims to acknowledge Jews and Christians, as well as themselves, as custodians of divine scriptures. Among Jews it's a term they often use to describe themselves, depicting the continuous living centrality to Judaism of the *Tanakh*, encompassing the five books of Moses, the Prophets (of particular significance to Progressive Judaism's emphasis on ethics) and the Writings. More broadly Jews like to think of themselves as 'people who love books', who respect study and learning, who relish the expression of culture and identity that words – in their various forms – offer, a particularly portable culture for people who've been so often on the move. How then do we understand the war that's

being waged on Palestinian culture, including its literature, by Israel?

PEN International, the charity founded over a century ago to promote literature and freedom of expression and to be a voice for writers silenced in their own countries, has documented and commemorated the 23 writers and poets killed in Gaza between October 2023 and September 2024. One of them was the young novelist, poet, and educator Heba Abu Nada, killed by an Israeli airstrike in southern Gaza on October 20 2023. In her final Facebook post, published on October 8 2023 she wrote: 'Gaza's night is dark apart from the glow of rockets, quiet apart from the sound of the bombs, terrifying apart from the comfort of prayer, black apart from the light of the martyrs. Good night, Gaza.' In October 2025,

PEN marked Israel's attack on Gaza as the deadliest conflict for writers in recent history, and a huge cultural loss accompanied as it was by the targeting and destruction of Gazan schools, universities, libraries and cultural and religious institutions including the Gaza Central Archive and the Great Omari Mosque. Books themselves have been specific targets.

The Educational Bookshop on Saladin Street East Jerusalem is a cultural, political and literary institution of the city. Founded in 1984 by the father of its current owner Mahmoud Muna, there are two branches – Arabic and English – across the road from each other. On Sunday 9th February 2025 both shops were raided by the Israeli police looking for books whose content included ‘incitement to violence against

the State of Israel’. The police judged the books by their covers, with aid from google translate, confiscating around 300 books deemed to fit that bill, throwing them into rubbish bags, sweeping other books off their shelves and onto the floor and causing general disruption and damage.

Mahmoud and his nephew Ahmad were arrested ‘on suspicion of disturbing public order’ and taken into custody. I and other members of Progressive Jews for Justice in Israel Palestine (PJJIP) heard this account directly from Ahmad a few weeks later at our monthly Solidarity Circle* webinar. Mahmoud was not there as he was still under house arrest at the time. But some of us were lucky enough to meet him in Edinburgh in October 2025, when he and Matthew Teller (Jewish author of *The Nine Quarters* of

* Solidarity Circles are initiated and facilitated by the Green Olive Collective that supports and advocates for the Palestinian right of return, an end to the occupation, full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and a democratic future of universal human rights.

Jerusalem) were invited to speak at the Edinburgh Jewish Literary Society about their new jointly-edited book *Daybreak in Gaza: Stories of Palestinian Lives and Culture*.

Israeli erasure and destruction of Palestinian culture has a long history, pre-dating 7 October 2023 by decades. In 2012 a documentary film made by Benny Grunner, *The Great Book Robbery* was released. This film brought to light the unofficial and official wholesale looting of Palestinian homes and institutions from which occupants had either fled or been driven during the Nakba of 1948. Between April '48 and February '49 in a joint Israeli Army and Hebrew University operation, staff from the National Library in Jerusalem followed soldiers, collecting 30,000 books from such homes and institutions in West Jerusalem. Back at the National Library, the books, including many priceless texts, were taken to their own storage room and then catalogued by

subject and author's name.

In the film, one of the ex-cataloguers described the books. 'There were works of Arab fiction, interpretation, religious books. Books about al-Mutanabbi and other great Arab poets – really important books.' They were classified as Abandoned Property, their catalogue numbers starting with AP. This was supposed to signify that the books were a temporary deposit, to be used for research until they were returned to their owners, the Library having confirmed that they were 'capable of safekeeping the books and of returning them to their rightful owners – should such owners ever turn up.' Nearly 80 years later, the books are still there. Historian Ilan Pappe commented on this, saying 'the appropriation and confiscation of the Palestinian assets is not different in my mind from the appropriation of the land, the territory, the natural resources – everything you want, except for one thing – the people themselves. It was

done in order to defeat the Palestinian narrative.'

What is the potency of books? In our webinar, Erez Bleicher (of Green Olive Collective and facilitator of the Solidarity Circles webinars) suggests 'we have to think of the raid on the bookshop as a raid on the imagination.' He made this comment after sharing a clip of a lecture being given to 60 students in Gaza only three of whom had ever been able to go to Jerusalem. The lecturer had been the esteemed poet Refaat Alareer killed by an Israeli airstrike in Northern Gaza (suspected to have been a targeted strike) along with his brother, sister and four of his nephews on 6 December 2023. He had posted what became his final poem 'If I must Die' just days before. In this lecture, Refaat talks with enthusiasm about Tamim al-Barghouti, known as the Poet of Jerusalem, saying how

through work such as his 'a place can turn into a poem, into literature, into stories. So our homeland turns into a story. We love our homeland because of the story. And we love the story because it's about our homeland. And this connection is significant. Israel wants to sever this connection between Palestinians and land. And literature attaches us back, connects us strongly to Palestine, creating realities, making the impossible sound possible.' Tamim al Barghouti was born in Cairo, his father's family having been among the last to leave the Qatamon neighbourhood of West Jerusalem, one of the areas looted by the National Library. Here are the first two sections of his marvellous poem In Jerusalem and Refaat Alareer's prophetic, heartbreaking, but also hopeful poem If I must Die:

In Jerusalem by Tamim Al-Barghouti

We passed by the home of the beloved
but the enemy's laws and wall turned us away
I said to myself, "Maybe, that is a blessing"
What will you see in Jerusalem when you visit?
You will see all that you can't stand
when her houses become visible from all sides
When meeting her beloved, not every soul rejoices
Nor does every absence harm
If they are delighted when meeting before departure
such joy cannot remain kindled
For once your eyes have seen Jerusalem
You will only see her, wherever you look.
In Jerusalem, a greengrocer from Georgia,
annoyed with his wife,
thinks of going on vacation or painting his house
In Jerusalem, a middle-aged man from Upper Manhattan
holds a Torah and teaches Polish boys its commandments
In Jerusalem, an Ethiopian policeman
seals off a street in the marketplace,
A machine gun hangs from the shoulder of a teenage settler,
A person wearing a yarmulke
bows at the Wailing Wall,
Blonde European tourists who don't see Jerusalem at all
but spend most of the time taking pictures of each other
beside a Palestinian woman selling radishes in public squares all
day long
In Jerusalem, there are walls of basil
In Jerusalem, there are barricades of concrete
In Jerusalem, the soldiers marched with heavy boots over the
clouds
In Jerusalem, we were forced to pray on the asphalt
In Jerusalem, everyone is there but you.

If I Must Die by Refaat Alareer

If I must die,
you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze—
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
no even to himself—
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love
If I must die
let it bring hope
let it be a tale

December 2023

Tikkun Olam

Voices for Prophetic Judaism

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah



*“Tzedek, Tzedek, tirdof –
Justice, Justice, you shall
pursue.” Deuteronomy, 16:20.*

Voices for Prophetic Judaism was initiated in January 2025 in response to the narrowing of discourse in Jewish communities in the UK since October 7, 2023, and its aftermath. Its aim is to instill hope into an atmosphere of insularity, fear, and intimidation; to empower dissenting voices; and to generate a spirit of solidarity.

Launched this Shavuot with an online Tikkun Leil Shavuot on the theme of Prophetic Jewish Teachings, the purpose of Voices for Prophetic Judaism is to provide a home for all Jews and fellow travellers and, in particular, those who feel marginalised and silenced in mainstream Jewish communities. To this end, in the absence of an institutional structure, formal membership and official leadership, Voices for Prophetic Judaism is open to all those who want to

contribute to the work of pursuing justice, peace, and equality, establishing human rights, and ensuring a sustainable future for the planet.

Voices for Prophetic Judaism offers pathways to prophetic action rooted in the foundational ethical teachings of Judaism proclaimed in the Torah and in the biblical books of the Prophets, and developed in talmudic, mediaeval, modern, and contemporary texts. So far, it has created these pathways in two ways:

Via a website at voicesforpropheticjudaism.uk with resources to support prophetic thinking and action, including prophetic biblical, talmudic, mediaeval, modern and contemporary teachings, sermons, and articles as well as signposting for organisations that act as pathways to prophetic action.

Via projects, linked to key moments in the Jewish year, including:

- The Tikkun Leil Shavuot –

study sessions, which can be accessed [here](#).

- *Aseret Ymei T'shuvah (Ten Days of Return)*, a booklet created for the High Holy Days and accessed [here](#).
- *Judiths for Justice*, a booklet created for Chanukkah and accessed [here](#).

Voices for Prophetic Judaism actively engages with and supports Jewish organisations, projects, and initiatives in the UK and Israel-Palestine that promote justice, equality, human rights, and sustainability, including:

- **René Cassin**, the UK's Jewish Human Rights organisation, whose mission is 'to promote and protect the universal rights of all people, drawing on Jewish experiences and values.'
- **Tzelem**, an initiative of progressive rabbis and cantors focused on social and economic justice issues in the UK.

- **HIAS+JCORE**, which ‘exists to enable displaced people to thrive in a society free from xenophobia and racism.’
- **EcoJudaism**, which ‘promotes the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical natural environment across the community in accordance with the principles of the Jewish faith.’
- **Queer Yeshiva**, which offers ‘rigorous, immersive, radically inclusive Jewish learning through an explicitly Queer lens.’
- **Yachad**, ‘a British Jewish organisation whose primary mission is to empower British Jews to support a political resolution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict.’
- **Na’amod**, ‘a movement of Jews in the UK seeking to end our communities support for Israel’s occupation, and mobilise it in the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality for all Palestinians and Israelis.’
- **Progressive Jews for Justice in Israel/Palestine**, a network of the members of progressive synagogues in the UK ‘committed to social justice and the application of universal human rights to Jews and Palestinians in Israel/Palestine.’
- **Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR)**, which ‘is dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights in Israel the Palestinian territories. Comprising rabbis and rabbinical students from diverse Jewish traditions, RHR is driven by their profound Jewish values of justice, dignity and equality.’
- **Standing Together**, a grassroots organisation of Palestinian and Jewish Israelis who are standing together in order to achieve ‘Peace and Independence for Palestinians and Israelis, fully equality for everyone in this land, and true

social, economic and environmental justice.'

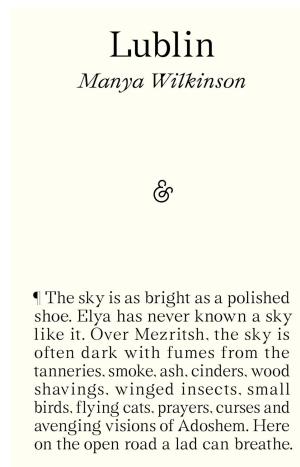
- **Parents Circle Families Forum**, which brings together Israelis and Palestinians who, having lost family members in the conflict, are dedicated to mutual cooperation and peace.
- **Combatants for Peace**, 'a group of Palestinians and Israelis who have taken an active part in the cycle of violence', and who work together 'on the basis of non-violence principles.'

• **EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East**, which is based in Bethlehem, Amman and Tel Aviv, and takes 'a leading role in peacebuilding through grassroots efforts undertaken through dialogue, confidence building and cooperation activities focused on actual crossborder resources that could directly benefit people.'

Books

Manya Wilkinson's *Lublin* (2024)

Elaine Samuel



¶ The sky is as bright as a polished shoe. Elys has never known a sky like it. Over Mezritsh, the sky is often dark with fumes from the tanneries. smoke, ash, cinders, wood shavings, winged insects, small birds, flying cats, prayers, curses and avenging visions of Adoshem. Here on the open road a lad can breathe.

I don't normally like to talk in terms of favourites. But then along comes Manya Wilkinson's *Lublin* and I'm smitten. For making this *shiddukh*, thanks go to Maria Chamberlain who in turn was introduced to *Lublin* by a personal friend, the critic Neel Mukherjee. In his *New Statesman* review of the best books of 2024, Mukherjee writes that *Lublin* was the best novel he'd read that year: "Part

picaresque, part boys' adventure story... this funny and devastating novel is lucid, beautiful and utterly original... Where has this author been hiding all these years?" Or, as Ian Sansom taunts in the *TLS*, "This is a mini masterpiece... if you find a finer novel this year —honestly, seriously?—well lucky you."

From my admittedly limited viewpoint, Manya Wilkinson burst onto the UK book scene

last year a complete unknown. A writer who drops proper *ekht* Yiddish into the text with all the naturalness and comfort of someone who drank Sholem Aleichem at her mother's breast and who lives less than a hundred miles from us?! A writer whose knowledge and understanding of shtetl life and its customs and practices in the Pale of Settlement before World War 1 provide the reader with the most authentic of experiences? And who hints into her narrative as to the future of that world thirty years hence with a sensitivity and brutality that never touches on the maudlin? Who is Manya? What is she?

We found the answer to some of these questions in November when Manya spoke at the New College Festival of Books and Belief, jointly sponsored by New College, The Lit, EJCC and the Netherlee & Clarkston Charitable Trust. She is a New Yorker and, yes, she considers Yiddish to be her *mameloshn*, her first language. Her love for it was cultivated by her grandfather, a

farbrenter Yiddishist. She took up a lectureship in prose and scriptwriting at the University of Newcastle after arriving in England. *Lublin* is her second novel, published 34 years after her first, *Ocean Avenue*, which points in the direction of her Brooklyn heritage. Had I the *chutzpah*, I might have asked what took her so long. It was certainly not for want of excellent reviews in 1991.

From her talk, it was clear that Manya had nursed and nurtured *Lublin* over a long period. This is evidenced not just by the years it took in the making, but also by the novel's carefully hewed structure, its finely crafted narrative, its painstakingly attentive research and its sensitively executed characterisation of three Jewish adolescents on a journey to Lublin in Poland at the beginning of the last century.

It is 1907 and the three are walking from their home in Mezritsh, known today as Miedzyrzec Podlaski, which is no longer the shtetl where over 84% of its 12,000 population

was once Jewish and whose claim to fame was the manufacture of bristles and brushes. The mission of the three friends is to sell this merchandise in Lublin, a centre of commerce, and thereby make their fortune.

The boys are quite different, almost prototypes of the options open to Jewish boys in the Pale, though Manya denied that this was her intention. There is Ziv, a pint-sized Trotsky. There is Kiva, a *yeshiva bokher* (“with a prodigious knowledge of the Holy Land—if only he had known as much about Poland”). And lastly there’s Elya, the entrepreneur among them. Who knows what his future might have been? Would his entrepreneurial spirit have taken him by boat to New York in his youth? Or would his success at home have weighed him down so that when he did eventually leave Mezritsh in his late middle age, it would be by train headed for Treblinka?

Narrated in the present tense, *Lublin* is scattered with dark conjectures as to the future. But it is also great fun to read because it is suffused with Jewish jokes and Yiddish phrases that your grandmother might never have dared share with you. As for her own grandmother, Manya revealed at her talk in Edinburgh that the *bobe* was actually from Mezritsh and that during Manya’s childhood in Brooklyn, she passed on to her granddaughter an ever-living presence of the life and times of the shtetl into which she had been born. It was this that Manya wanted to pass on to a general readership. She has succeeded admirably.

In 2024 the judges of the Wingate Prize (a prize awarded to the writer who best stimulates an interest in areas of Jewish concern while appealing to the general public) wholeheartedly agreed. Reader, she won.

***Lublin* is published by And Other Stories.**

Film

Palestine 36 (2025)

Leo Kaminski



Palestine 36 is a historical drama written and directed by Palestinian filmmaker Annemarie Jacir. The film is set in Mandatory Palestine during the late 1930s, and follows events during the Arab general strike and uprising against the British administration, along with the British response in the form of the Peel

Commission, the resulting 1937 partition plan, and violent suppression of the Arab population.

Rather than following any single story closely, we are shown snapshots in the lives of Arab and British characters from different parts of Palestinian society during certain pivotal events, with the action moving between

Jerusalem and a nearby village. This loose, fluid narrative evokes the feeling that we are witnessing a collection of disordered memories in the wake of great turmoil. At the same time, the film is grounded by ever-present tension and mounting violence; the latter is intermittent at first then becomes sustained and almost unbearable to watch. To capture so much of these complex events in just two hours, the film is concise with dialogue that gets to the point quickly and occasionally verges on being heavy-handed.

However, this may not be a bad thing for viewers who, like myself, are less familiar with this period of history and need help to digest such a large amount of new information. The earliest scenes introduce Yusuf (Karim Daoud Anaya), a young man from a farming community who has found work as an assistant for the wealthy editor of a magazine in Jerusalem. His trajectory from a relatively privileged position to one that is outside the law —

despite his passivity and desire to avoid confrontation — demonstrates the legal precariousness of the Arab villagers, and the way that their dignity and personal safety is constantly threatened by the shifting policies of the colonial administration. The role of women in both peaceful and armed rebellion, along with varied attitudes to them from Arab and British men, is explored at length via the film's many female characters: especially through the contrasting but complementary stories of Khuloud (Yasmine Al Massri), an upper-class woman who writes for her husband's magazine under a male name, and Afra (Wardi Eilabouni), a young girl growing up in a rural village. Hiam Abbass' performance, in the role of Afra's grandmother Hanan, is particularly moving. British characters sometimes risk coming across as cartoonishly evil; depending on your perspective, this either undercuts their believability or makes for an accurate portrayal of colonial rule. For

example, I wondered if the sadistic Christian Zionist Captain Orde Wingate (Robert Aramayo) was too on-the-nose to ever have been a real person. It turns out that I was wrong: this man actually existed, and he seems to have been exactly as vicious and destructive as depicted.

Interestingly, the film contains very little depiction of Jewish characters. While tensions between Jewish settlers and Arabs drive the film forward (almost entirely off-screen), the action is completely focused on Arab characters and their interactions with British colonial forces. I was initially unsure how to feel about this obviously purposeful omission; I am inclined now to see it as a delineation of the scope of this narrative, and an acknowledgement of its own subjectivity. This is a Palestinian film, made by a Palestinian Arab filmmaker who set out to communicate the experiences of Palestinian Arabs. For the film to include a Jewish perspective with any

authenticity, it would have required becoming something else entirely — and would have stretched an already ambitious project to breaking point.

Moreover, this conspicuous absence has its own part to play. It highlights the divisions between the Arab and Jewish populations: from physical separations between Jewish settlements and Arab villages to the asymmetrical treatment of workers by the British government. It also keeps the spotlight on the role that the British imperial project, along with European antisemitism, played in creating the conditions for the ongoing conflict between the two peoples. Towards the end of the film, a tumultuous meeting between colonial officials plainly lays out the fact that it was in British interests to encourage these divisions if they hoped to maintain power in the region. Amidst comparisons to colonial India and Ireland, the situation is put succinctly: "If we cannot keep them apart and show them who is in control, they

will eat us alive".

Palestine 36 offers an incisive look at the catastrophic effects of dispossession, state-sponsored violence and the erosion of legal rights of the Arab population of Mandatory Palestine. More than this, it emphasises the complete abdication of responsibility from authority figures for the suffering happening under their watch, which itself stems from the refusal to treat Arab lives as worthy of protection. While it makes for valuable viewing to fill in some overlooked parts of British history, I found that the real importance of this film is in the challenge it poses to me as a viewer (in particular, as a

British Jew). After all, a large part of the injustice in these events lies in a refusal to accept responsibility for them: and I am a member of communities that have benefited from the colonisation of Palestine. Several urgent questions arise: what form can justice possibly take in this context, nearly ninety years on from Lord Peel's partition plan? Where should it come from? And what can I do to work towards it?

***Palestine 36* is available to stream on Curzon Home Cinema and other streaming platforms.**

Food

Osh Savo: Old Flavours of Bukhara

Rolando Trapero



Take a step back and think about the King of Kings, the King of the Four Corners of the World. I'm not talking about Hashem, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. I'm talking about Cyrus the Great, a legendary historical king of Persia, who was known by these lofty titles. As part of his many achievements, he conquered

Babylonia and allowed the Jewish community in his empire to return to Judea after being exiled. We obviously regarded him very positively for this, and, in a rare move for ancient empires, the Achaemenid king even commissioned the rebuilding of the Temple!

But there's a detail we don't

always linger on: not everyone went back. Some Jews stayed behind in the Persian world, and, over centuries, Jewish life was spread across Central Asia too. One of the best-known communities that emerged from that long history is the Bukharan Jewish community, named for Bukhara in today's Uzbekistan. Many Bukharan Jews now live primarily in Israel and the United States, but their culture has remained distinct. You might know Bukharan Jews best from what is clearly the best of all *kippah* designs: they're comfortable and unapologetically stylish!

More importantly to my stomach though, Bukharan Jewish food is fantastic. Like the surrounding Uzbek, Tajik, Afghan, and other Central Asian cuisines, it emphasizes fragrant rice, dried fruits, spiced savoury meats, tandoor-baked breads, and generous presentation. And of course, like Jewish communities everywhere, Shabbat is a weekly excuse to cook something that says "we made it, we're together, we're

celebrating".

So it's my pleasure to introduce you to a Bukharan Shabbat classic: Osh Savo, a slow cooked rice and meat stew with dried fruit and warm spices, made for overnight cooking.

A quick note about this particular version: I've tried to keep it pre-Columbian Exchange, meaning I avoided ingredients that only entered the Old World after 1492. That's not to claim Bukharan Jews didn't later use those foods (like everyone, they did), but to highlight how naturally this dish sits within an older and distinctive Central Asian cuisine. Bukharan Jewish cooking is already rich in the flavours that build a Shabbat pot: onions and garlic for savoury depth, rice for substance, dried fruit for sweetness, all held together by slow cooking and time.

If you'd like a wine with it, I'd go for an off-dry white for example Vouvray demi-sec (one of my favourites) or an off-dry Riesling because a little sweetness matches the

apricots/prunes while the acidity keeps the dish feeling lively. If you prefer the reds, choose something mild and juicy like a Gamay/Beaujolais or a lighter Grenache/Pinot Noir.

Ingredients

(for Dutch oven or large, heavy casserole with tight-fitting lid,

Serves 8 or so)

- 1 kg beef chuck/short rib/brisket/shin, 3-4 cm cubes
- 4 tbsp oil of your choice
- 3 large yellow onions, chopped
- 6 garlic cloves, sliced
- 2 carrots, chopped
- 1 large seeded apple, chopped
- 200g dried pitted apricots
- 200g pitted prunes
- 2.5-3 tbsp pomegranate molasses
- 500g parboiled long-grain rice (sometimes called “easy cook long grain”)
- ~2.8 to ~3L water (depending how hot your oven runs, pot lid tightness, etc. but keep some water ready in case it goes too dry)
- 1 tbsp kosher/any large-

grained salt or to taste

- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1.5 tsp ground coriander powder
- 1.5 tsp ground ginger powder
- 1.5 tsp ground turmeric powder
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 1/4 tsp nigella seeds

Recipe

- Add everything except the water to the cold Dutch oven.
- Stir thoroughly to distribute evenly.
- Add the water.
- Oven (no fan) 160C covered, 60 min
- Turn down to 110C covered, 7 hours. (Total = 8 hours)
- Feel free to quickly check water levels a few hours in.
- Rest 15 min outside the oven.
- Stir gently from the bottom to mix it up.
- Taste and add salt if needed.
- Serve it as-is or with chopped fresh herbs (parsley, dill, and coriander), a sharp salad or pickles to cut the richness, and plenty of challah.

Folk Stories

Rachel the Clever

Introduced and illustrated by Samara Leibner



This classic tale from Poland appeared in Y.L. Cahan's collection of stories, *דיישע פֿאַלְקָסְמָעַשְׁיָוָת* (*Jewish Folktales*), published in Vilna in 1931.

This is more than a rags-to-riches story. In Poland/Lithuania in the early modern period, Christians were heavily discouraged from selling alcohol, though not from buying or drinking it. Jews were banned from owning land or weapons, joining trade

guilds, or pursuing higher education, so their options were limited. There was also, for some reason, a local belief that Jews did not drink alcohol. As a result, the job of innkeeper was a characteristically Jewish one, and was consequently very low on the social hierarchy. Innkeepers and their families were not just working-class, they were considered criminals and a social evil.

This story is a fantasy of

meritocracy. The daughter of an innkeeper uses her personal qualities of cleverness, courage, and sincerity to overcome the barriers placed on her because of her ethnicity, social class and gender and to achieve a position she is shown to deserve and use wisely. Rachel becoming a queen is a symbol of the ultimate social acceptance. Even so, earning the wise, handsome young king's personal respect as an equal, and as a voice worth listening to, in spite of her background is presented as the true prize.

As the story goes, a proud and handsome young king vowed he would only marry a woman as clever as he was. One day, he met a Jewish innkeeper who told the king that his daughter, Rachel, was so clever that she could solve any riddle. The king was intrigued by this, and told the innkeeper that if Rachel could answer a riddle, he would marry her, but if she could not answer, the innkeeper would

lose his inn as punishment for lying to the king.

The riddle was this: "What is the fastest thing? What is the richest thing? What is the dearest thing?"

Rachel smiled, and answered quickly: "Thought is the fastest thing, the life-giving Earth is the richest thing, and love is the dearest thing."

The king, impressed with her cleverness (and her beauty), eventually overcame his pride and married her, even though she was a commoner. However, as the king was still very proud, the marriage was predicated on the condition that Rachel would never disagree with any of the judgments the king made in court.

All was well and good until Rachel disagreed with a ruling the king had made regarding the ownership of a horse. The king, angered at her going against him, told her that she must leave his palace immediately. Because he loved her still, the king offered one consolation, that Rachel was allowed to bring her dearest

possession with her when she left.

That night, Rachel slipped a sleeping potion into the king's wine. Once he had fallen into a deep sleep, she arranged to sneak him out of the palace and into the nearby woods, where she stayed with him until he awoke.

"Where am I?" the king asked, finding himself in a field instead of in his royal

bed."Why am I here?"

Rachel smiled and answered, "You told me I could take my dearest possession with me. That, my love, is you."

The king forgot his pride and asked for his wife's forgiveness, vowing that he would always listen to her when making future decisions.

And, as couples in fairy tales tend to do, they lived happily ever after.

Etrog

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Each writer that mentioned Chanukah spelt its transliteration differently. In the interest of diversity we've left them like that. How many have you spotted?—*Ed.*

