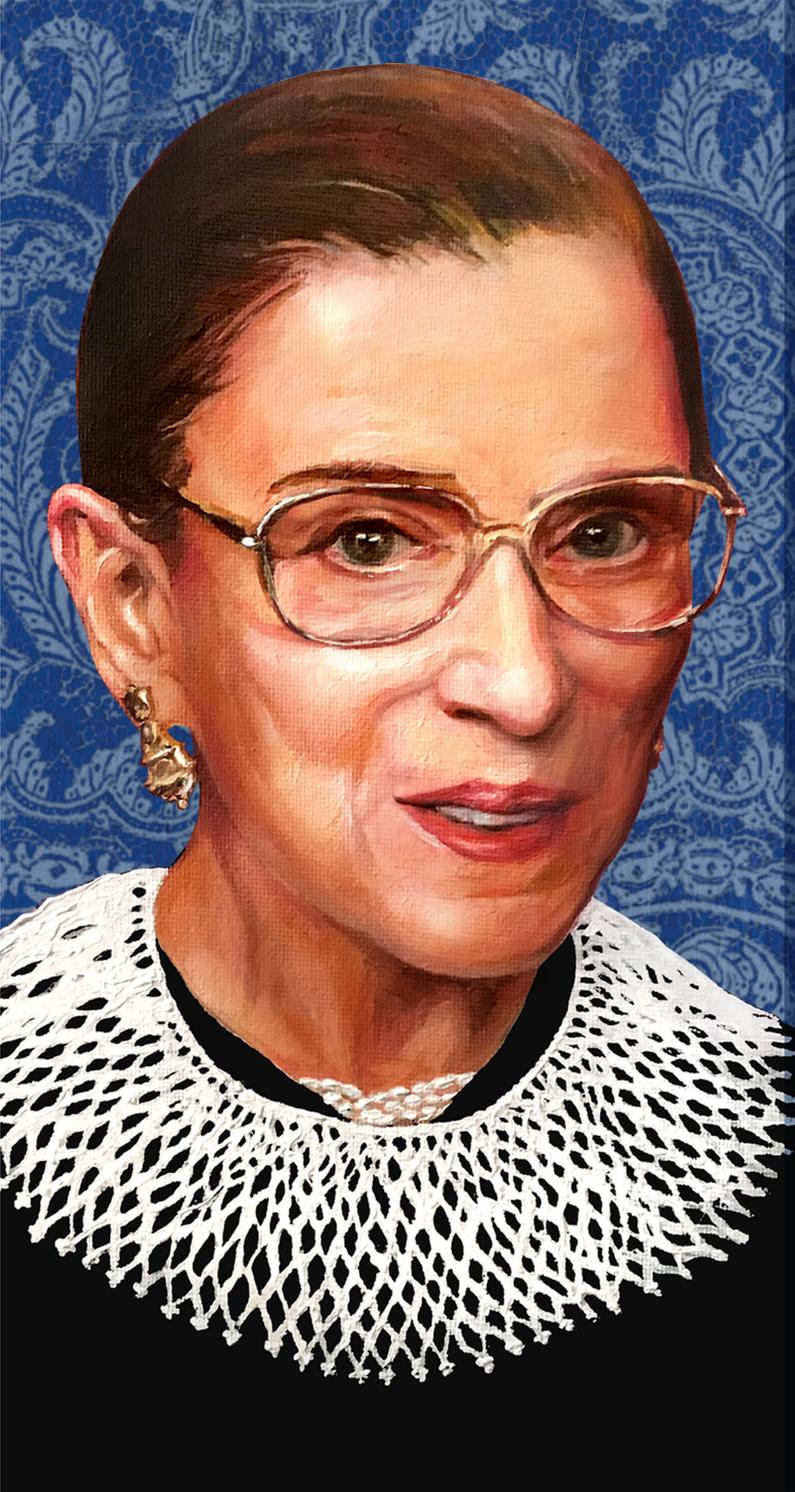


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Culture

For America, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a new kind of Jew

By Talya Zax

In 1852, the Kentucky politician Henry Clay became the first person to lie in state under the United States Capitol Rotunda.

A skilled liaison between political opposites, Clay favored abolition and inspired Abraham Lincoln. But through his life, he was also an enslaver who enforced his supposed right to own people as property, even as he decried slavery as “a grievous wrong.” Since Clay, the tradition of lying in state has served as both a totem of the country’s drive toward progress and its reluctance to address its greatest failings. The congressmen John Lewis and Elijah Cummings, both civil rights heroes, lay in state. So did former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who built a national security apparatus that routinely violated civil liberties.

On Friday, Ruth Bader Ginsburg will become the first woman, the first Jew and only the second Supreme Court Justice to lie in state at the Capitol. It will make a meaningful final appearance for the late jurist. Having spent much of her life fighting to open doors historically barred to those who were not white Christian men, she will be a pioneer for her gender and religion in death as in life, serving, in the mixed tradition of the honor, as proof of both progress and that progress’s incompleteness. And in a quieter, no less momentous way, the occasion will be the culmination of a process by which Ginsburg, first as a judge and then as a pop culture icon, remade American ideas of Jewishness, turning her background from a perceived impediment to a marker to be celebrated and respected.

How did the girl from Flatbush pull it off?

The short answer: The same way she did everything – through hard work.

“Ginsburg grew up in this very Jewish world, where your

identity was shaped not just by your family or by your beliefs, but also by the neighborhood, by the high school, by the milieu of New York City and its politics,” said Deborah Dash Moore, professor of history at the University of Michigan. Then Ginsburg left Brooklyn for Cornell, where, suddenly, being Jewish put her in the minority – as did being a woman. Through Ginsburg’s years at college and law school, and in the earliest period of her career, Moore said, the future justice became “really conscious of what it means to be a woman, and what it means to be a Jew, what it means to not be welcome in certain places.”

As Ginsburg’s sense of the injustice of that exclusion sharpened, she began a systematic fight for gender equality. “I think one has to recognize, especially in the late ’60s and ’70s when she’s pressing the cases she brings to the Supreme Court for equality, these are also cases, implicitly, about a Jew arguing for equality for everybody,” Moore said.

The Supreme Court made a poignant stage for that argument. Historically, it had been the branch of the federal government in which Jews made the greatest impact. The 1930s-era justice Louis Brandeis, the first Jew to sit on the Supreme Court, had become firmly enshrined as one of the institution’s greatest jurists; his successors, including Benjamin Cardozo and Felix Frankfurter, were powerful legal thinkers who had made themselves central to the institution. But antisemitism had followed all of them, particularly Brandeis, on their paths to the highest court in the land. Brandeis’s progressivism already set him up for a bitter confirmation battle, but, as his fellow justice William O. Douglas wrote in 1964, “The fears of the Establishment were greater because Brandeis was the first Jew to be named to the Court.”

Brandeis, a campaigner for the rights of those to whom

the country had often denied basic dignities, was Ginsburg's judicial model. But the form of Judaism she brought to the court was substantially different from his. Where he was highly assimilated and fond of Biblical references that appealed to Jews and Christians alike – he was sometimes referred to as “The Greatest Jew in the World Since Jesus Christ” – she was an unabashed Brooklyn Jew. There was no masking it, and she didn't try. “She never couched the fact of her having been born and raised a Jew as anything other than central to who she was,” said Hasia Diner, professor of American Jewish history at New York University. “She spoke and wrote and performed her Jewishness in an unembarrassed way.”

But Ginsburg's experience of Judaism was complicated, changed forever by the fact that when her mother died during her teenage years, the community in which she was raised hadn't allowed her to join a *minyan* to say Kaddish. So while her Jewishness was apparent in every part of her persona, from her accent to her favored cultural references, she had more in common with the secularized Jewish women who defined second-wave feminism than the Jewish men who preceded her on the court. And when she stood in the court as a lawyer, arguing the cases by which she methodically advocated for women's equality with men, she was bridging the gap between those male predecessors and her feminist peers.

In doing so, she established an expansive vision of equality, one that set the stage for the ways in which she reshaped and expanded America's idea of what it meant to be Jewish.

Like the Jewish women whose fierce organizing had shaped the labor movement, Diner said, Ginsburg showed up to her fight “in the context of bringing greater justice to the world.” In a world where antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as an insular group only interested in their own advancement abounded, “everybody was within her scope.” But because Ginsburg was herself so absolutely Jewish, for those who followed her work – by the end of her life, much of the country – she helped form an instinctive bond, in the minds of the public, between Judaism and the quest for social justice.

“I think that she introduced non-Jewish Americans to a kind of Jew with whom they could identify,” said Moore, “because they shared her politics, because she was quirky and funny, and that meant that they saw Judaism in a more diverse kind of way.”

“I think by the very nature of what she did, she had, in a way, blown stereotypes out of the water,” Diner said. “People who want to hold onto the stereotypical images would hold on to it no matter what,” she said, but “having said that, I think in [their] very nature her actions were a real challenge to that kind of thinking.”

But just as Brandeis paved the way for the Jewish justices who followed him, the success Ginsburg found in shifting American ideas about Judaism remains evident on today's Supreme Court. Ginsburg found a natural successor in Elena Kagan, appointed by President Obama in 2010, said Dahlia Lithwick, a Supreme Court reporter for Slate.

Both Ginsburg and Kagan, Lithwick said, “challenged Jewish orthodoxy as teenagers.” Both, seeing the inequality in the communities in which they grew up, were driven to fight inequality in the broader world. In the 2013 case *Town of Greece vs. Galloway*, which centered on the question of whether a small town violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment by reading a prayer from Christian liturgy at town meetings – the court decided it did not – Lithwick recalled that Ginsburg gave Kagan the dissenting opinion.

Ginsburg had known from the start that the younger justice, like her, had an implicit understanding of what the nation owed those who continued to be, in some fundamental way, outsiders. And once she read Kagan's full-throated defense of religious freedom – as Kagan called it, “the breathtakingly generous constitutional idea that our public institutions belong no less to the Buddhist or Hindu than to the Methodist or Episcopalian” – she must have known, as well, her work would be carried on.

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Talya Zax is the Forward's deputy culture editor. Follow her on Twitter, @TalyaZax.

News

Zoom, Facebook and YouTube cancel Leila Khaled, setting precedent

By Rob Eshman and Stewart Ain

Something remarkable, maybe even historic, happened when Palestinian terrorist Leila Khaled appeared live via YouTube – the site knocked her off.

Just 22 minutes into a long-planned Sept. 23 seminar featuring Khaled, the transmission abruptly stopped and a message appeared against a black screen: “This video is unavailable.”

Those four words capped an intense, weeks-long battle over Khaled’s appearance on a panel sponsored by San Francisco State University. As opponents finally convinced one tech platform – Zoom – not to host the panel, organizers scrambled to Facebook, only to be blocked there too. Finally they flipped to YouTube, where the company took them off one channel, then knocked them off again when they popped up on another.

In the end, opponents declared a victory not just against Khaled, but for the very idea that Big Tech has the right – and the responsibility – to limit speech on its platforms.

“Today was an important day,” said Jonathan Greenblatt, chief executive officer of the Anti-Defamation League. “Three of the most prominent brands in Silicon Valley stepped forward and said, ‘Enough. We don’t want our brands associated with this kind of bigotry. We don’t want our products to give voice to people who have snuffed out the voices of other people.’”

Whether the move means Zoom, Facebook and YouTube will work harder to referee the messages and people that appear on their platforms remains to be seen. The decision may also backfire on the very groups claiming victory.

“By taking this action Zoom is saying they do bear a responsibility for the content on their platform,” said

Suzanne Nossel, chief executive officer of PEN America and author of “Dare to Speak: Defending Free speech for All.” “Is that something they’re willing to take on?”

Nossel said that while Facebook and YouTube have standards for content – imperfectly and sometimes reluctantly applied – Zoom, at least until now, seemed to operate more like a video equivalent of a phone company.

“There’s no liability on the part of Verizon if you engage in conspiratorial action over the phone,” she said. “This seems to blur the line that Zoom would have potential culpability. I’m surprised that’s the direction the company wants to go in In.”

Nossel made clear she was not addressing the validity of the concerns over Khaled, but the larger issue over free speech and new technologies. Who’s to say, asked Nossel, that in the future, pressure won’t be applied to Zoom and similar companies to prevent seminars on abortion, or in favor of Israel, or any number of controversial subjects?

“People may try to exploit this for causes they disagree with,” she said.

The ADL sees it differently. It has been working with the NAACP and other groups in the #StopHateforProfit coalition to pressure platforms to take stronger measures against hate speech and other misuses.

“Zoom has the right to choose,” said Greenblatt. “It’s not just a medium. These are platforms.”

In any case, Greenblatt said, canceling an appearance by a convicted terrorist and wanted fugitive is a low bar when it comes to policing content.

“It sets a precedent that some ideas are not in bounds,” said Greenblatt.

Khaled is a senior member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. In 1969, she hijacked a TWA flight, later blowing up the front of the plane. A year later she was captured during a foiled attempt to hijack an El Al flight.

She was scheduled to be the featured speaker at a virtual discussion titled “Whose Narratives? Gender, Justice and Resistance,” organized by SFSU’s Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas Studies department. University President Lynn Mahoney said in a statement defending the panel that she condemns anti-Semitism and “other hateful ideologies that marginalize people based on their identities, origins or beliefs,” but is also convinced that a public university is “committed to academic freedom ... and scholarship without censorship.”

As soon as publicity for the event went out in late August, Jewish groups attempted to persuade Zoom not to play host.

The Lawfare Project argued to the university and Zoom that Khaled’s appearance at the event would be a violation of American law.

In a letter to the U.S. Department of Justice, an attorney with The Lawfare Project wrote that providing Khaled with a platform to speak to college students “may give rise to violations” that make it “unlawful to provide material support or resources to a foreign terrorist organization.” Khaled is a senior member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization.

One of the organizers of the program, Rabab Abdulhadi, wrote in an email to those who had registered for the Zoom program that “Zoom has threatened to cancel this webinar and silence Palestinian narratives. We expect SFSU/CSU to uphold our freedom of speech and academic freedom by providing an alternative venue to this open classroom.”

On Sept. 22, a day before the planned event, the Lawfare Project joined with other groups demonstrating outside of Zoom’s San Jose, California offices to protest plans to use Zoom for the program. The groups, including the ADL, SFSU Hillel and Shield of

David, joined under the name #EndJewHatred.

Zoom later issued a statement to the Lawfare Project saying Khaled’s “reported affiliation or membership in a U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization” was a violation of Zoom’s Terms of Service.

In an email to the campus community Sept. 23, Mahoney wrote that the university “disagrees with and [is] disappointed by Zoom’s decision not to allow the event to proceed on its platform.”

“Zoom’s cancelation of the event will be deeply wounding to some members of our community who will feel themselves and their dissent silenced once again, just as the participation of Leila Khaled in a class panel discussion is deeply wounding to others in our community. We cannot embrace the silencing of controversial views, even if they are hurtful to others.”

Zoom’s last-minute cancellation sent the organizers to Facebook Live, which turned them down as well.

Gerard Filitti, senior counsel for the Lawfare Project, said his organization “contacted counsel at all of the major platforms to advise them” that the university was planning to use its platform for its program and that “this was a violation of the law and they could face criminal penalties for hosting it.”

He said organizers “waited until the last minute to try to sneak it in onto Youtube.”

When YouTube took down the initial transmission, the group switched to another channel. YouTube shut down that transmission as well.

Judging by live comments during the program, of the 987 viewers who tuned in, many were opposed to it.

Khaled appeared as one of the panelists on screen but remained silent as a professor introduced her and the program at length. The program was shut down before her turn came to speak.

Life

His mother died and I never called. Can I fix this?

By Shira Telushkin

Dear Bintel,

At Rosh Hashanah services this year I saw a friend I hadn't seen in a long time, and we joyfully caught up in the hallway, like old times. My synagogue had a well-organized indoor service with social distancing, and it was SO nice to spontaneously see friends again!! But then as I walked away, I realized with a gasp that I had never called this friend when their mother died earlier this year. The shiva was a Zoom shiva right around when my state started shutting down, and with all the craziness going on we just...never followed up, my husband and I. This person is the kindest, most gracious human, and I'm sure they would be nice about the lapse, but I feel awful.

How do I call now and apologize? It really was a crazy time, with the pandemic and some things going on with my children, and I want to let them know how sorry I am that I didn't reach out. His mother used to sit a few rows behind me in synagogue, and I remember her with so much fondness. And now before Yom Kippur, I have to do something, right?

Signed,

Friend From [Too] Afar

Dear Afar,

You should definitely call to follow up, but not to apologize. Instead, you should deliver the condolence call you never made.

This person lost their mother, and I'm sure it would be nice to hear from someone who has fond memories of their mom, especially during the holidays. You can give one or two sentences of context, for sure, but don't make your guilt the focus point of the conversation. That would just result in them comforting you for feeling bad, instead of you comforting them for their loss!

Given the feelings of mutual friendship, a simple,

“David! I am so sorry I didn't reach out when your mother died. Sam and I were keeping you in our hearts, but somehow with everything going on we didn't reach out, and I feel awful. But I was so sorry to hear the news. Your mother meant so much to me...” would be totally appropriate. And then focus on your memories of the mother, and why you miss her in synagogue, etc.

The High Holidays are a natural time to reach out to old friends, so don't let this opportunity slip by. The call, from everything you've written here, will be appreciated, and it is the right thing to do. But make it about the mother, and not about your guilt.

Shira Telushkin lives in Brooklyn, where she writes on religion, fashion, and culture for a variety of publications. She is currently finishing a book on monastic intrigue in modern America. Got a question? Send it to bintel@forward.com.

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News

High turnout at virtual Rosh Hashanah leaves rabbis relieved, but money woes persist

By Irene Connelly

Mishkan, a congregation in Chicago, registered 2,500 guests for Rosh Hashanah services, compared to 1,900 last year.

At B'nai Jeshurun in New York, a slate of virtual Rosh Hashanah offerings drew about 10,000 users, three times the number of members and guests the synagogue hosts in a typical year.

Although it's too soon to say exactly how many Jews attended virtual services, some synagogues experienced even higher turnout than they did last year – defying the widespread conviction that online services couldn't match the spiritual experience congregants enjoy in normal years. But that doesn't mean their worries are over: Many synagogues depend on money raised during the High Holidays, and online services may not attract the same level of financial support.

"A lot of people, including rabbis, were worried that it was going to feel inauthentic or strange," said Rabbi Hara Person, the chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. "It certainly was strange, but I think people were surprised at how real it felt."

Representatives from the Reform and Reconstructionist movements said that participation in services during Rosh Hashanah bodes well for Yom Kippur, and built on a trend of robust attendance throughout the pandemic.

To be sure, both B'nai Jeshurun and Mishkan are large, relatively well-known congregations. Not all synagogues experienced such high turnout. Hinenu: The Baltimore Justice Shtiebl, saw attendance dip slightly, with 207 registrants compared to 230 the year before.

And not everyone feels comfortable weighing in on the

question of Rosh Hashanah attendance yet. Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, CEO of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, said it was too early to judge.

Virtual worship didn't hit the spot for everyone. Ariella Rohr, 31, said she cried throughout the first night of services at her Reform synagogue, Temple Israel of Omaha, Neb. Rohr balanced holiday observance with caring for her toddler, and it was difficult to feel connected or reflective from her living room.

"There's nothing the clergy could have done to fix that," she said. "This just isn't how High Holidays are supposed to be."

Still, many smaller synagogues reported enthusiastic attendance, despite the fact that some did not make services available to the public and were therefore unlikely to attract unaffiliated Jews searching online last-minute for a service.

Congregation Beth Tikvah, a Conservative synagogue in Marlton, N.J. with 255 member families, saw 260 families register for High Holiday services. Rabbi Nathan Weiner was especially surprised by high turnout on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, which doesn't usually draw crowds.

"People told me they didn't know what to expect and liked it, so they came back," he said.

Kol Ami, a Reform Congregation in Kirkland, Wash. whose sanctuary accommodates a maximum of 225 people for in-person worship, broadcast Zoom services to over 400 people. Rabbi Yohanna Kinberg said that some participants submitted membership applications before services even ended.

There are likely several factors behind the figures rabbis reported. Some large congregations, B'nai Jeshurun among them, that would normally charge

non-members for High Holiday tickets made live-streamed services available free of charge. Person also noted that the option to worship from home might have made attendance easier and more appealing for young parents, seniors with limited mobility, and busy professionals.

Deborah Waxman, the president of Reconstructing Judaism, saw a spiritual significance in the numbers. “I deeply believe the existential nature of the pandemic has contributed to a religious revival,” she said. “Those of us who have been really protected from life-or-death questions are facing them in a way that our ancestors did. [People] are looking for religious answers and the solace of community.”

For Howard and Barbara Herman, 71, longtime members of Temple Beth-El in Great Neck, N.Y., a High Holiday season at home was a break from years of tradition – but one they ultimately enjoyed. They appreciated that their clergy, who went “all-out” in designing a slate of online offerings, addressed the pandemic by inviting the congregation’s essential workers – including teachers, doctors, nurses and EMTs – to pre-record the blessings called *aliyot* over the summer.

After months without seeing friends in person, Howard said, “it was a beautiful thing to see them honored in that way.”

Some found that virtual services provided opportunities that in-person ones simply can’t.

“We were split into small breakout rooms during my rabbi’s *d’var Torah* to reflect, support and share with each other in a way that wouldn’t have been possible in a huge room with echoing acoustics,” said Davinica Nemtzow, a congregant at Mishkan Shalom, a Reconstructionist synagogue in Philadelphia.

Yet most synagogues, even those seeing high levels of attendance, are facing tremendous financial pressure as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Some, like Brooklyn’s Congregation Beth Elohim, set up “emergency stabilization funds” to compensate for lost revenue.

Past economic crashes have had devastating effects on synagogue life: Historian Jonathan Sarna estimated

that the Reform movement lost 20% of its members after the 2008 financial crisis.

Karla Goldman, a professor of Judaic Studies and Social Work at the University of Michigan, cautioned that high turnout and even creative virtual services won’t automatically translate into financial stability for synagogues.

In fact, Goldman said, even if virtual worship is drawing in Jews who might not have attended before, the increasing availability of live-streamed services from well-known synagogues could actually discourage them from investing in the congregations in their own communities.

“Synagogues have found they can move online, but does that mean there’s a guarantee of membership in the future?” Goldman said. “We don’t know.”

Person said that synagogues live-streaming their services free of charge are “getting savvier in terms of asking people who just drop in to donate” – for example, by placing a donation button next to a livestream.

And while traditional High Holiday fundraisers, like the sale of reserved seats or parking spots, aren’t possible this year, some synagogues are adapting their appeals to the virtual era. The Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore, a congregation in Long Island, asked congregants to chip in for cardboard cutouts of themselves, which were stationed in the sanctuary during virtual services.

Ultimately, Goldman said, synagogues that want to convert high attendance into long-term support must emphasize what they can offer beyond services.

“The thing synagogues have to do is say, ‘We’re offering meaningful community in a way that streaming online can never do,’” she said.

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Irene Katz Connelly is an editorial fellow at the Forward. You can contact her at connelly@forward.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@katz_conn](https://twitter.com/@katz_conn).

Culture

An extraordinary yearning to understand a father's life

By Julia M. Klein

Finding My Father: His Century-Long Journey from World War I Warsaw and My Quest to Follow

By Deborah Tannen

Ballantine Books, 272 pages, \$28

You may know the Georgetown University sociolinguist Deborah Tannen from her groundbreaking 1990 examination of how gender impacts conversational styles, “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation.” Or from all the bestselling volumes that followed, analyzing American culture, work life, friendships, and family relationships through the prism of linguistics.

But Tannen’s latest book, “Finding My Father,” is something quite different and surprising: an accomplished, clear-eyed, and affecting memoir about a man who is at once ordinary and extraordinary.

A Polish Jewish immigrant from a large Hasidic clan in Warsaw, Eli Tannen led a sometimes difficult, decidedly nonlinear life. At age 6, he lost his father to tuberculosis. His mother, who ran a school in Poland, was emotionally and physically abusive. For all his native brilliance, he was able to practice his *métier* – as a lawyer – only after reaching middle age. He married a woman, Tannen’s mother, who was less than a soul mate, but whom he nevertheless loved. And he struggled, always, with regret.

So Tannen tells us, as she skillfully sifts and weighs both his memories and her own. Her elegant narrative, too, is nonlinear – more like a mosaic. “Finding My Father” incorporates abundant foreshadowing, long verbatim reminiscences of Eli Tannen’s life (till age 11) in Poland, his convoluted work history, and an intriguing digression about his extended family. It crescendos to the question that intrigues Tannen most: her father’s choice to marry Tannen’s mother, Dorothy, instead of

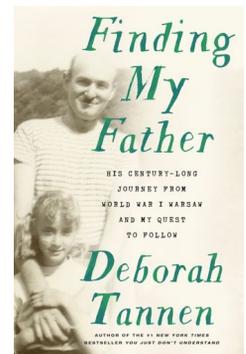
the pseudonymous Helen, with whom he shared a more obvious romantic connection.

The memoir’s intimacy is buttressed by many hours of taped interviews and a voluminous hoard of Eli Tannen’s personal papers, including two youthful journals and his correspondence with Helen. Tannen finds the letters beguiling and renders this judgment: “She’s contemplative, sensuous, thoughtful, playful – and she can write.”

Eli Tannen bequeathed the materials to Tannen, and wanted her to preserve his story – above all, his memories of early 20th-century Warsaw. “To me it’s not real unless it’s in the past,” he tells her. At one point, she asks whether he feels more American or more Polish. “I feel like a Jew,” he says.

Tannen’s drive to understand her father’s life (he died in 2006 at 97) stems in part from how much she missed him during her childhood. “A sense of yearning for him stayed with me long after I was grown,” she writes. Work preoccupied him. He’d dropped out of school at 14 to support his mother and sister, and, without attending college, earned a law degree in his 20s that he waited three decades to use. Stymied by the Great Depression, he instead took a variety of unlikely jobs, including prison guard, parole officer, alcohol tax inspector and garment cutter, while also dabbling in Liberal Party politics.

Surprisingly, the correctional gigs, for a minimum-security federal facility in Danbury, Connecticut, suited him, and he always lamented having left. He might well have been promoted to warden had he stayed. In time, with a boost from his wife’s income as an electrologist,



Penguin Random House

he was able to pursue a legal career, developing a successful workers' compensation practice.

The youngest of three sisters, Tannen describes herself as having been a rebellious and unhappy child. "Finding My Father" touches on her troubled relationship with her mother, which thawed later in life. In contrast to her father, her mother, who had emigrated from present-day Belarus, preferred not to talk about the past – and resented her husband for doing so obsessively. It remained a sore point in their marriage.

Tannen steps back at one point to unpack the unusual lives of her father's extended family. One of his maternal aunts, Dora, a mathematician and physicist, was reputed to have been Albert Einstein's lover, and, according to family lore, aborted their child. Another, Magda, a dedicated Communist, served prison time and later rose to a powerful position in Poland's post-World War II government. Tannen's father, too, was a Communist for a while, before becoming disillusioned, like many, by Stalin's 1939 pact with Hitler.

Tannen had always wondered whether her mother, who was the sister of her father's best friend and worked for a time in the same office, had manipulated him into marriage. But her father's journals changed her mind. They revealed that the attraction was mutual, if complicated. His wife-to-be was ubiquitous in his daily life – and their premarital sexual involvement likely sealed the deal.

As a young man, Tannen's father, who regarded himself as homely and undesirable, was hugely motivated by sex. But he had scruples, too. Despite Helen's charms, he declined her entreaties to consummate their relationship. The main reason seems to have been his erroneous belief that Helen was a virgin.

Both women "gambled with virginity," Tannen writes. "They just played the sex card differently. Helen hid the fact that she wasn't a virgin. My mother wasn't a virgin either, but she didn't hide it; she used it. My mother's was the gamble that paid off."

"Finding My Father" captures Eli Tannen's wry humor. It is also straightforward about his flaws, as well as the accretion of bad choices and misfortunes that shaped –

and misshaped – his life. But the memoir is burnished by filial love. Now permanently absent, the father remains deeply present for the daughter, not least in their shared affinity for language. Eli Tannen might have winced at his daughter's candor, but there's no doubt he would have admired this book.

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Julia M. Klein, the Forward's contributing book critic, has been a two-time finalist for the National Book Critics Circle's Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing. Follow her @JuliaMKlein

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Do talk politics with family this election

By Neal Brodsky

Watching the flames in California along with the destruction of lives and livelihoods in Kenosha, it suddenly hit me that we can either grow together or burn together. I say this as both a Holocaust-traumatized Jew and as a family therapist. Seeing fear in the faces of children most days in my practice on Zoom as they head back to school, I know that an assault weapon can end their lives sure as the peanut butter mom put on their bagel this morning. Because that's what happened 20 miles up the road from me in Newtown, Connecticut. And for me, it's too much to bear alone.

So yesterday I decided to end my coastal elite isolation and call my closest relative in Wisconsin. She's someone I love and feared as one of my family members who could vote me, and progressives like me, into a world where AK-47 toting teenagers rule the streets. God forbid. So, one hour before my scheduled Jewish Dems voter outreach, I picked up the phone to contact my only surviving first cousin. Republican or not, I know if armed vigilantes come for me in the night, I may need somewhere to escape. Enough of family separation. We need to talk.

To my relief, I found someone very much like me on the other end of the line. A human being who wants us all to have a plan, even though she's undecided on who to cast a ballot for.

Like me, my cousin loves cooking chicken soup for family. Visiting farmer's markets. Discovering new places in the world to travel (may it come to pass speedily and in our days). Together we share the memory of my dad, a World War II tank gunner who died 120 days ago at age 96, breath leaving his body from Covid-related grief and isolation. He had lived through times where the world also threatened to explode in flames. Where being a Jew meant you were stuck with a gun in some muddy trench thousands of miles from home or taken away at the point of a gun. We remember how the family split in 1938 between Russia and the Midwest as the KGB snuffed out

communication between Brodsky brothers and sisters who wanted to reunite and couldn't because the United States had shut the doors.

I spoke to my cousin about what scares me. My memory of the McCarthy Era where the parents of my friends couldn't work because of the blacklist that scooped up reform-minded Democrats like my parents, along with other progressives who dreamed the New Deal could last. Of the trenchcoated FBI on the other side of my fireproof steel front door. I was only 4 years old watching my mother rearing up to her full 4 foot eleven height, peering through the peephole. and telling the men to "get the f*** away from this door." How my sense of on television. I suggested we watch together. She safety skewed from that day on towards terror, even though the intruders left quietly, never to return again.

My cousin and I shared the words we so often say to each other: "I love you." And she offered another gift, reminding this frightened activist that my voter outreach calls have the most chance of influencing people I know in my immediate circle. In the glow of these moments, I took another risk and told my cousin that Billy Crystal, Mandy Patinkin, and Carol Kane would do a reunion film script reading of "The Princess Bride" to benefit the Wisconsin Democrats that night.

I couldn't watch because I would be calling Jewish voters in Minnesota. Maybe she would like to use my ticket? Turns out she loves Mandy Patinkin. So, I sent her the link. My cousin reminded me that Bob Woodward of "All the President's Men" fame would soon recount his recent conversations with the 45th male occupant of the White House said she'll take notes. We can fact check together. As our family call wound to a close, I knew in my heart that this step to reach out beyond a silence of my own making had borne sweet fruit. That my cousin and I would, God willing, continue to build our individual antidote to anxiety in these uncertain times.

In these days of electronic overload, of hiding out from well-meaning folks calling, reminding us to vote, consider the potential value of answering the call. Perhaps the person on the other end of the line has something to offer, a kind word or a chance to check in on how you're doing in these difficult times. It could be someone like me who cares so much they're willing to risk reaching out to a stranger. Or it could be a family member whose views are different. Someone your heart could touch to build a brighter future, one family member at a time.

A holistic psychotherapist, writer and activist based in the woods of Connecticut, Neal Brodsky's words can be found online at The Forward, The Times of Israel, on his WordPress Blog and in the upcoming International Handbook of Play Therapy.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.

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In Palestine, mastering my mother's riqaq o addas, homemade noodles and lentils

By Vivien Sansour

St. Nicholas is one of many saints adored in Beit Jala, my hometown.

His church, which is built atop the cave where he lived, has a golden dome that distinguishes Beit Jala from any other town in Palestine.

But across the street from Saint Nicolas is a more captivating place: A building that hosts a group of women who years ago decided to create a union to organize their different activities surrounding homemaking and children.

One could easily dismiss this place as just another initiative doing what women have been doing all their lives: cooking and taking care of children. But in the alleyways of this little town, St. Nicholas and its grandiose dome made far less an impact on me as a child compared to the place across the street, where the work of women filled my nose with aromas of fenugreek, sambosak, and cakes that I can still smell and taste.

With little interest in church ceremonies, I always found myself sneaking in the backdoor of the Women's Child Care Society to go sit in the kitchen and watch the women work miracles with their hands. Flour flew across the top of their elongated steel counters like pixie dust, turning into dough they played with and converted into small triangles of spinach filled pastries. Spinach, dandelion, and whatever wild greens were in season – they would lay them in small heaps onto the thinly rolled dough and gently wrap them into perfectly matched pockets.

How they managed to make them all look identical

is still a mystery to me. A grown woman, I have come to appreciate this place more and more as a visionary attempt by women, like my Aunt Salwa, who still runs the place, to claim their own space and to find their power in the thing they have declared full dominion over – the kitchen.

The kitchen was also my mother's queendom. The only other person allowed to meddle in its pots and pans was her mother, Wadia'. Though it's not nice to make poor mention of the dead, my grandmother Wadia' was not the warmest of grandmothers. She was a genius in the kitchen and a master in the garden – a perplexing fact considering her lack of tenderness as a person.

All that aside, I owe it to her that I love soil, and that I know a thing or two about raising rabbits, and most of all that I have mastered the art of making *riqaq o addas*: a Palestinian country dish cooked primarily in the Fall during olive harvest season.

Riqaq o addas is a noodle and bean dish made of two basic ingredients – flour and lentils. *Riqaq* means thin dough and *addas* means lentils. I would sit and watch Wadia' instruct my mother on how to stretch her dough and slice it into small strings to make up what looks like the Italian version of *riqaq* – tagliatelle.

But the days of using a knife to make these long strands were over by the time my mother started making them for us. It was a memorable day when my mother purchased a hand-operated apparatus that swallowed the sheets of dough and turned them into symmetric ribbons that descended from the stainless steel machine with each cranking of its handle that was gently operated by my mother.

What is today an old-fashioned pasta making machine for me was a magical instrument that spat out light yellow threads that I would sew into a fantastical world that didn't exist. But who cares, I was a tiny creature trying to dip my fingers in the bowl of wheat and water so I could experience the bouncing of the dough created by the unseen bacteria.

Though *riqaq o addas* was not necessarily my favorite dish it was for sure one that I looked forward to, because I knew the kitchen would turn into a lab that

day, and I would become the observant scientist whom my mother would try to kick out of the way, allowing me to practice more mischief as I attempted to make my way back to the counter where she prepared the meal.

"I don't want you in the kitchen. Go make a life for yourself!" That was my mama's mantra. Maybe she wanted to give me a life different than hers. One where I would pursue my dreams and make them into reality. She didn't see the magic in the kitchen. Her life goals had nothing to do with dough or lentils. She wanted to be a nurse, build a hospital, create her own wellness center and who knows what else. But somehow she cooked every meal like a master chef and never bought ready-made foods – all the while insisting on leaving me out of the kitchen as a way, I suppose, of saving me from traditions that would suffocate my dreams.

Ironically, it was the kitchen that was always part of my aspirations. It still is. I try out every dish possible from palatal memories, sometimes from instructions she gives me over the phone while she tends her garden in North Carolina. I experience many failures. Some days I don't cook the vegetables long enough, others I cook them for too long. Though sometimes futile, the days when I am able to recreate a taste of childhood long gone are worth every failure. Alas, I am not one to shy away from failure. I cherish it in the kitchen and in life the way I cherish my harsh grandmother for showing me who I want and who I don't want to be.

And I want to be a better cook – be it in creating my food or my dreams. The older I get the more I conclude that there seems to be no distinction between success and failure. Both provide the sweet and the sour – precisely like *Riqaq o Aaddas*, which is cooked with wild sumac berries that are tangy and sweet at the same time. We seek them and we adore their sour taste with great reverence because we know they are necessary.

"Where is your *riqaq*-making machine?" I plea with my mother to remember where she might have stored it before she left Beit Jala. Unproductive searches led me to go back to the basic cutting blade and my hands. I mix the flour with the water and add a sprinkle of salt.

While I knead the dough I let the sumac berries soak

in hot water and the lentils get tender as they boil in a different pot. Kneading, I start to feel, is not for the faint of heart. Perhaps I should join a gym or start weight lifting. My lazy back starts to crack. It seems our mothers and grandmothers were not only cooks, they were athletes.

“I won’t give up. I am not going to sit down,” I whisper to myself as I start to see the dough molding itself in my hands. With each twist of my hands I felt I was being kneaded into stories of lives I can only imagine. My mother, grandmother, and grandmothers before them must have used this process to release their burdens into mounds of dough. Maybe they survived not with grief but with smirks in their hearts, as their men ate their bread and underestimated the power of knowledge they had of turning grains into bread.

“The hearts are secrets,” we say in Arabic, so I capitulate to the fact that I may never know if they felt sorrow or power. I must know my own heart’s secret. I am feeling elated as I make my dough.

“Yes. I can.” And so I do. I spread my dough and I start rolling. As it gets thinner I am transported into my mother’s body. My hands start to look like hers and I am suddenly making all the moves and dancing with the tempo of her rolling pin. I am honored to be using the utensil that shaped my mother’s cookies and bread for so long. Scratched and brutalized by years of hard work, the wood looks more alive than it has been in years. It is joining me in this return to life. Water, wheat, and salt; the minerals of this earth that was once drowned by the ocean. How do we assert claims over things that existed before we ever did?

The smell of boiled lentils intensifies as I forget they were even there. I rush to turn off the stovetop and I begin to strain them. Steam fills my nostrils and I become irritated by my lack of swift attention that has rendered them mushy.

“I bet this never happened to my mother,” I say to myself. “It’s really a simple dish you see,” she always says, “you don’t need anything to make it. Peel some garlic, saute it with a bit of olive oil, add the lentils, water, and then add the pasta.” Her instructions always came with a caveat of things I should somehow know because she forgets how she always kicked me out of her kitchen. “Oh and of course don’t forget to strain the sumac and add its juice to the pot”.

I remember every step this time. I finally feel like I am getting it right. My riqaq o addas is going to turn out wonderful. I feel confident as I slice more fresh garlic and place it in a pan full of olive oil. I am making *qadha*, a signature of many Palestinian dishes. Even bad cooks can fool their audience with *qadha*: a process of infusing olive oil with garlic using heat to bond them together before adding the mix to the dish in its final preparation stages.

It doesn’t feel like Fall yet. A heatwave that struck our area is making this dish unfit for this time of year. The sun strikes through my kitchen window and I see its reflection in the golden dome of St. Nicholas. He is still celebrated in my town in the fall when he is thanked for being the protector and savior.

Be it as it may, I never felt especially protected by him. It was always the women cooking in the backyard of his church, the master chefs of their homes, and the goddesses, like my mother, who sacrificed their dreams so I can have my own who gave me a feeling of protection.

But that is not who we talk about when we talk about visionaries. We think of people like my mother as “just a homemaker” or “a stay at home mom” as if they were somehow average and not pillars who have shaped our worlds by acts of protection such as feeding us pure food and pure love represented in their swollen hands, broken backs, and relentless struggles inside their kitchens and out.

How, for so many years, the world reduced the work of mothers around the world as a side job is truly society’s greatest failure. It’s one that we are still trying to recover from, and one that can only be rectified when we start to understand that the food on our table is not the product of mundane activities, but of rigorous physical and mental processes that require discipline, courage, and determination to make our lives a little more tender and a whole lot more tolerable.

But then again, they were just women doing what women always did. And unlike St. Nicholas they were real, visible, and their power, if acknowledged, a force to be reckoned with.

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Vivien Sansour is a Forward food columnist. You can read more about Vivien here