

Dreams for Living Jews



ABOUT SIX YEARS AGO, I participated in a small American academic conference whose subject was modern Hebrew. Predictably, it was attended almost entirely by Jewish academics who had invested their careers in Hebrew literature, linguistics, and pedagogy, presenting research on everything from contemporary Hebrew fiction to Hebrew usage at American Jewish summer camps. It was a good conference, as these things go. But the reason I remember it six years later isn't because of any of the papers presented. It's because of three attendees who sat in the back of the sessions, taking careful notes. They were representatives of the Wampanoag Nation, Native Americans with origins in today's eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island—the people whose ancestors, centuries earlier, first encountered the Pilgrims who arrived on American shores. Their goal was to revive the Wampanoag language, which had not been spoken in over 200 years. They were at this Hebrew conference because, as one put it, “we want to know how you did it.”

The Wampanoag figured they were ahead of the game. Hebrew was successfully revived after it hadn't been spoken for two millennia, while the Wampanoag language had fallen silent for a mere two centuries. Contemporary scholars of Wampanoag were working with a cache of 17th-century letters and legal documents, along with a Bible translation by the 17th-century English missionary John Eliot, in order to reconstruct the spoken language. In their community, the representatives proudly told us, one young couple had recently had a baby, who everyone hoped would be the first native speaker of Wampanoag in 200 years. These people had nothing but optimism. After all, we Jews had demonstrated that it was possible.

Conference participants made jokes about the sufferings of Itamar Ben-Avi, son of the Hebrew revivalist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Ben-Avi was locked in a closet and otherwise punished by his fanatical father whenever he failed to fulfill his destiny as the first native Hebrew-speaking child in 2,000 years. Those jokes were more uncomfortable than funny. As the Wampanoag waxed eloquent about cultural revival, some of the Hebrew scholars looked at one another with knowing glances that stopped just short of eye rolls. The Hebrew scholars knew, far more intimately than the Wampanoag and far more intimately than most Jews, exactly what this particular grand idea was up against. You could almost see them tabulating in their academic minds the many critical things that the dead Wampanoag language lacked that the supposedly comparably dead premodern Hebrew had: an enduring and evolving written language, a millennia-old education system that relied on children learning that language, an ever-expanding corpus of thousands of years' worth of texts in that language, people deliberately writing intellectually and creatively in that language for varied purposes over many centuries in many countries and contexts, and a worldwide population that had been using that language, albeit for very limited purposes, every single day for all of those intervening centuries. As one of those Hebrew scholars myself, I didn't have a whole lot of hope for the Wampanoag. *Good luck*, I thought.

I had occasion to think of the Wampanoag again while fielding questions about my new book, the rather pessimistically titled *People Love Dead Jews*, which examines how non-Jewish societies often embrace stories of Jewish deaths while taking almost no interest in the actual content of Jewish culture, not to mention actual living Jews. When readers asked me for better ways to think about the Jewish past and present, I pointed out that non-Jewish societies have a great deal to learn from Judaism's persistence as a counterculture that runs through Western history and from the many ways that Jewish culture has dynamically reinvented itself. That's when I remembered those earnest Wampanoag representatives. They had been doing exactly what I was now recommending: learning from the successes of living Jewish culture, instead of from its devastations.

Recently I looked up the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project online. Far from being the province of a few scholars, as it seemed to be at that conference, Wampanoag language reclamation is now a going concern for a broad community of people. There are adult-education language classes at beginner and advanced levels. There is a language-immersion preschool and a language afterschool program for older children — which, according to news reports, seems to already have a better track record than most American synagogue Hebrew schools for keeping students involved (though, one must admit, that is a rather low bar). One Massachusetts public-school district, on tribal lands that were just reclaimed in 2015, now teaches Wampanoag language to students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

All this, of course, is very far from actually reviving a spoken language. I saw no evidence of that baby born six years ago now posting TikTok videos in Wampanoag, as Itamar Ben-Avi, had he been a century younger, would surely have been forced by his fanatical father to do. But still, these language schools and programs with an active and engaged community of children and adults were quite a bit more than I, a person entirely ignorant of this particular culture, had expected. I've since learned that

I am now the embarrassed recipient of hundreds of messages from Jewish readers from all walks of life, sharing with me their own degrading personal experiences with this type of erasure or humiliation, often prefacing their stories with 'I never told anyone this before.'

the Wampanoag are far from unique in their efforts at language reclamation — or, most poignantly for me as a Hebrew scholar, in taking their inspiration from its most successful practitioners. Similar language schools among the Maori in New Zealand have based their curricular materials on Israeli ulpan language classes. But here I will admit one shameful private thought. As I looked through the photos and news items from the school district that taught Wampanoag, I found myself suddenly jealous. How the heck, I wondered, did they manage to get this language taught in a *public-school district*? Yes, the school was on tribal lands. But was there, maybe, some way we could pull that off for Hebrew too, at public schools in the United States that had many Jewish students? Why not?

And suddenly I felt my pessimistic self awakening to the wide-open world of unexpected possibilities.

Writing *People Love Dead Jews* was not an exercise that encouraged optimism. The book is a collection of essays about how non-Jewish societies often use or exploit Jewish history to encourage positive

The astonishing power of the Jewish past and present is not merely this culture's endurance or even its objective achievements, but precisely its astonishing resilience, its constant reinvention, its demonstration of what might be possible.

feelings about themselves, while simultaneously erasing living Jews and the actual content of real Jewish life. A case in point is a 2018 incident at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, where a young Jewish employee was asked to hide his yarmulke under a baseball cap for the sake of the museum's "neutrality" in celebrating the Jews' humanity—the humanity of the dead Jews, that is, not the living ones doing gross things like practicing Judaism. It was apparently very on-brand for the Anne Frank House to force a Jew into hiding.

For me, this was an intellectual phenomenon that I had repeatedly encountered in my work as a scholar, travel writer, and cultural commentator. But after I published the book, I had the misfortune of discovering that I was more right than I had known. I am now the embarrassed recipient of hundreds of messages from Jewish readers from all walks of life—religious and secular, young and old, from the United States and from around the world—sharing with me their own degrading personal experiences with this type of erasure or humiliation, often prefacing their stories with "I never told anyone this before." I spent 20 years as a scholar of Jewish studies and a novelist on Jewish themes, but my sudden transformation in the past few months into a receptacle for this public outpouring has shocked and disturbed me. Prior to pub-

lishing this book, I passionately agreed with the 20th-century Jewish historian Salo Baron's famous dismissal of the "lachrymose" view of Jewish history. Now that my readers have shared their private experiences with me, I have discarded my contempt for those caught in its thrall. I get it now.

But another result of this outpouring is that I am now, for the first time in my life, being asked for solutions to these problems. *What can we do?* my painfully sincere readers ask. My first thought as a lifelong pessimist is to tell them: *Nothing. Sorry.* And to add, as I mentally told the Wampanoag, *Good luck.* But that's not what the Wampanoag thought. Or what generations of Jews before us thought either.

I now have a very different attitude toward the Jewish past and present. One need not dismiss or minimize the "lachrymose" realities of Jewish history to perceive and marvel at its joys and triumphs; on the contrary, the blessing and the curse are entirely intertwined, because the astonishing power of the Jewish past and present is not merely this culture's endurance or even its objective achievements, but precisely its astonishing resilience, its constant reinvention, its demonstration of what might be possible. That reinvention was not foreordained or predictable; it required hard work and harder optimism about the existence of a future. The Judaism that emerged from the centuries following the Second Temple's destruction is not the same as the Judaism practiced in the time of the Temple, but it is deeply indebted to it, and its creative reinvention is a model of what psychologists now call post-traumatic growth. Theodor Herzl's 1902 novel *Altneuland* was speculative fiction, just as corny today as when it was written, and still full of many goofy things that never happened—except for the small detail of a real place named after that novel's translated Hebrew title, which was *Tel Aviv*.

These impossibilities are worth sharing with the world, if only because they demonstrate that more things are possible than we might assume. Sometimes I contemplate what non-Jewish students

in public schools learn about Jews in their history textbooks, and I imagine how that story of Western history might be turned upside down if such students actually learned what was possible. Most textbooks of this nature include only the “lachrymose” versions of Jewish history, mentioning only things such as the Holocaust. So students learn that Jews, essentially, are people who got murdered. But if actual Jewish history were to be included in such textbooks, an entirely new story would emerge that would open up all sorts of challenges to the way things are.

That same textbook that mentions Jews only in the context of persecutions, for example, probably also describes how mass literacy for the poor was not possible until the invention of the printing press and later industrial production. But if Jewish history were included in world history, this would be revealed to be a lie, since, of course, Jewish communities had almost universal male literacy for many centuries before the printing press, even if only in that very dead language called Hebrew. Teaching this historical fact would reveal that societies actually didn't require advanced technology or industrial production in order to achieve mass literacy, even among the poor; they merely needed to believe that reading was important.

As a history lesson, this might be rather depressing, because it would reveal the lost potential of untold millions of people left unnecessarily illiterate—as depressing as the lost potential of untold millions of women, including Jewish women. Obviously, there are many choices Jewish communities have made over the centuries that are profoundly depressing and limiting too, including choices Jewish communities are making right now. But as lessons about the future, these retroactively depressing facts might be profoundly inspiring. What other impossibilities might be open to us right at this moment, if we were to stop limiting our imaginations? What might happen if we had the courage to approach people different from us and discover how they did it—whether those people were our neighbors, people across the world, or our

Self-abnegation is not a virtue.
We are entitled to want more than crumbs;
the ability to desire more is the most humane
act of respect for ourselves and others.

own ancestors? What might it be possible to hope for? What would we even want to want?

—

Traumatized people are used to feeling grateful for crumbs; such people do not think they are allowed to want things. The classic illustration of this problem in Jewish literature comes to us from the Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz, in his mock-pious story “Bontshe Shvayg.” This infamous tale begins with the death of Bontshe Shvayg (“Bontshe the Silent”), opening with the words “Here on earth, the death of Bontshe Shvayg made no impression.” Bontshe, we are told, was the poorest and most pathetic of people: neglected at birth, trampled in life, homeless and starving and buried in an unmarked grave. But this story is set in the next world, where Bontshe's arrival is heralded by angels who convene a divine court to judge him. The defense attorney describes Bontshe's many sufferings and how Bontshe silently endured them all, never once complaining of his plight. The prosecutor agrees, and the reader is led to believe that Bontshe's humility was admirable. But the story's trick lies at its end, when the divine court declines to pass judgment: “It is not for us to determine your portion of paradise. Take what you want!” Bontshe, however, has never learned the art of wanting things. He asks only for a roll

with fresh butter each morning, left literally with crumbs as his life's reward, simply because he had no idea he could want more. The socialist author's condemnation of this traumatized passivity is harsh: "You yourself never knew," the court informs Bontshe, "that had you cried out but once, you could have brought down the walls of Jericho. You never knew what powers lay within you." The fact that this story is still sometimes read today as a celebration of Bontshe's "humility" is itself a testament to a deeply ingrained failure of aspiration. Self-abnegation is not a virtue. We are entitled to want more than crumbs; the ability to desire more is the most humane act of respect for ourselves and others.

That act of aspiration and of imagining what might be possible is also at the heart of what distinguished Judaism from other ancient traditions. For many years, I was puzzled by the story in Genesis in which Joseph interprets the Egyptian pharaoh's dreams. Pharaoh dreams of seven fat cows emerging from the Nile, followed by seven thin cows that consume the fat ones; the dream then repeats with sheaves of grain. Baffled by these dreams, Pharaoh calls upon the Hebrew slave Joseph to interpret them. The story always lost me when it arrived at Joseph's interpretation, the rather obvious idea that the cows and sheaves represent seven good harvest years followed by seven bad ones; Joseph then suggests that Pharaoh stockpile food from the good years, so that his kingdom will not starve during the bad years. Pharaoh is stunned by Joseph's brilliance and appoints him to run this rationing system, in gratitude for his genius idea. For a long time, I found this story incredibly stupid. Pharaoh, after all, lives in a country with one water source. Good years are when the Nile greatly overflows; bad years are when the Nile overflows less. Pharaoh knows this pattern and it worries him; he's even having anxiety dreams about it. But why did Pharaoh need this foreign slave to tell him that he should *save food from the good years so that he'd be able to eat later*? Wasn't that obvious? Why didn't Pharaoh think of that?

After I wrote a novel recasting the Joseph story in the modern era, I posed this question to my readers, and one of them supplied an answer. My kind reader explained that, like an immensely wealthier Bontshe Shvayg, perhaps Pharaoh had simply never learned to think of the world as something that was his to change. Perhaps Pharaoh's milieu, like many ancient cultures, assumed passive submission to the whims of capricious gods. Joseph, on the other hand, came from a covenantal tradition that required divine-human partnership. Joseph's father and great-grandfather had negotiated with God for what they wanted or needed, sharing their own desires and hopes and joining a dialogue that, while far from equal, required their participation. Such a tradition is not merely amenable to people acting for dramatic social and technological change; it requires it. Later, in the Book of Exodus, with the Israelites enslaved, Moses breaks with his society's expectations by killing a murderous taskmaster to save a slave's life, an act of resistance to a seemingly impregnable social order, an act that is not the result of God's call to him, but the prerequisite for it. We are not merely allowed to demand better than the world we are given; we have to. The Hebrew prophets who followed Moses are known for their warnings of doom and their promises of restoration, but they are equally known for their visions of previously unimagined and still-unrealized possibilities: widespread peace, ultimate justice, broad human liberation, shared enlightenment. Such things are possible, even promised. We are allowed to want them.

So why not dream as big as we can, as our ancestors both ancient and recent didn't fear to do? Why not solve the unsolvable problems, change the social order, undo the bad years, do the things that were supposed to be impossible? Someday, sincere and thoughtful strangers may come and sit in the back of our conference rooms, wanting to know how we did it. We might as well be ready for them. *