

Forty-seventh Street, between Fifteenth and Sixteenth Avenues, is the teeming Jewish heart of Boro Park in Brooklyn, bursting with kids in strollers, or hanging onto them, or pushing them; kids on big wheels and bicycles, on the stoops and leaning out the windows. Now, the pale-brick houses are packed together and built all the way out to the sidewalk, but when I was growing up on the block there were still some nice old-fashioned houses set back from the street, with glassed-in porches and driveways and big backyards where dilapidated *sukkahs* sagged year-round.

There must have been ten or twelve girls more or less my age on the block, but they were different from me, brash girls from enormous families (there were only four of us children) whose tall fathers and blond-wigged mothers had been born right here in America. A bachelor lived in the attic apartment, an oldish-youngish man whose pale-red eyelashes disappeared in the light. Next door, in the basement of the apartment building, was the super you called to relight the pilot light on *shabbes* if it had gone out. In the grocery on Sixteenth Avenue, the grocer pulled down boxes from the top shelf with a long stick that had a claw on the end. Across the avenue were the shadowy, crowded aisles of Mrs. Greenstein's toy store. Mrs. Greenstein had been in my mother's class in the Beis Yakov seminary in Czernowicz before the war, but that

didn't stop my mother from once making my brother and me march right back to her store and tell Mrs. Greenstein to take back the bee-bee gun she had sold us, since it wasn't coming into the house.

When I turned five, I started Beis Yakov myself, a squat beige-brick elementary school on Fourteenth Avenue where we sang a song about Sara Schnirer, who in a little town in Poland (actually, Krakow) took the stones her enemies threw at her and said, "From these stones will I build a school to teach girls Torah." Our backyard shared a fence with the main synagogue of the Bobover Hasidim,

REFLECTIONS ON A BELATED APOSTASY

by Naomi Seidman

where once, in pursuit of a stray ball that had bounced down the concrete stairs of the basement of the shul, I stumbled into a steamy room filled with naked men, their shaven heads bare, shouting "*a maydl, a maydl.*" This fleeting and confused vision

confirmed my suspicion that there was a hell that lurked just underneath the surface of our lives. Later, the pizza stores on Thirteenth Avenue opened, one after another—Amnon's, Tel Aviv, Masada—and we had our first taste of falafel, which my father jokingly called "*ploppe,*" turning the exotic Middle Eastern spices into something Yiddish and familiar. These landmarks constituted the known limits of the world, beyond which lay dragons: Italian, across Sixtieth Street, and Puerto Rican, under the elevated subway tracks.

That there were Jews who weren't *frum*, Orthodox, was an unsubstantiated but intriguing rumor. Evidence of its truth turned up in my own house one afternoon when I was ten or so, in the form of three previously undisclosed cousins, sons of my Uncle Bushy, who was actually my father's *Amerikaner* cousin. The boys stood in our front hall, no doubt over their protests, huddled stiffly together against the strangeness pressing in on them. Shiny bar mitzvah yarmulkes, the folds still visible, perched on three thick heads of hair. The middle one, Barry, was perfect: sun-streaked hair down to broad shoulders, blue eyes and dark lashes against a tan acquired in circumstances outside my own experience. And what did they see when they looked at me? A blue skirt down past my knees, glasses, a braid. I was probably staring. Did they see *me*? Did they know that inside the blouse buttoned up to my neck, inside my scratchy tights, the blood surged with sudden lust and yearning?





What *did* I want so badly? Sometimes I thought it was Barry, but sometimes it seemed to me that it must be God, calling me for some special purpose beyond the ordinary pieties that occupied my life. For months at a time, I davened myself into a frenzy on the roof of the school or tried desperately to improve my character, to stop biting my nails on *shabbes*, to stop telling *loshn harah*, gossip, about girls in my class, to dedicate my life to being good. There must have been more, too, because I remember the principal of my school calling me into his office to inform me that I couldn't possibly be a prophet (What had I told him? What had he heard?), since prophecy had ceased among Israel with the Destruction of the Temple.

But these zealous periods alternated with equally intense fits of agnosticism and alienation. I harbored the suspicion, all through sixth grade, that I was the subject of a secret experiment, in which a whole community had been recruited to perform the elaborate play that was Orthodox Judaism. The point of this exercise was to see whether repetition and unanimity alone could make someone—me, that is—believe the most incredible untruths. It wasn't God watching from behind some one-way mirror, but rather invisible scientists in lab coats. There was no way to resist the whole charade altogether, but it was important to signal as often as I could—if only for my own dignity—that I wasn't completely fooled.

The other side of my paranoia, my fear of being surrounded by spies and automatons, was the hope that somewhere beyond the streets of Boro Park were the real people, the people I should by all rights be part of. The library gave me a glimpse of them: Nancy Drew dressing for her prom, twirling for her father's approval, and the tomboy Georgie brushing down her pony; the whole crew of girl detectives camping under

the stars. I lived in an apartment with the people who thought they were my parents, even though they were too old to be anyone's parents, and they spoke English with thick accents, and my room had a curtain instead of a door, but one day, my true family would figure out where I was being held captive and bring me home. Night after night I listened for the sound of an emissary from that world, the roar of an approaching motorcycle, the tink of a pebble on the windowpane, a soft call, the door as it creaked open and then shut again, finally, behind me. My own jeans were hidden behind the schoolbooks on my shelf; on Sunday afternoons, I perfected the quick-change from skirt to pants, and (less happily) back again, behind odorous pillars on

had posed in a magazine, stark naked; that a daughter of Rabbi H. had married her professor, an Indian, no less. In my mother's hushed conversations with her sisters and friends, these scandals were tragic not only because they tore a family apart, but also because they saddled that family with a stigma that could never be made right. To leave when there were other children to be married off—this was a sign of the cruelest indifference to the brothers and sisters whose chances for a decent match were forever ruined. And when the girls in my class repeated these stories, they had another force; for us, the bearers of chaste Jewish blood, rumors of girls who had strayed were pieces of the puzzle of sex we were always trying to reconstruct, evidence of some

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subway platforms. On Friday evenings after the meal, when there was nowhere else to go, I would wait until the *shabbes* clock had ticked off and the lights gone out and write furiously and blindly in a notebook, as if I could scribble my way out of the suffocating darkness.

I began to look around for chinks in the walls that enclosed me, the tracks of others who had broken through earlier. There was, first of all, Uncle Bushy himself, who had apparently shared a childhood with my Orthodox uncles Motl and Anshel, but somehow emerged from it a Conservative rabbi with his trio of sturdy Jewish *goyim*. There were darker rumors, too, that the twin granddaughters of a great Torah sage (even now, the old taboo keeps me from sullyng his name)

provocative, terrifying power that was neither entirely inside nor outside us. For me, and maybe a few others, these scandals were also the signposts I was watching for, the arrows that marked the exit.

Conservative rabbis and Playboy bunnies. Like the signs on restroom doors, it was clear which of these was for boys and which for girls. A boy might conceivably become an *apikores*, a heretic, but transgression in a girl could only mean something sexual. The first few steps of the Beis Yakov girl gone bad were visible enough: I knew girls who sneaked out of camp to meet boys at pizza stores in the Catskills, who wore their denim skirts over the knee and hung posters of David Cassidy inside their closet doors. They were "bums,"

the term we used for the nail-polished and boy-crazy among us. I chose my friends from among these circles, but I myself aspired to something more dignified, something that signaled intellectual force rather than bodily weakness. I was a philosopher, I hoped, not a whore. At *shabbes* lunch, I would harass my parents by asking how they could bless the wine “after Auschwitz.” My brother, caught in the turmoil of his own adolescence, would cover his ears and yell “*Shah! Apikores!*” Once, when he demanded that my parents throw me out of the house, my father asked him, softly, who it was that was paying the rent.

A generation or so earlier, the crisis might have been addressed through a rebbe or matchmaker. My parents turned instead to Jewish Family Services, where we were assigned family therapy with a staff psychologist, a burly Orthodox man with the circumspect, businesslike manner of a diamond merchant. When he asked each of us why we were there, my brother sullenly responded: “Because my sister’s a bum.” There was something curiously cheering for me in his straightforwardness.

The office lay in the shadow of the elevated tracks of the B train, and every few minutes a train would rumble by a few feet from the office window and the session would come to an awkward pause, since my father was hard of hearing. In fits and starts, though, we were beginning to learn the ritualized gestures of family therapy, the parallel airing of grievances, the alternating deference and complaint, tears and outrage, when the entire exercise was abruptly terminated. The psychologist opened our third session with the announcement that he would not be continuing to work with us, since “the main problem your family has is that you all want Naomi to be *frum* and she doesn’t want to be.” As far as he could see, he continued, that

was a theological issue, not a psychological one. There would be no charge for this last session, he added, and he wished us all the best. It would be another year or two before I made my break, but those words, I think, were what finally set me free.



It wasn’t until I was a graduate student at Berkeley that I finally discovered that my own break with tradition was itself part of a tradition, amply recorded in the first, dusty generations of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. For the other students, these nineteenth-century narratives were almost unreadable, with their gothic descriptions of cruel *melamdim* and overbearing mothers-in-law and their archaic prose style (as it turned out, this was exactly the sort of old-fashioned Hebrew my own education had prepared me for!). For me, this literature of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment, was full of glamour and adventure: forbidden books hidden in the pages of the Talmud, heretical ideas discussed in heated whispers, the ritual of a Friday night smoke in the garret of a fellow free-thinker, the divorce from a marriage arranged by mercenary parents, the move to a big city. I sensed a community of fellow outsiders in these long-dead men. In their bitter stories, I found language and shape for the hole in the middle of my own life.

But it was only a partial camaraderie. After all, I never belonged to an underground cell, never read Chernishevsky on free love or Marx on class warfare. My own story, it seemed to me, lacked collective resonance, historical shape, intellectual substance, the conviction of revolution. I left the traditional world not with a wave of heretics, but against a tide of once-secular Jews who had “returned” to “Torah-true Judaism,” repackaged as the antidote to the hollow

successes of the American-Jewish middle-class. The damning indictments of traditional Jewish life as depicted in *Haskalah* literature had themselves become historical curios, relics of an outmoded and forgotten past. Where would such Jewish rage come from, after the Nazis had done their work? The parents I left sleeping in their beds when I slipped out the door had seen that destruction, and the home I left behind was their bid to salvage something from the ruin. Whatever the accounts had been between those 19th century parents and their rebellious children, surely the debts had shifted under the pressure of the history that had intervened.

My dreams of escape had always ended, in the hazy tradition of the American road movie, with the roar of an engine, in a blast of exhaust. But what was there, exactly, beyond that, in the vast indifference of the American continent that opened up before me? The Hebrew and Yiddish writers I read in graduate school had left the traditional world for the capitalized ideals of their time: Enlightenment, Freedom, Literature, Socialism, Palestine. The biggest thing in my life, it sometimes seemed, was what I had left behind.

In those first heady days after I left home, it was transgression that spiced every bite I tasted, every step I took, riding the subway on Saturday—a whole new day of the week, a whole new city was mine—or eating a *treif*, street-corner shish kebab. Even now, twenty years later, carrying a heavy bag of groceries home to my family, the Berkeley dusk is ripe with the expectancy of *erev shabbes*, as if my childhood, a clock I’d long ago packed away and forgotten, nevertheless, continued to tick. Everything comes down to a before and an after, between which there is no commerce, no common language; but just because this is so, I live always in both. My father, craning his craggy neck to knot his necktie in the mirror, would catch my eye and say, “Old age,

what a strange thing to happen to a little boy.” Stranger still, my father is gone, and I have a little boy now whom I call “*tatele*,” little father. He bears his grandfather’s name, Hillel, the way secular American Jews carry the impossible names of an earlier generation, as a middle name, tucked between his two public names like a recessive gene, a secret message. He has a cousin Hillel born the same night as he was, my brother’s ninth. They’ve never met.

Every summer, though, we fly into the sweltering city to visit my mother. She buzzes us in and stands at the top of the steep stairs beaming. She is smaller each time I see her, and I am larger. Every time, there’s less excuse for what I’ve done. One of my two sisters allows her children to see me, and once each visit, they troop up the steps to meet their little cousin from California. The twins stand in their plaid school uniforms, turned in to each other like a pair of pigeon toes, staring at my son’s improbably yellow curls under the oversized yarmulke I found in my father’s nightstand drawer. I suppose I should know what they’re thinking, but I don’t.

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