



CONSIDER THE CATERPILLAR

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Consider the Caterpillar: A Yom Kippur Reader

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It is all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies

and then maintain that in their youth they had been little butterflies.

Maturation makes liars of us all.

-G.E. Vaillant, *Adaptation to Life*

As we enter Yom Kippur, change is on our minds. Have we changed? Will we change? Will this year be different than this past year, or will it be more of the same?

Although a less common image in Jewish literature, the butterfly is a powerful metaphor for change. As the quote from Vaillant above indicates, the disparity between the caterpillar and the butterfly signifies one deep aspect of change: the disconnect we so often feel between who we are now and who we once were. Kathryn Schulz, the author of *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, writes that

It takes courage to leave our past selves behind. But it takes even more to carry some token of them with us as we go: to accept that we have erred, recognize that we have changed, remember with compassion our caterpillar past. As difficult as this can be, the dividends are worth it. “The main interest in life and work,” said Foucault, “is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.”

Seeing ourselves as we once were – and seeing others that are where we once were – can be profoundly uncomfortable, as it serves as a reminder of the fact that *we once were different*. It is more comfortable to forget our caterpillar past, just as it is more comfortable to forget that our future selves will probably also try to forget our present selves. Even as we now emerge as butterflies to our past, we are also caterpillars to our future. We will yet change, and in all likelihood look back with a smile (or a grimace) at who we once were. And best of all – such is life. The process of becoming, ever becoming, is the process of life. It is not for nothing that God goes by the name “I am becoming that which I am becoming” – perhaps *to become* is godly.

Throughout history, Yom Kippur has been a time of such change, such becoming. The book of Jonah, which we read on Yom Kippur, is a book about change: change by the occupants of Tarshish, by the prophet Jonah, and perhaps even by God.

In 1913, a 26-year old Franz Rosenzweig was on the cusp of conversion to Christianity, until a fateful Yom Kippur. Something happened that day. Rosenzweig never articulated what exactly he felt, but that day was a turning point in his life. This was his “why I stayed” moment, and the rest of his life was spent immersed in Jewish learning. He founded the (original) *Lehrhaus*, “Freies Judisches Lehrhaus,” a center for intense engagement with Jewish and Western thought, and he joined with Martin Buber in penning a German translation of the Torah. In the words of his friend and biographer Nahum Glatzer: “Rosenzweig left the Synagogue a changed person. What he had thought he could find in the Church only – faith that gives one an orientation in the world – he found on that day in the Synagogue.”

Two years earlier, in Morocco, another German theologian found God on Yom Kippur. It was 1911, and Rudolf Otto, a young, Protestant scholar on a trip to Northern Africa, visited a shul in the town of Mogador on Yom Kippur. Although the setting was simple, Otto was stunned by the power of the moment and the liturgy. It impressed upon the young Otto a long and fruitful interest in the experience of the holy, which culminated in his iconic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, in which he investigates the holy.

In Cynthia Ozick’s short story “The Butterfly and the Traffic Light,” two characters, Isabel and Fishbein, consider the caterpillar-butterfly dynamic:

Isabel frowned with logic. “But it’s only that the caterpillar’s future is longer and his fate farther off. In the end he will die too.”

“Never, never, never,” said Fishbein; “it is only the butterfly who dies, and then he has long since ceased to be a caterpillar. The caterpillar never dies. – Neither to die nor to be immortal, it is the enviable state, little dear, to live always at the point of beautiful change! That is what it means to be extraordinary...”

There are millions of caterpillars, and not one of them is intended to die, and they are all of them extraordinary. *Your aim,*” he admonished...”is to avoid growing into a butterfly. Come,” he said, and took her hand, “let us live for that.”

What does it mean to live forever as a caterpillar? Maybe the caterpillar is more honest than the butterfly. The butterfly dies, but the caterpillar is immortal. The butterfly has changed, but the caterpillar is ever *about* to change. On the cusp of change, the caterpillar is always humble. The caterpillar knows that everything can change – the hard held positions and beliefs that we hold on to one day can soon be transformed.

This Yom Kippur, in the humble light of the possibility for change, we offer a sampling of our favorite articles on religious change. Change has many faces, reflected in the articles here – Kelsey Osgood’s reflections on her own religious change, David Bashevkin’s article on Jonah, Adrian Chen’s portrayal of one woman’s de-radicalization through Twitter,

James Winchell's article on Franz Rozensweig's Yom Kippur, and Pini Dunner's article on the Yabloner Rebbe. In each, the challenge and complexity of change is addressed. Change is not immediate. Nor is it always easily apparent or rapturous in quality, but it is always present, even if under the surface. Consider the caterpillar, as we humbly turn towards Yom Kippur.

-Yehuda Fogel, Editor

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JUDAISM AND THE TWICE-BORN

By Kelsey Osgood

April 1, 2015

I did not grow up in a religious family, but now, upon waking each morning, I whisper a little prayer called the *Modeh Ani*, in which I thank G-d for returning my soul to me after sleep. When I eat breakfast, I say a blessing over the food, a different one depending on what I'm having that morning, whether it's made from grain or milk, and I make sure to wash out a bowl used for yogurt with the appropriate dairy sponge. Throughout my day, I declare at least three times that G-d is G-d, that He is One being, and that I love Him. On Friday evenings, I light the ceremonial Sabbath candles and try, despite my anxieties, to rest, to think, and to ignore what I'm sure are the thousands of urgent text messages I am receiving at that very moment.

For much of his life, Shulem Deen, the author of the new memoir “All Who Go Do Not Return,” did these same things. As a man and a Hasid, he in fact observed far more religious laws than I am ever likely to. He donned phylacteries during morning prayers and dedicated years of his life to studying tractates of the Talmud. He refrained from tearing off a square of toilet paper on Shabbat, since tearing qualifies as work, and he let his sidelocks grow long in accordance with the Levitical mandate not to round the corners of your head. As a member of the strict Skverer sect of Hasidism, and a resident of the sect's home base in New Square, New York, he walked on the men's side of the street, which is marked with a blue sign.

Then, as he describes in his book, it all stopped working. It wasn't a single moment of epiphany: Deen chipped away at his faith like he snipped at his sidecurls, “a few millimeters each time.” He allowed outside influences—television, the Internet, books by atheists and Conservative Jews, newspapers, talk radio—into his life, and then the secular world, which he had once thought brimming with sin, began to seem like an idyll he couldn't resist. The process of unburdening himself of his religious beliefs, which he eventually renounced entirely, and extracting himself from the insular community where he lived, was devastating. He lost any semblance of a relationship with his five children. He lost the ability to forget himself in the joyous group worship integral to Hasidic faith, because he saw the desires and delusions that can lie beneath any euphoric experience. At the end of his memoir, he offers a statement of his new credo, his replacement Shema, if you will: “I now lived deeply and fundamentally suspicious of any hint of dogma or ideology, of subjective values presented as Great Truths.”

Deen is my opposite in many ways, and yet I found in his memoir a story not entirely unlike my own—a conversion narrative of sorts, with secular humanism as the destination rather than Judaism. Though my course is the reverse, I too had to leave aspects of my former life, to escape the nihilism in which I felt I might drown. An atheist from childhood through my early twenties, I noticed that my motivation to find joy in life—to live at all, really—was waning year by year. Perhaps I could have found an antidote other than Judaism, but no other faith



Photograph courtesy Kieran Kesner

accounted so thoroughly for the questions I had, or balanced so well the priorities of an earthly as well as a spiritual life. Though the decision to convert came slowly and deliberately, it also felt, at times, like the simple and irrational process of falling in love.

The stories of such spiritual transformations have always been beguiling to me—from Leo Tolstoy, who was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church for fashioning his own brand of ascetic Christianity, to Mary Karr, a convert to Catholicism. “I feel Him holding me when I’m scared,” Karr writes movingly in “Lit,” “the invisible hands I mocked years before.” These are the people the philosopher William James dubbed the “twice-born.” In “Varieties of Religious Experience,” he writes that, “in the religion of the twice-born, the world is a double-storied mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and minuses to the equation.” Such people know what it means to change, to insist on beliefs that many around them find unfathomable or even ridiculous. When Deen is expelled from New Square for heresy—a severe sentence even in a place where harsh decrees are not unusual—the most galling of all his crimes is that he has ceased to believe in God. “How does one not believe in God?” a member of the rabbinical court asks him. Deen writes, “He said this as if he were genuinely curious.”

In his book, Deen confronts some of the most upsetting events of his life without flinching. He retraces his intellectual path, reading atheists like Richard Dawkins and Modern Orthodox luminaries like Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik—both equally taboo in New Square—and contemplating the Kuzari principle, the Big Bang, and evolution. “I looked inside my heart and discovered there was no truth, anywhere,” Deen writes, “only the scalding furnace in which my beliefs were now smoldering embers.” As a critic, I can say that “All Who Go Do Not Return” is not only the most lyrical but also the most searchingly spiritual of the [“ex-frum” memoirs](#) that I’ve read to date. As a potential Jew—conversion dates aren’t set ahead of time, but mine will probably arrive in May—I find my feelings are more complicated. On some level, I feel obliged to disapprove of Deen’s decision to become irreligious. In the Talmud it says, “*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*,” which means that all of Israel is bound up together. Some believe that if one Jew stops keeping the commandments, the coming of the Messiah could be delayed. This concept is at the heart of a tension in Judaism between the rugged individualism of the Biblical patriarchs, who went against the idol-worshipping people of their age, and the groupthink that can creep into any religious community.

But that Talmudic tenet also means that Jews are responsible for one another’s quality of life. Typically, this mandate is taken to refer to the bottom tiers of Maslow’s hierarchy: food, shelter, physical and financial security. But one might read in it a commandment concerning higher needs as well: a sense of self-worth, a feeling of belonging, the ability to pursue one’s true vocation. Deen would never have had those things had he remained Hasidic. He felt emotionally distanced from the Skverers for many years before he left, and he would not have been able to write honestly and critically surrounded by the conformist pressures of New Square (or, in his view, had he remained religious at all). In Deen’s former world, questions, particularly those put down in writing, are considered dangerous weapons. Once, when riding the bus home to New Square from New York City, a neighbor noticed him reading a book called “One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues That Divide Them.” “I explained that I was curious to hear different views,” Deen writes; his neighbor, screaming, attempted to rip the book from his hands.

Again, I think of William James, who in “The Varieties of Religious Experience” asks, “Ought it, indeed, to be assumed that the lives of all men should show identical religious elements?” His answer, and mine, is an emphatic no. “The divine can mean no single quality,” he continues. “It must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions.” Deen’s mission and mine are different, clearly. But I hope that they are both worthy.

Jonah and the Varieties of Religious Motivation

 thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/jonah-and-the-varieties-of-religious-motivation/

October 9, 2016



Dovid Bashevkin

“The consolations of Religion, my beloved, can alone support you; and these you have a right to enjoy. Fly to the bosom of your God and be comforted.”

— Letter of Alexander Hamilton to Elizabeth Hamilton, July 4th 1804

“**Rust Cohle:** What do you think the average IQ of this group is, huh?

Marty Hart: Can you see Texas up there on your high horse? What do you know about these people?

Rust Cohle: Just observation and deduction. I see a propensity for obesity, poverty, a yen for fairy tales, folks putting what few bucks they do have into little, wicker baskets being passed around. I think it’s safe to say that nobody here is gonna be splitting the atom, Marty.

”

— *True Detective*, Season 1, The Locked Room

The journey towards more fervent religious life so often begins with personal turmoil. Some people turn to religion because they are lonely, some are looking to cope with feelings of mortality, while others may turn to religion in the hopes that it will serve as a respite from a broken family. As a religious educator, it is hard to ignore the gnawing feeling that the object of these people's search is not authentic spirituality, but a very, almost secular driven, emotional catharsis from the everyday pain of life. Of course, as an educator, there is a duty to remain egalitarian as to the religious motivations of those who seek counsel; but can I be faulted for noticing that so many people who are seeking religious commitment would seem to be better suited in finding simple healthy social interactions? Does the teenager looking to make sense of her or his parents' impending divorce really need theological purpose or would she or he be better suited with the guidance of a mental health professional and a friend?

I don't think I am the first educator to develop fatigue from watching many who began with intense motivation and then slowly watch said motivation (d)evolve into either disappointment or disuse. The prime suspect, in my eyes, of such abortive entrances into religious life was often the nature and substance of the motivation that brought them there in the first place. Perhaps, I wondered, if people came to religion for the "right reasons," if such can even be said to exist, the resulting religious experience would be more fruitful.

Of course, I recognize that everyone is welcome to seek meaning where they see fit, but my frustration was couched not so much in the breadth of what motivates religiosity than by incredulity towards the religious commitment that emerges from such fleeting emotional pain. A person can surely find God after a devastating diagnosis, but what enduring sense of duty could such motivation produce? Can religious motivation devoid of theological urgency still foster lasting religious commitment? It is an uncomfortable question to ask, for who has the authority to question others' religious search, but it was a question I nonetheless found myself asking, however quietly.

I don't know if I ever found a definitive answer to my difficulties, but my frustrations were assuaged, somehow. In December of 2014 I was invited to deliver a series of classes at a weekend program for teenagers. Many of the participants would have the personal backgrounds that typically irked me in my endeavors at religious education. But, those classes changed my view on the varieties of religious motivation and experience. My classes focused on a personality, who I learned, dealt with a set of frustrations and difficulties similar to the ones with which I had been grappling. His name was Jonah.

II.

Jonah was approached by God to convince the people of Nineveh to repent and return to Him. Instead of listening, Jonah chose to run. Why did Jonah, a prophet, decide to run?

Like many biblical characters Jonah's underlying religious ethos was alluded to in his name. He was Jonah the son of Amittai, which derives from the Hebrew word *emet* – meaning truth. Jonah was a man of truth. He was not interested in religious comfort or convenience. He was not concerned with escaping the terror of death and finitude. Jonah was motivated by truth. Jonah's religiosity was founded on theological fact and doctrinal integrity.

After fleeing, Jonah found himself on a boat in a tempestuous storm. His fellow sailors began to panic. “And the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god.” Throughout the story the operative description of the sailors is fear. The religious motivation of the seamen was based on the impending crisis of their own mortality. Jonah, however, took a nap. He was not interested in being a prophet on this boat. The task of reminding them of repentance so as to escape death's grasp is the very job he absconded by running away from Nineveh. Jonah understood that the people on that boat were not seeking religious truth, but rather religious comfort.

After being thrown overboard in the midst of the storm, Jonah is saved from drowning by miraculously being swallowed by a fish. Inside the fish, Jonah prays and recommits himself to God, who in return ensures he is safely returned to dry land. Jonah, now seemingly reformed, agreed to return to Nineveh – which he did. The Nineveh community, hearing Jonah's exhortations to repent, promptly responded with a communal commitment to return from evil, which God just as promptly accepted.

Jonah, however, is still in pain. His outreach work still leaves him unfulfilled. He finally discloses to God why he ran:

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֵל ה' וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲנִי ה' הֲלוֹא זֶה דְבָרִי עַד הָיוּתִי עַל אֲדָמָתִי—עַל בֶּן קַדְמָתִי, לְבָרֵחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה: כִּי יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי אַתָּה אֵל חַנוּן וְרַחוּם, אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חַסֵּד, וְנָחָם עַל הַרְעָה.

He prayed to God and said: Please, God, was this not my contention when I was still on my own soil? Because of this I fled towards Tarshish; for I knew that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and who relents of evil.

While Jonah clearly intends to offer an explanation as to why he ran, his justification at first glance still remains unclear. A close reader, however, will notice that Jonah invokes the opening of the familiar refrain of Moses (or God, depending on who you ask), known as the Thirteen Attributes, that are repeated throughout the High Holiday season – albeit, with one exception. The standard sequence of God's attributes that most readers are surely familiar with ends not with the term “*niham al ha-ra'ah*,” but rather with the term

“*emet*”—truth. The word *niham* derives from the word *nehamah*, comfort. Jonah in his aggravated description of God substitutes comfort for truth. Jonah the son of Amittai finally discloses his frustration with outreach to God. “You want to know why I ran away? Because for most people God, religion, spirituality—it’s not about truth—it’s about comfort.”

Why did the fear of death and mortality seem to have no bearing on Jonah’s religious outlook? Perhaps, it was his childhood. I Kings ch. 17, presents the story of the widow Zarephath, whose son died only to be revived by the Prophet Elijah. That son, according to the Midrash, was Jonah. Death for Jonah, then, was not an abstract fear lurking in his future, but a reality he had already experienced. Having already lived through the terror of death, Jonah sought another motivation to ground his religious commitment: truth.

Jonah’s concern has been articulated by many critics of religion. David Hume, in his *History of Natural Religion*, considers the concerns which motivated the advent of religion commitment. Hume, who was quite skeptical of religion, assumes that religion began not in the search for truth, but rather in a search for comfort:

But what passion shall we here have recourse to, for explaining an effect of such mighty consequence [i.e., religion]? Not speculative curiosity surely, or the pure love of truth. That motive is too refined for such gross apprehensions; and would lead men into enquiries concerning the frame of nature, a subject too large and comprehensive for their narrow capacities. No passions, therefore, can be supposed to work upon such barbarians, but the ordinary affections of human life; the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, especially the latter, men scrutinize, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.

His pessimistic view of the underlying motivation for religion is shared by many philosophers. Ernst Becker, in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*, flatly declares that “religion solves the problem of death.” No doubt, this view is best encapsulated in Karl Marx’s often cited declaration that “religion is the opiate of the masses.” An opiate does not bring its users truth, of course; it is a specious solution for the harsh pain of a harsh world.

Long ago, Maimonides was also concerned with this issue. In his *Laws of Repentance* (10:2), Rambam makes an important distinction regarding the proper motivation for religious commitment:

Whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with the study of the Law and the fulfillment of commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external

motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits—such a man does what is true because it is true...

The ideal form of religious commitment, according to Maimonides, is founded upon truth as opposed to the solace religion proves in the face of calamity. Of course, he readily concedes, most will never achieve such purity of motivation – but it stands as an ideal nonetheless.

In 1967, Gordon Allport wrote “Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice,” an important essay that invoked a similar dichotomy in religious motivation to that of Maimonides. According to Allport, religious motivation can be characterized based on two binary poles – intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. He succinctly defines this scale as follows:

Perhaps the briefest way to characterize the two poles of subjective religion is to say that the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated lives his religion. As we shall see later, most people, if they profess religion at all, fall upon a continuum between these two poles. Seldom, if ever, does one encounter a “pure” case.

Using Maimonidean terminology, those motivated by truth could therefore be considered intrinsically motivated, while those motivated by fear of calamity or, for that matter, by social, emotional, or any other form of temporal comfort could be typified as extrinsically motivated. Thus, what plagued Jonah was his insistence on pure intrinsic motivation.

The story of Jonah can be read as the narrative of a frustrated outreach professional. As a prophet, Jonah has proclaimed God’s impending wrath to wayward communities and time and again he sees them repent out of fear. Man, when confronted with his own mortality, finds comfort in the community and eternal promises offered by religion. Jonah, however, grew tired of serving as the temporal haven for man’s fear of crisis and transience. If religion is only a blanket to provide warmth from the cold, harsh realities of life, did concerns of theological truth and creed even matter?

III.

What was God’s response to Jonah’s religious torment? The story of Jonah ends abruptly. God provides a tree for the ailing Jonah to find shade. After momentarily providing Jonah comfort, God summarily destroys the tree. Jonah is crestfallen. With the sun beating down on Jonah, he pleads for death. God, in the closing statement of the story, rebukes Jonah for becoming so attached to the comfort of the tree, while still failing to develop any empathy for the religious struggle of the people of Nineveh.

Comfort, God reminds Jonah, is a need inherent in the human condition. The comfort provided by a tree no more obscures the role of God, than the comfort that religion provides. The means through which we find solace need not obscure the ultimate source

from which all comfort derives.

Christian Wiman, a noted American poet, knows that his religious motivations are looked at with suspicion. After living as an atheist for much of his teens, he rediscovered God following a bout with cancer. As he acknowledges in his brilliant collection, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*, “[t]hat conversion often happen after or during intense life experiences, especially traumatic experiences, is sometimes used as evidence against them.” As he surely was accused of himself, “The sufferer isn’t in his right mind. The mind tottering at the abyss of despair or death, shudders back toward any simplicity, any coherency it can grasp, and the man calls out to God.” Wiman, however, does not accept this skeptic narrative of religious motivation, “[t]o admit that there may be some psychological need informing your return to faith does not preclude or diminish the spiritual imperative any more than acknowledging the chemical aspects of sexual attraction lessens the mystery of enduring human love.”

Religious motivation, however fleeting, however fearful, can still beget dignified religious commitment. Many people seek out religion, just as Jonah thousands of years ago desperately sought shade. Few, if any, are purely and intrinsically motivating by theological truth – but the story of Jonah teaches that their stories are still endowed with religious depth and significance. Perhaps this is why the story of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur. People come to synagogue for all sorts of reasons on Yom Kippur; many come only on this day. Reading the story of Jonah is an apt reminder that it doesn’t matter what brought you to synagogue, be it comfort, truth, or otherwise.

Religious integrity is not determined by the door through which you enter, or even the length of your stay. Our momentary religious experiences are meaningful, regardless of their motivations or durations. So whatever brings you to prayer on Yom Kippur, know that your presence has meaning. We’re glad you’re here.

Author’s Note: My deepest appreciation to Rabbi Baruch Dov Braun for first introducing me to Jonah and his religious worldview.

UNFOLLOW

How a prized daughter of the Westboro Baptist Church came to question its beliefs.

By Adrian Chen

November 16, 2015



It was easy for Megan Phelps-Roper to tweet things that made people cringe—she knew that they were evil or deluded by God. Photograph by Katy Grannan for The New Yorker

On December 1, 2009, to commemorate World AIDS Day, Twitter announced a promotion: if users employed the hashtag #red, their tweets would appear highlighted in red. Megan Phelps-Roper, a twenty-three-year-old legal assistant, seized the opportunity. “Thank God for AIDS!” she tweeted that morning. “You won’t repent of your rebellion that brought His wrath on you in this incurable scourge, so expect more & worse! #red.”

As a member of the Westboro Baptist Church, in Topeka, Kansas, Phelps-Roper believed that AIDS was a curse sent by God. She believed that all manner of other tragedies—war, natural disaster, mass shootings—were warnings from God to a doomed nation, and that it was her duty to spread the news of His righteous judgments. To protest the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in America, the Westboro Baptist Church picketed the funerals of gay men who died of AIDS and of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Members held signs with slogans like “GOD HATES FAGS” and “THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS,” and the outrage that their efforts attracted had turned the small church, which had fewer than a hundred members, into a global symbol of hatred.

Westboro had long used the Internet to spread its message. In 1994, the church launched a Web site, www.godhatesfags.com, and early on it had a chat room where visitors could interact with members of Westboro. As a child, Phelps-Roper spent hours there, sparring with strangers. She learned about Twitter in 2008, after reading an article about an American graduate student in Egypt who had used it to notify his friends that he had been arrested while photographing riots. She opened an account but quickly lost interest—at the time, Twitter was still used mostly by early-adopting techies—until someone e-mailed Westboro’s Web site, in the summer of 2009, and asked if the church used the service. Phelps-Roper, who is tall, with voluminous curly hair and pointed features, volunteered to tweet for the congregation. Her posts could be easily monitored, since she worked at Phelps Chartered, the family law firm, beside her mother, Shirley, an attorney. Moreover, Megan was known for her mastery of the Bible and for her ability to spread Westboro’s doctrine. “She had a well-sharpened tongue, so to speak,” Josh Phelps, one of Megan’s cousins and a former member of Westboro, told me.

In August, 2009, Phelps-Roper, under the handle @meganphelps, posted a celebratory tweet when Ted Kennedy died (“He defied God at every turn, teaching rebellion against His laws. Ted’s in hell!”) and a description of a picket that the church held at an American Idol concert in Kansas City (“Totally AWESOME! Tons going in & taking pics—even tho others tried to block our signs”). On September 1st, her sister Bekah e-mailed church members to explain the utility of Twitter: “Now Megan has 87 followers and more are trickling in all the time. So every time we find something else to picket, or have some new video or picture we want to post (or just something that we see on the news and want to comment about)—87 people get first-hand, gospel commentary from Megan Marie.”

A couple of hours after Phelps-Roper posted her tweet on World AIDS Day, she checked her e-mail and discovered numerous automated messages notifying her of new Twitter followers. Her tweet had been discovered by the comedian Michael Ian Black, who had more than a million followers. He was surprised that a member of the Westboro Baptist Church was on Twitter at all. “I sort of thought they would be this fire-and-brimstone sort of Pentecostal anti-technology clan that would be removed from the world,” he told me. He tweeted, “Sort of obsessed w/ @meganphelps. Sample tweet: ‘AIDS is God’s curse on you.’ Let her feel your love.” The director Kevin Smith and “The Office” star Rainn Wilson mocked her, as did many of their followers.



WATCH

Losing Religion Through Twitter

Losing religion through Twitter. Megan Phelps-Roper comments on tweets she once posted for the church.

Phelps-Roper was exhilarated by the response. Since elementary school, she had given hundreds of interviews about Westboro, but the reaction on Twitter seemed more real than a quote in a newspaper. “It’s not just like ‘Yes, all these people are seeing it,’ ” she told me. “It’s proof that people are seeing it and reacting to it.” Phelps-Roper spent much of the morning responding to angry tweets, citing Bible passages. “I think your plan is back-firing,” she taunted Black. “Your followers are just nasty haters of God! You should do something about that . . . like tell them some truth every once in a while. Like this: God hates America.” That afternoon, as Phelps-Roper picketed a small business in Topeka with other Westboro members, she was still glued to her iPhone. “I did not want to be the one to let it die,” she said.

By the end of the day, Phelps-Roper had more than a thousand followers. She took the incident as an encouraging sign that Westboro’s message was well suited to social media. She loved that Twitter let her talk to large numbers of people without the filter of a journalist. During the next few months, Phelps-Roper spearheaded Westboro’s push into the social-media age, using Twitter to offer a window into life in the church and giving it an air of accessibility.

It was easy for Phelps-Roper to write things on Twitter that made other people cringe. She had been taught the church’s vision of God’s truth since birth. Her grandfather Fred Phelps established the church, in 1955. Megan’s mother was the fifth of Phelps’s thirteen children. Megan’s father, Brent Roper, had joined the church as a teen-ager. Every Sunday, Megan and her ten siblings sat in Westboro’s small wood-paneled church as her grandfather delivered the sermon. Fred Phelps preached a harsh Calvinist doctrine in a resounding Southern drawl. He believed that all people were born depraved, and that only a tiny elect who repented would be saved from Hell. A literalist, Phelps believed that contemporary Christianity, with its emphasis on God’s love, preached a perverted version of the Bible. Phelps denounced other Christians so vehemently that when Phelps-Roper was young she thought “Christian” was another word for evil. Phelps believed that God hated unrepentant sinners. God hated the politicians who were allowing the United States to descend into a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. He hated the celebrities who glorified fornication.

Phelps also believed that fighting the increasing tolerance of homosexuality was the key moral issue of our time. To illustrate gay sin, he described exotic sex acts in lurid detail. “He would say things like ‘These guys are slobbering around on each other and sucking on each other,’ ” Megan said. In awe of his conviction and deep knowledge of Scripture, she developed a revulsion to homosexuality. “We thought of him as a star in the right hand of God,” she said. Westboro had started as an offshoot of Topeka’s East Side Baptist Church, but by the time Phelps-Roper was born its congregation was composed mostly of Fred Phelps’s adult children and their families.

Nevertheless, Phelps-Roper didn’t grow up in isolation. Westboro believed that its members could best preach to the wicked by living among them. The children of Westboro attended Topeka public schools, and Phelps-Roper ran track, listened to Sublime CDs, and read Stephen King novels. If you knew the truth in your heart, Westboro believed, even the filthiest products of pop culture couldn’t defile you. She was friendly with her classmates and her teachers, but viewed them with extreme suspicion—she knew that they were either intentionally evil or deluded by God. “We would always say, They have nothing to offer us,” Phelps-Roper said. She never went to dances. Dating was out of the question. The Westboro students had a reputation for being diligent and polite in class, but at lunch they would picket the school, dodging food hurled at them by incensed classmates.

Phelps-Roper was constantly around family. Nine of Fred Phelps’s children were still in the church, and most of them had large families of their own. Many of them worked as lawyers at Phelps Chartered. The church was in a residential neighborhood in southwest Topeka, and its members had bought most of the houses on the block around it. Their back yards were surrounded by a tall fence, creating a huge courtyard that was home to a trampoline, an in-ground pool, a playground, and a running track. They called the Westboro compound the Block, and considered it a sanctuary in a world full of evil. “We did lots of fun normal-kids stuff,” Megan said.

The Phelps-Roper home was the biggest on the Block, and a room in the basement acted as a kind of community center for Westboro. An alcove in the kitchen had cubbies for the signs that were used in pickets. On summer afternoons, Shirley led Bible readings for young members. She had a central role in nearly every aspect of Westboro’s operations: she was its media coördinator, planned the pickets, and managed Phelps Chartered. A parade of journalists and Westboro members sought meetings with her. Louis Theroux, a British filmmaker who made two

documentaries about Westboro, said, “My feeling was that there was a pecking order and there was an unacknowledged hierarchy, and at the top of it was Shirley’s family.” Starting in middle school, Megan worked side by side with Shirley; among her siblings, she had a uniquely strong bond with her mother. “I felt like I could ask her anything about anything,” Megan told me.

Other young Westboro members regarded Shirley with a mixture of fear and respect. “Shirley had a very abrasive personality,” Josh Phelps said. But, he added, she could be remarkably tender when dispensing advice or compliments. Megan lacked Shirley’s hard edge. “She was just happy in general,” her cousin Libby Phelps, one of Megan’s close friends, told me.

Shirley, as Westboro’s de-facto spokeswoman, granted interviews to almost any outlet, no matter how obscure or adversarial. “She was smart and funny, and would answer impertinent questions and not be offended about it,” Megan said. When reporters wanted the perspective of a young person, Shirley let them speak to Megan. In sixth grade, Megan gave her first live interview when she answered a call from a couple of radio d.j.s who wanted to speak to her mother. Megan recalls, “They thought it was hilarious, this eleven-year-old talking about hating Jews.”

Obedience was one of the most important values that Shirley instilled in Megan. She would sum up the Bible in three words: “Obey. Obey. Obey.” The smallest hint of dissent was seen as an intolerable act of rebellion against God. Megan was taught that there would always be a tension between what she felt and thought as a human and what the Bible required of her. But giving place to rebellious thoughts was the first step down the path toward Hell. “The tone of your voice or the look on your face—you could get into so much trouble for these things, because they betray what’s in your heart,” she said. Her parents took to heart the proverb “He that spareth his rod hateth his son.” Her uncle gave them a novelty wooden paddle inscribed with the tongue-in-cheek direction “May be used on any child from 5 to 75,” and her father hung it on the wall next to the family photos. The joke hit close to home for Phelps-Roper, who was spanked well into her teens. Sometimes, she told me, “it went too far, for sure.” But, she added, “I also always knew that they were just trying to do what God required of them.”

As she grew older, she came to find comfort, and even joy, in submitting her will to the word of God. Children in Westboro must make a profession of faith before they are baptized and become full members of the church. One day in June, when she was thirteen, her grandfather baptized her in the shallow end of the Block’s pool. “I wanted to do everything right,” she said. “I wanted to be good, and I wanted to be obedient, and I wanted to be the object of my parents’ pride. I wanted to go to Heaven.”

Westboro started picketing in June, 1991, when Phelps-Roper was five years old. Fred Phelps believed that Gage Park, less than a mile from the Block, had become overrun with gay men cruising for sex. Phelps claimed that he was inspired to launch the Great Gage Park Decency Drive, as he called it, after one of his young grandsons was propositioned while biking through the park. The church sought redress from city officials, to no avail, so throughout the summer church members, including Megan, protested every day, walking in a circle while holding signs with messages written in permanent marker such as “WARNING! GAYS IN THE BUSHES! WATCH YOUR CHILDREN!” and “AND GOD OVER-THREW SODOM.”

The pickets were met with an immediate backlash from the community, but Phelps was not deterred. He had been a committed civil-rights attorney in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, one of the few lawyers to represent black Kansans in discrimination suits, before the state disbarred him, in 1979, for harassing a court reporter who failed to have a transcript ready in time. Now Westboro targeted local churches, politicians, businesses, journalists, and anyone else who criticized Phelps’s crusade. Throughout the nineties, Westboro members crisscrossed the country, protesting the funerals of AIDS victims and gay-pride parades. They picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard, the gay man whose murder, in what was widely believed to be a hate crime, became a rallying cry for gay-rights activists. They picketed high schools, concerts, conferences, and film festivals, no matter how tenuous the connection to homosexuality or other sins. “Eventually, the targets broadened such that everyone was a target,” Phelps-Roper said.

Phelps-Roper enjoyed picketing. When the targets were within driving distance, the group packed into a minivan and her grandfather saw them off from his driveway. “At five in the morning, he’d come out and give us all hugs,” she said. When they flew, she and Libby recounted “Saturday Night Live” skits. Amazing things happened on the trips. In New Orleans, they ran into Ehud Barak, the former Israeli Prime

Minister, and serenaded him with an anti-Semitic parody of Israel's national anthem. Phelps-Roper learned to hold two signs in each hand, a technique that Westboro members called the Butterfly. Her favorite slogans were "GOD IS YOUR ENEMY," "NO PEACE FOR THE WICKED," "GOD HATES YOUR IDOLS," and "MOURN FOR YOUR SINS." She laughed and sang and smiled in the face of angry crowds. "If you were ever upset or even scared, you do not show it, because this is not the time or the place," she said. Phelps-Roper believed that she was engaged in a profound act of love. Leviticus 19:17 commands, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him." "When you see someone is backing into traffic, you yell at them," Phelps-Roper said. "You don't mope around and say it's such a good idea."

One of the most common questions she was asked on the picket line was why she hated gay people so much. She didn't hate gay people, she would reply, God hated gay people. And the rest of the world hated them, too, by cheering them on as they doomed themselves to Hell. "We love these fags more than anyone," she would say.

In the summer of 2005, Westboro began protesting the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, holding signs like "THANK GOD FOR IEDS." "They turned the country over to the fags—they're coming home in body bags!" Fred Phelps would say. He believed that 9/11 was God's punishment for America's embrace of homosexuality, but that, instead of repenting, Americans had drowned this warning in a flood of patriotism. Phelps believed that God had killed the soldiers to warn a doomed America, and that it was the church's job to make this fact explicit for the mourners. The scale of the picketing increased dramatically. One of Phelps-Roper's aunts checked the Department of Defense Web site every day for notifications of casualties. The outrage sparked by the soldier-funeral protests dwarfed anything that Phelps-Roper had experienced previously. Crowds of rowdy, sometimes violent counterprotesters tried to block their signs with huge American flags. A group of motorcyclists called the Patriot Guard Riders eventually began to follow Westboro members around the country, revving their engines to drown out their singing.

Phelps-Roper picketed her first military funeral in July, 2005, in Omaha. She was nineteen years old and a sophomore at Washburn University, a secular public college in Topeka, where many Westboro children went. The Westboro members stood across the street from the church, in a quiet neighborhood in South Omaha, as the mourners filed in. "Everybody's in close quarters, and marines in dress blues are just staring at us with—the word that comes to mind is hateful 'disgust.' Like 'How could you possibly do this?'" Phelps-Roper said. But, before the picket, she asked her mother to walk her through the Bible passages that justified their actions. "I'm, like, O.K., it's there," she said. "This is right." She added, "This was the only hope for mankind, and I was so grateful to be part of this ministry."

In September, 2009, when Phelps-Roper began to use Twitter in earnest, Westboro was preparing for the end of the world. Fred Phelps had preached for years that the end was near, but his sermons grew more dire after Barack Obama's election in 2008. Phelps believed that Obama was the Antichrist, and that his Presidency signalled the beginning of the Apocalypse. The sense of looming calamity was heightened by a multimillion-dollar judgment against the church that had been awarded, in 2007, to Albert Snyder, who sued Westboro after it picketed the funeral of his son Matt, a U.S. marine killed in Iraq. Westboro members drew prophecies from the Book of Revelation about how the end might unfold. First, the Supreme Court would overturn the Snyder verdict. The country would be so enraged by Westboro's victory that its members would be forced to flee to Israel. Obama would be crowned king of the world, then lead every nation in war against Israel. Israel would be destroyed, and only a hundred and forty-four thousand Jews who repented for killing Jesus would be spared. (Revelation says that a hundred and forty-four thousand "children of Israel" are "redeemed from among men.") Westboro members would lead these converted Jews through the wilderness until Christ returned and ushered them into Heaven. Phelps-Roper and her family members all got passports, so that they could travel to Israel. One day, she was in the grocery store and picked up a container of yogurt with Oreo pieces. She stared at it, thinking, We won't have modern conveniences like this in the wilderness. Is it better to learn to live without them, or to enjoy them while we can?

Still, she had a hard time believing in aspects of the future foretold by some church members, like the idea that they would soon be living in pink caves in Jordan. "We were making specific predictions about things without having, in my mind, sufficient scriptural support," she said. Many other members shared her bewilderment, she found, and so she turned to Twitter for answers. Most of the prophecies centered on Jews,

so she found a list, published by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, a syndicated news service, of the hundred most influential Jewish Twitter users. She created an account under the pseudonym Marissa Cohen and followed many of the people on the list, hoping to learn if Westboro's prophecies were coming true.

As the prophecies were developed, Westboro expanded the focus of its preaching to include the Jewish community. Members hoped to find the hundred and forty-four thousand repentant Jews. They picketed synagogues and sent anti-Semitic DVDs to Jewish organizations. Westboro called the protests the Fateful Fig Find, after a parable in the Book of Jeremiah that compares Jews who had been captured by the Babylonians to two baskets of figs, one good and one "naughty." Phelps-Roper thought that this initiative was more explicitly supported by the Bible than other parts of the prophecies were, so she threw herself into the effort. She wrote the church's press release: "WBC IS LOOKING FOR THE GOOD FIGS AMONG THE CHRIST-REJECTING HYPOCRITES!" She looked at the J.T.A. list of influential Jews and saw that No. 2 was David Abitbol, a Jerusalem-based Web developer and the founder of the Jewish-culture blog Jewlicious. With more than four thousand followers and a habit of engaging with those who tweeted at him, he would be a prime target for Westboro's message of repentance, she figured.

On September 9, 2009, Shirley gave an interview to an Atlanta radio station, and Phelps-Roper shared a quote on Twitter. Phelps-Roper tagged Abitbol in the post so that he would see it. She wrote, "Atlanta: radio guy says 'Finish this sentence: the only good Jew is a . . .' Ma says 'REPENTANT Jew!' The only answer that suffices @jewlicious." "Thanks Megan!" he responded. "That's handy what with Yom Kippur coming up!" Phelps-Roper posted another tweet, spelling it out more clearly. "Oh & @jewlicious? Your dead rote rituals == true repentance. We know the diff. Rev. 3:9 You keep promoting sin, which belies the ugly truth." "Dead rote rituals?" he responded. "U mean like holding up God Hates Shrimp, err I mean Fag signs up? Your 'ministry' is a joke."

"Anybody's initial response to being confronted with the sort of stuff Westboro Baptist Church says is to tell them to fuck off," Abitbol told me. Abitbol is a large man in his early fifties who often has a shaggy Mohawk, which he typically covers with a Montreal Expos baseball cap. He was familiar with Westboro from its godhatesfags.com Web site. He had lived in Montreal in the nineties, and had become fascinated with the explosion of hate sites on the early Internet. "Most people, when they first get access to the Internet, the first thing they wanted to see was naked ladies," he told me. "The first thing I wanted to see was something I didn't have access to in Montreal: neo-Nazis and hate groups." There were few widely available search engines at the time, so he spent hours tracking down the Web sites of Holocaust deniers, anti-Semites, and racists of all types. He and a friend eventually created a directory called Net Hate, which listed the sites along with mocking descriptions. "We didn't want to debate them, we just wanted to make fun of them," he said. As for the Westboro members, "I just thought they were crazy."

Phelps-Roper got into an extended debate with Abitbol on Twitter. "Arguing is fun when you think you have all the answers," she said. But he was harder to get a bead on than other critics she had encountered. He had read the Old Testament in its original Hebrew, and was conversant in the New Testament as well. She was taken aback to see that he signed all his blog posts on Jewlicious with the handle "ck"—for "christ killer"—as if it were a badge of honor. Yet she found him funny and engaging. "I knew he was evil, but he was friendly, so I was especially wary, because you don't want to be seduced away from the truth by a crafty deceiver," Phelps-Roper said.

Abitbol had learned while running Net Hate that relating to hateful people on a human level was the best way to deal with them. He saw that Phelps-Roper had a lot of followers and was an influential person in the church, so he wanted to counter her message. And he wanted to humanize Jews to Westboro. "I wanted to be like really nice so that they would have a hard time hating me," he said. One day, he tweeted about the television show "Gossip Girl," and Phelps-Roper responded jocularly about one of its characters. "You know, for an evil something something, you sure do crack me up," Abitbol responded.

On December 20, 2009, Phelps-Roper was in the basement of her house, for a church function, when she checked Twitter on her phone and saw that Brittany Murphy, the thirty-two-year-old actress, had died. When she read the tweet aloud, other church members reacted with glee, celebrating another righteous judgment from God. "Lots of people were talking about going to picket her funeral," Phelps-Roper said. When Phelps-Roper was younger, news of terrible events had given her a visceral thrill. On 9/11, she was in the crowded hallway of her high school when she overheard someone talking about how an airplane had hit the World Trade Center. "Awesome!" she exclaimed, to the

horror of a student next to her. She couldn't wait to picket Ground Zero. (The following March, she and other Westboro members travelled to New York City to protest what they described in a press release as "FDNY fags and terrorists.") But Phelps-Roper had loved Murphy in "Clueless," and she felt an unexpected pang—not quite sadness, but something close—over her death. As she continued scrolling through Twitter, she saw that it was full of people mourning Murphy. The contrast between the grief on Twitter and the buoyant mood in the basement unsettled her. She couldn't bring herself to post a tweet thanking God for Murphy's death. "I felt like I would be such a jackass to go on and post something like that," she said.

Her hesitance reflected a growing concern for the feelings of people outside Westboro. Church members disdained human feelings as something that people worshipped instead of the Bible. They even had a sign: "GOD HATES YOUR FEELINGS." They disregarded people's feelings in order to break their idols. Just a few months earlier, the Westboro Web site had received an e-mail arguing that the church's constant use of the word "fag" was needlessly offensive. "Get a grip, you presumptuous toad," Phelps-Roper had replied. She signed off, "Have a lovely day. You're going to Hell."

But on Twitter Phelps-Roper found that it was better to take a gentler tone. For one thing, Twitter's hundred-and-forty-character limit made it hard to fit both a florid insult and a scriptural point. And if she made things personal the conversation was inevitably derailed by a flood of angry tweets. She still preached God's hate, and still liberally deployed the word "fag," but she also sprinkled her tweets with cheerful exclamations and emoticons. She became adept at deflecting critics with a wry joke. "So, when do you drink the Kool-aid?" one user tweeted at her. "More of a Sunkist lemonade drinker, myself. =)" she replied. Phelps-Roper told me, "We weren't supposed to care about what people thought about us, but I did." As she developed her affable rhetorical style, she justified it with a proverb: "By long forbearing is a prince persuaded, and a soft tongue breaketh the bone."

Other Twitter users were fascinated by the dissonance between Westboro's loathsome reputation and the goofy, pop-culture-obsessed millennial who Phelps-Roper seemed to be on Twitter. "I remember just thinking, How can somebody who appreciates good music believe so many hateful things?" Graham Hughes said. In November, 2009, Hughes, then a college student in British Columbia, interviewed Phelps-Roper for a religious-studies class. Afterward, they corresponded frequently on Twitter. When Hughes was hospitalized with a brain infection, Phelps-Roper showed him more concern than many of his real-life friends. "I knew there was a genuine connection between us," he said.

As Phelps-Roper continued to tweet, she developed relationships with more people like Hughes. There was a Jewish marketing consultant in Brooklyn who abhorred Westboro's tactics but supported the church's right to express its views. There was a young Australian guy who tweeted political jokes that she and her younger sister Grace found hilarious. "It was like I was becoming part of a community," Phelps-Roper said. By following her opponents' feeds, she absorbed their thoughts on the world, learned what food they ate, and saw photographs of their babies. "I was beginning to see them as human," she said. When she read about an earthquake that struck off Canada's Pacific coast, she sent a concerned tweet to Graham Hughes: "Isn't this close to you?"

In February, 2010, Westboro protested a festival in Long Beach, California, that David Abitbol had organized through Jewlicious. Phelps-Roper's conversations with Abitbol had continued through the winter, and she knew that debating him in person would be more challenging than on Twitter. The church set up its picket a block from the Jewish community center where the festival was taking place. Phelps-Roper held four signs, while an Israeli flag dragged on the ground from her leg. The church members were quickly mobbed by an angry crowd. "Each of us was really surrounded," Phelps-Roper said. "Two really old women came up behind me and started whispering the filthiest stuff I'd ever heard."

She recognized Abitbol from his Twitter avatar. They made some small talk—Abitbol was amused by a sign, held by one of Phelps-Roper's sisters, that said "YOUR RABBI IS A WHORE"—then began to debate her about Westboro's doctrine. "Our in-person interaction resembled our Twitter interaction," Phelps-Roper said. "Funny, friendly, but definitely on opposite sides and each sticking to our guns." Abitbol asked why Westboro always denounced homosexuality but never mentioned the fact that Leviticus also forbade having sex with a woman who was menstruating. The question embarrassed Phelps-Roper—"I didn't want to talk about it because, ugh"—but it did strike her as an interesting

point. As far as she could remember, her grandfather had never addressed that issue from the pulpit. Still, Phelps-Roper enjoyed the exchange with Abitbol. Not long after, she told him that Westboro would be picketing the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations, in New Orleans, that year. Abitbol said that he'd be there, too, and when they met again they exchanged gifts.

Phelps-Roper and Abitbol continued their conversations via e-mail and Twitter's direct-message function. In Phelps-Roper's effort to better understand Westboro's new prophecies, she had bought a copy of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism," but she found it more profitable just to ask Abitbol her questions. Here was a real live Orthodox Jew who lived in Israel and was more than happy to enlighten her. During their debates over Scripture, Phelps-Roper sometimes quoted passages from the Old Testament; Abitbol often countered that their meaning differed in the original Hebrew, so Phelps-Roper bought some language-learning software. She figured that, since she would soon be living in Israel awaiting the end of the world, she should learn the language. Abitbol helped her with the vocabulary.

Phelps-Roper still urged Abitbol to repent, but as someone who was concerned about a wayward friend. "I just wish you would obey God and use your considerable platform to warn your audience about the consequences of engaging in conduct that God calls abomination," she e-mailed Abitbol in October, 2010.

In response, Abitbol kept pressing Phelps-Roper on Westboro's doctrine. One day, he asked about a Westboro sign that said "DEATH PENALTY FOR FAGS," referring to a commandment from Leviticus. Abitbol pointed out that Jesus had said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." Abitbol knew that at least one member of Westboro had committed a sin that Leviticus also deems a capital crime. Phelps-Roper's oldest brother, Sam, was the product of a relationship that Shirley had had with a man she met while she was in law school, before she married Megan's father.

Shirley's sin of fornication was often thrown in the church members' faces by counterprotesters. Westboro always argued that the difference between Shirley and gay people was that Shirley had repented of her sin, whereas gays marched in pride parades. But Abitbol wrote that if gay people were killed they wouldn't have the opportunity to repent.

Phelps-Roper was struck by the double standard, and, as she did whenever she had a question about doctrine, she brought up the issue with her mother. Shirley responded that Romans said gays were "worthy of death," and that if it was good enough for God it was good enough for Westboro. "It was such a settled point that they've been preaching for so long it's almost like it didn't mean anything to her," Phelps-Roper said. Still, she concluded that Westboro was in the wrong. "That was the first time I came to a place where I disagreed, I knew I disagreed, and I didn't accept the answer that they gave," she said. Phelps-Roper knew that to press the issue would create problems for her in the church, so she quietly stopped holding the "DEATH PENALTY FOR FAGS" sign. There were plenty of other signs whose message she still believed in wholeheartedly. She also put an end to the conversations with Abitbol.

Phelps-Roper found it easy to ignore her doubt amid the greater publicity that Westboro was receiving, much of it tied to her Twitter activity. In February, 2011, the hacker collective Anonymous declared war against Westboro. On Twitter, Phelps-Roper taunted the group's members as "crybaby hackers." Anonymous retaliated by hacking godhatesfags.com, and blogs seized on the drama. "Thanks, Anonymous! Your efforts to shut up God's word only serve to publish it further," Phelps-Roper tweeted. In March, Westboro members walked out of a screening of the film "Red State," which spoofed the church. They had been invited by the director, Kevin Smith, with whom Phelps-Roper had kept up a running feud on Twitter since World AIDS Day. Ten days earlier, the Supreme Court had overturned the judgment against Westboro in the Albert Snyder case. Phelps-Roper was inundated with tweets and new followers. That month, she tweeted more than two thousand times; by the end of the month, she had more than seven thousand followers. "That explosion of activity, it was insane," she said.

But as other members of the church joined Twitter they began to question her friendly relations with outsiders. In April, 2011, the BBC aired one of Louis Theroux's documentaries about Westboro. In one scene, Phelps-Roper explained how she used Twitter to keep up with a group of four Dutch filmmakers who had visited Westboro in 2010. She showed Theroux a picture of one of the filmmakers, Pepijn Borgwat, a smiling, handsome young man holding a package of chocolate truffles that she and her sister Grace had given to him.

The day after the documentary aired, Sam Phelps-Roper sent an e-mail to church members urging more discretion in their tweets. “I understand the concept of showing the world our brotherly kindness, but we don’t have to let it all hang out,” he wrote. Megan’s father made her block the Dutch journalists from her private Twitter account. “It feels like we are opening ourselves up for entangling ourselves with the affairs or cares of this life,” he e-mailed Phelps-Roper and her siblings. Phelps-Roper said, “It made me scared for myself that I wanted that. And so I was, like, ‘O.K., you gotta step back.’ ”

Another online relationship proved more threatening. In February, 2011, Phelps-Roper began to have conversations on Twitter with a user named @F_K_A. His avatar was Robert Redford in “The Great Gatsby.” He had learned of Westboro after reading an article about the Anonymous hack. “He sent me a tweet, and initially it was like this angry, nasty tweet,” Phelps-Roper said. But @F_K_A was disarmed by Phelps-Roper’s friendly demeanor. He began to ask her questions about life in Westboro, and, because he was curious instead of condemning, she kept answering them. One day, Phelps-Roper recalled, “I asked him some kind of pointed question about the Bible. He said something like, ‘I can’t answer that, but I have never been beaten in Words with Friends’”—the popular online Scrabble knockoff. Phelps-Roper replied, “I can’t boast the same. =)” She put her Words with Friends username at the end of the tweet.

They began to talk about the church using the in-game chat function, free from Twitter’s character limit. @F_K_A told Phelps-Roper to call him C.G. But C.G. remained a mystery. She knew that he was an attorney, but she didn’t know where he lived or how old he was. “He was careful not to reveal anything about himself,” Phelps-Roper said.

Like David Abitbol, C.G. argued against Westboro’s beliefs and practices, but while Abitbol’s arguments were doctrinal C.G. was most critical of Westboro’s cruelty. “We had the same discussion several times when someone would die,” Phelps-Roper said. C.G. urged Phelps-Roper to think of how much hurt it must cause the families of the deceased to see Phelps-Roper and her family rejoicing. Westboro divided people into good and evil, but, Phelps-Roper said, C.G. “always tried to advocate for a third group of people: people who were decent but not religious.” She had heard all these arguments before, but they had never affected her as they did when C.G. made them. “I just really liked him,” she said. “He seemed to genuinely like people and care about people, and that resonated with me.”

Phelps-Roper increasingly found herself turning to Bible passages where tragedy is not met with joy. The Old Testament prophet Elisha, for example, weeps when he foresees disaster for Israel. One day in July, 2011, Phelps-Roper was on Twitter when she came across a link to a series of photographs about a famine in Somalia. The first image was of a tiny malnourished child. She burst into tears at her desk. Her mother asked what was wrong, and Phelps-Roper showed her the gallery. Her mother quickly composed a triumphant blog post about the famine. “Thank God for famine in East Africa!” she wrote. “God is longsuffering and patient, but he repays the wicked TO THEIR FACE!” When Brittany Murphy died, Phelps-Roper had seen the disparity between her reaction and that of the rest of the church as a sign that something was wrong with her. Now the contradiction of her mother’s glee and her own sadness made her wonder if something was wrong with the church.

Phelps-Roper’s conversations with C.G. often drifted away from morality. C.G. liked indie rock and literary fiction. He introduced Phelps-Roper to bands like the Antlers, Blind Pilot, and Cults—“funnily enough,” she said—and to the novels of David Foster Wallace and Marilynne Robinson. “Hipster shit,” Phelps-Roper said. He turned her on to the Field Notes brand of notebooks. He poked fun at the inelegant fonts that Westboro used for its press releases. After C.G. complimented her on her grammar, she took pains to make sure that her tweets were free of clunky text-message abbreviations.

As Phelps-Roper developed her relationship with C.G., her sister Grace grew suspicious. “Suddenly, her taste in music started changing,” Grace told me. “It annoyed me, because it wasn’t coming from Megan. It was coming from him, this question mark of a person that I don’t get to know about, but she has some kind of thing with.” As young children, Grace and Megan had squabbled constantly, but they had grown close. Grace was seven years younger than Megan, and still in high school at the time. Grace would scroll through Megan’s iPhone, asking about the various messages and e-mails. But soon after Megan started talking to C.G. she stopped letting Grace look at her phone. “I remember thinking, What the heck? What are you hiding?” Grace said.

For young women in Westboro, having romantic interactions with someone outside the church was forbidden. When Phelps-Roper was growing up, one of her cousins had been pushed out of the church for, among other things, getting entangled with boys; other young women had been harshly punished. Phelps-Roper had long assumed that she would likely never get married, since she was related to almost every male in the church. “I was terrified of even thinking about guys,” she said. “It’s not just the physical stuff that can get you in trouble.” She did her best to displace her feelings for C.G. onto the music and books he recommended, which she fervently consumed. “I was in denial,” she said.

Then, on September 30, 2011, she had a dream: It was a beautiful summer day, and she was standing on the driveway of the church. A black car with tinted windows pulled up, and a tall, blond man got out. She couldn’t see his face, but she knew it was C.G. She walked up to him, and they embraced. She knew her family could see them on the surveillance cameras that line the Block, but she didn’t care. “It was so real, that feeling of wanting to be with him,” Phelps-Roper told me. She woke up fighting back tears. “He was not a good person, according to the church,” she said. “And the fact that I dreamed about him, and the strong feeling of wanting that relationship, represented huge danger to me.” That day, she told C.G. that they couldn’t talk anymore. She deleted her Words with Friends account. C.G. deleted his Twitter account.

Phelps-Roper tried to throw herself back into the Westboro community, but the atmosphere had changed while she was distracted by her relationship with C.G. It had started in April, 2011. Her mother seemed mysteriously troubled. After Phelps-Roper pressed her parents, they showed her an e-mail they’d received from her oldest brother, Sam, and Steve Drain, another church member. It accused her mother of lacking humility, saying that she was too zealous in correcting other members’ behavior and had overreached her authority on a number of occasions, Phelps-Roper told me. Reading the e-mail made her sick with fear. When a Westboro member was singled out for bad behavior, it often triggered a harrowing period of discipline. The smallest transgression could spark another round of punishment, until the member either shaped up or was kicked out of the church.

Shirley’s role in the church was reduced dramatically. “My mother was supposed to be primarily a mother and a caretaker,” Zach Phelps-Roper, Megan’s younger brother, told me. Megan took over picket planning, while Steve Drain became the church’s media manager. The Phelps-Roper house was now quiet, as the flow of church members and reporters stopped. “I watched her all my life work so hard and sacrifice so much, and just be so willing to do anything for anybody,” Phelps-Roper said. “She had to be put in her place, essentially, and that feeling—it just was really, really wrong to me.” (Drain insists that Megan’s description of the letter is inaccurate. He said that it was a “disciplinary message,” but wouldn’t reveal its contents. “We don’t air our dirty laundry,” he said.)

An all-male group of nine elders took control of church affairs. Previously, decisions at Westboro had been hashed out in church meetings, where consensus was required before moving forward. But the elders met separately before bringing their decisions to the rest of the group. The church became more secretive, as members were reluctant to discuss important issues for fear of appearing to go behind the elders’ backs.

Women like Shirley and her older sister Margie—an attorney who had argued the Snyder case in front of the Supreme Court—had always been among the most public and influential members of the church. Westboro members drew on stories of powerful women in the Bible, like Deborah, a prophet and judge of Israel. But now the emphasis shifted to passages about women submitting to their husbands. Fred Phelps encouraged church members to read the Evangelical writer John R. Rice’s book “Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers,” from 1941, which offered a view of gender roles that was regressive even when it was published. “It suddenly sucked to be a woman,” Phelps-Roper said. “It was, like, I would need to get permission from Dad to talk to anybody else.”

Westboro women had long been forbidden to cut their hair, and had restrictions on other aspects of their appearance. But now the elders required more severe standards of modesty. Phelps-Roper had to wear high-necked shirts and dresses or shorts that covered her knees. After one shopping trip with her mother and her sisters, Phelps-Roper had to show her clothes to her father and her brother Sam, to make sure that they were appropriate. She was barred from wearing colorful nail polish and her favorite gold sandals to church. Phelps-Roper was upset to learn that some of her cousins lived under more liberal standards. How could God’s judgment differ from house to house?

helps-Roper's confusion soon turned to outrage. In 2012, she was twenty-six years old, but she was still being treated like a child. Once-minor indignities, like being accompanied by an adult chaperone while eating lunch at a restaurant with other young church members, now seemed unbearable. In April, she was shocked when Westboro expelled a cousin of hers without adhering to the process that the church had always followed, which was derived from the Book of Matthew. Typically, expulsion resulted only after a unanimous decision, but in the cousin's case she was excluded over other members' objections. (Drain recalls no objections, and said, "Everything was done decently and in accordance with Scripture.") "It stopped feeling like this larger-than-life divine institution ordained and led by God, and more like the sniping and sordid activity of men who wanted to be in control," Phelps-Roper said.

She resented the increasing authority wielded by Drain. One of the few Westboro members unrelated to Fred Phelps, Drain had visited Topeka in 2000 to film a skeptical documentary about the church, but he soon became convinced of its message. The next year, he and his family joined the church. He'd long pushed for a larger role in Westboro, and after the elders came to power his influence increased. In February, 2012, during the funeral of Whitney Houston, in New Jersey, Drain urged Phelps-Roper and other members to tweet poorly Photoshopped images that depicted them haranguing mourners. The media quickly unravelled the hoax. (Drain told me that the fake picket was never meant to be taken literally.)

Phelps-Roper was embarrassed by the debacle. It undermined her own proud claims on Twitter to be spreading God's truth—and lying violated Scripture. In addition, she now had to have all her media appearances approved by Drain. "It seems like he wants to be Pope Steve and for no one else to do anything without his permission," she wrote in her journal. "I hate it so much."

Megan's doubt engendered by the "DEATH PENALTY FOR FAGS" sign grew. She started to complain to her mother, saying that the elders were not obeying the Bible. They treated her mother and other members with cruelty when the Bible required brotherly love, she said. The elders acted arrogantly and tolerated no dissent, when God demanded meekness and humility. Phelps-Roper was struck by the similarities between her arguments and what C.G. and David Abitbol had always said about the church. "It was like we were finally doing to ourselves what we had done to everyone else," she said. "Seeing those parallels was really disorienting."

Drain disputed many of Phelps-Roper's characterizations of the changes in the church. He acknowledged that an all-male group of elders assumed preaching duties, but not that this led to a less open atmosphere in the church. "There's definitely more participation than when I first got here, in 2001, when you had one person doing all the sermons," he said, referring to Fred Phelps.

He also denied that women in the church had been significantly marginalized. "Women do a lot at Westboro now, as they always have," he said. Shirley's role was not reduced as a punishment for overstepping her bounds, he said. Instead, after the Snyder decision, other members had volunteered to help her deal with an overwhelming torrent of media. "We lifted her burden," he said. He pointed out that Shirley had recently spoken at a picket protesting Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk who had refused to issue marriage licenses to gay couples—the church took issue with Davis's remarriages after divorce. (Through Drain, Megan's parents declined to comment.)

Phelps-Roper first considered leaving the church on July 4, 2012. She and Grace were in the basement of another Westboro family's house, painting the walls. The song "Just One," by the indie folk group Blind Pilot—a band that C.G. had recommended—played on the stereo. The lyrics seemed to reflect her dilemma perfectly: "And will I break and will I bow / if I cannot let it go?" Then came the chorus: "I can't believe we get just one." She suddenly thought, What if Westboro had been wrong about everything? What if she was spending her one life hurting people, picking fights with the entire world, for nothing? "It was, like, just the fact that I thought about it, I had to leave right then," she said. "I felt like I was going to jump out of my skin."

The next day, she mentioned the possibility of leaving to Grace. Grace was horrified. "It just sounded ridiculous to even suggest it," Grace told me. "These were the points I brought up: we're never going to see our families again, we're going to go to Hell for eternity, and our life will be meaningless." Megan, still uncertain, agreed. But she plunged into a profound crisis of faith. "It was like flipping a switch," she said. "So many other thoughts came in that I'd never pursued, and that's every doubt that I'd ever had, everything that had ever seemed illogical or off."

When they were together, Megan engaged Grace in interminable theological conversations. When they were apart, Megan detailed her doubts in text messages. One day, she texted Grace, “What if the God of the Bible isn’t the God of creation? We don’t believe that the Koran has the truth about God. Is it just because we were told forever that this is How Things Are?” She added, “Does it really make you happy when you hear about people dying or starving or being maimed? Do you really want to ask God to hurt people? I ask myself these questions. I think the answer is no. When I’m not scared of the answer, I know the answer is no.” Two days later, she texted Grace about Hell: “Why do we think it’s real? It’s starting to seem made up to scare people into doing what they say.” Grace replied, “But what if?”

That day, Grace wrote to Megan, “Our belief in God has always curbed everything. Like, pain & sorrow, I mean. Without that we’d only have our belief in each other. But we are human & humans die. What would we have if we didn’t have each other?” For Megan, the answer could be found in other people. “We know what it is to be kind & good to people,” she wrote. “We would just have to find somewhere else, other people to love and care about and help, too.” Grace wrote back, “I don’t want other people.” In truth, Megan didn’t want other people, either; she desperately wanted things in Westboro to go back to the way they had been. But the idea of living among outsiders was no longer unimaginable.

Phelps-Roper spent the summer and the fall in an existential spiral. She would conclude that everything about Westboro’s doctrine was wrong, only to be seized with terror that these thoughts were a test from God, and she was failing. “You literally feel insane,” she said. Eventually, her doubts won out. “I just couldn’t keep up the charade,” she said. “I couldn’t bring myself to do the things we were doing and say the things we were saying.”

She largely stopped tweeting and tried to avoid journalists on the picket line, for fear that she might say something that revealed her misgivings. At one protest, a journalism student cornered her and asked if she ever got tired of picketing. “I honestly replied no,” she wrote in her journal. “It’s not about being tired, it’s about not believing in it anymore. If I believed it, I could do it forever.” In October, Megan finally persuaded Grace to leave. At the end of October, the sisters started secretly moving their possessions to the house of one of their high-school teachers, who agreed to help them. Many of Megan and Grace’s young relatives who left the church had slipped away quietly, in order to avoid confronting their families. But the sisters wanted to explain to their parents the reasons behind their decision.

As the sisters agonized over whether to leave, they befriended an older man in the church and his wife, eventually becoming allies in discontent. For a while, they all planned to leave together. Then the couple’s marriage began to deteriorate, and the husband told Megan and Grace that they were going to divorce. Grace became involved in a brief romantic relationship with the man. After the relationship ended, the wife learned about it, and sent a letter to Megan and Grace’s parents revealing both the relationship and the sisters’ plan to leave.

On Sunday, November 11th, the family had just returned from church when Megan and Grace were called into their parents’ bedroom, where their father began to read the letter out loud. Megan told Grace quietly that they had to leave: “It was like the world was exploding and I didn’t want to be around to see it.” Their mother tried to calm things down. Their parents wanted to talk things over—they seemed to think that the sisters could be persuaded to stay—but Megan and Grace had made up their minds. As Grace packed, their father came into her room and asked what she wanted the church to do differently. “I want you and everyone else to leave with me,” Grace replied. Their parents were stunned, but they didn’t try to force the sisters to stay.

As the sisters packed, their younger brother Zach sat at the piano downstairs, crying and playing hymns, which he hoped might change their mind. Other church members stopped by to say goodbye and to warn the sisters of the consequences of their decision. “The fact that I’m coming face to face with the damage that I was doing to them was even worse than anything else that was happening to me,” Phelps-Roper said. Her parents told her to say goodbye to her grandfather. She walked over to the residence where her grandparents lived, above the church sanctuary. When Megan told them she was leaving, her grandfather looked at her grandmother and said, “Well, I thought we had a jewel this time.”

Megan and Grace's father drove them to a hotel in Topeka, where he had paid for a room, but they were too scared to spend the night alone, so they called the teacher who had agreed to store their boxes. That night, they cried themselves to sleep on couches in his basement. Megan and Grace returned to their house the next day with a U-Haul truck to pick up their remaining possessions. As they walked away for the last time, Shirley called after them, "You know you can always come back."

For the next few months, the sisters drifted. They lived in Lawrence for a month with their cousin Libby, who had also left the church, while Grace finished the first semester of her sophomore year at Washburn. They travelled to Deadwood, South Dakota, because Megan wanted to see the Black Hills. As she drove there, she kept imagining her car careering off the highway—she was so afraid of God's wrath. "We were a mess, crying all the time," she said. Phelps-Roper was tempted to hide in the Black Hills forever, but soon decided that, after spending so many years as the public face of Westboro, she wanted to go public with how she'd left the church, and to start making amends for the hurt she had caused. In February, 2013, she wrote a statement on the blogging platform Medium. "Until now, our names have been synonymous with 'God Hates Fags,'" she wrote. "What we can do is try to find a better way to live from here on." She posted a link to the statement on Twitter. It was her first tweet in three months. "Hi," she wrote. Tweets of encouragement and praise poured in. "I expected a lot more people to be unforgiving," she said.

When David Abitbol learned that the sisters had left Westboro, he invited them to speak at the next Jewlicious festival in Long Beach. They agreed, hoping that the experience might help them to find their way, and to finally understand a community that they had vilified for so long. "It was like we were just reaching out and grabbing on to whatever was around," Megan said. Abitbol said, "People, before they met them, were like, 'So, now they're not batshit-crazy gay haters and we're supposed to love them? Fuck that.'" He added, "And then they heard them speak, and there wasn't a dry eye in the house." The sisters befriended their hosts, an Orthodox rabbi and his family. They went kosher-grocery shopping together, and Megan and Grace looked after the kids. Grace became especially close with the family, and ended up staying for more than a month. "They were amazing and super-kind," Phelps-Roper said. Abitbol joked about the dramatic role reversal: "Your Rabbi Is a Whore? Your rabbi is a *bast*."

Megan tried to put herself in situations that challenged the intolerance she had been indoctrinated with. One evening, after speaking at a Jewish festival in Montreal, she and Grace passed a group of drag queens on the sidewalk outside a cabaret. She felt a surge of disgust, but when Grace asked if they could watch the show she agreed. "It felt illicit," she said. "Like, oh, my gosh, I can't believe I'm here." She and Grace ended up dancing onstage during the intermission. Wherever Megan and Grace went, they met people who wanted to help them, despite all the hurt they had caused. The experience solidified Megan's increasing conviction that no person or group could claim a monopoly on moral truth. Slowly, her fears about God's judgment—the first terrifying understanding of her faith as a child, and its most stubborn remnant—faded. "As undeniable as they had seemed before, they seemed just as impossible now," she said.

One Sunday last February, I went with Megan and Grace to visit their old neighborhood. We parked a few blocks from the church and walked down a quiet street lined with ranch-style homes. It was sunny and warm for a winter day in Kansas. Phelps-Roper wore a green polka-dot dress and high leather boots, and her long curly hair—she still hadn't cut it since leaving the church—fell down her back. Now twenty-nine, she lives in a small town in South Dakota, where she works at a title company. Six months after she left the church, she went on a date with C.G. They met in Omaha, in driving distance for both of them, and saw "The Great Gatsby," the Baz Luhrmann movie. "It's hard to even describe how weird it was," she told me. It was her first date ever, and it was with someone who had become a symbol of the unattainable. "I was quite a bit like a teen-ager. He put his arm around my waist at one point, and I just stood up so straight." She and C.G. connected as strongly in person as they had online, and they now live together.

When we reached the Block, we walked along the privacy fence. In front of each house where Westboro members live, Megan pointed out colorful numbers on the curb; Grace had helped paint them when she was a teen-ager. We passed the Phelps-Roper house and came to an intersection. A group of men and boys came toward us. "I can't tell yet, but it sure looks like a group of brothers and cousins," Megan said. First came five of their young cousins, followed by two of their brothers, Sam and Noah. Steve Drain, a large bearded man, trailed behind. They

carried tools. Megan later explained that they had probably just come from doing repairs on a Westboro member's house. The group passed us without stopping. Grace called out, "Hi!" Sam nodded and gave a terse smile and a small wave. "Hi, how are you?" he said. Sam and Noah had recently had birthdays, and Megan wished them a belated happy birthday. The sisters said nothing to Drain. The crew quickly disappeared into a house.

We reached the church, an unremarkable white and brown mock-Tudor building on the northeast corner of the Block. A banner advertised a Westboro Web site, godhatesamerica.com. Two American flags—one of them rainbow colored—flew upside down from a pole. The church sign read "ST. VALENTINE IS A CATHOLIC IDOL AND AN EXCUSE TO FORNIFICATE! JUDE 7."

Directly across the street stood a house painted in bright, horizontal rainbow stripes. The house had been bought, in 2012, by Planting Peace, a nonprofit group whose mission, according to its Web site, is "spreading peace in a hurting world." The Equality House, as it's known, is home to a group of young L.G.B.T. activists. Planting Peace has worked with former Westboro members to spread its message of tolerance. Megan first visited the house in 2013, after her cousin Libby encouraged her to visit. She sneaked in the back door, for fear of being spotted by her family.

Today, Megan and Grace's only connection to Westboro is virtual. Although Phelps-Roper no longer believes that the Bible is the word of God, she still reads it to try to find scriptural arguments that could encourage Westboro to take a more humane approach to the world. Sometimes she'll tweet passages, knowing that church members will see them. After they left the church, Megan and Grace were blocked from Westboro's Twitter accounts, but they created a secret account to follow them. Sometimes, when her mother appears in a video, Megan will loop it over and over, just to hear her voice.

Fred Phelps died in March, 2014, at the age of eighty-four. Former members of the church told me that Fred had had a softening of heart at the end of his life and had been excommunicated. (The church denies these claims.) Zach Phelps-Roper, Megan's younger brother, who left the church later that year, said that one of the precipitating events in Fred's exclusion had been expressing kindness toward the Equality House. At a church meeting, Zach recalls, members discussed the episode: "He stepped out the front door of the church and looked at the Rainbow House, the Planting Peace organization, and looked over and said, 'You're good people.'" ♦

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COMMUNITY

A Great Thinker Rediscovered His Judaism on the Day of Atonement

Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig was set to convert to Christianity a century ago. Yom Kippur services changed his mind.

BY JAMES WINCHELL

SEPTEMBER 09, 2013



Franz Rosenzweig as a young man in Goettingen, 1905. (Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute)

In October 1913, 100 years ago these High Holidays, 26-year-old philosopher (and Jew) Franz Rosenzweig was preparing for a crucial conversion ceremony: his own, to Christianity.

However, because he insisted on converting “as a Jew, not as a ‘pagan,’” Rosenzweig dutifully attended services on the Day of Atonement 1913 at a small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin. In his mind, participation in the Day of Atonement was a necessary, preparatory step toward his Christian baptism. “Here was a Jew,” writes Nahum N. Glatzer in his biography of Rosenzweig, “who did not wish to ‘break off,’ but who deliberately aimed to ‘go through’ Judaism to Christianity.”

What happened to him thereafter constitutes a paradox difficult to grasp: How is it possible that Rosenzweig’s reconnection with his native Judaism could occur only when he stood upon the virtual threshold of a Christian altar? And what role did his participation in the Yom Kippur service for 1913 play in his ultimate decision not to convert to Christianity?

Rosenzweig’s life after that determinate day, writes Glatzer, is nothing less than “the story of a rediscovery of Judaism.” Rosenzweig’s subsequent writings—most notably “Atheistic Theology” (1914), the magisterial *Star of Redemption* (1919), *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* (1921), and “The New Thinking” (1925)—serve to short-list him among a handful of the greatest of Jewish thinkers since Rashi, Yehuda Halevi (whose Hebrew poetry Rosenzweig translated into German), and Maimonides.

To some, this inclusion of a 20th-century writer on a short-list of the all-time greatest Jewish philosophers must appear almost heretical. Paradoxically, however, reading Rosenzweig’s reasoning after his (non-)conversion experience during the Days of Awe in 1913, especially in light of the rest of his too-short life, brings traditional Jewish philosophy into sharper focus today: Which ideas, if any, in the modern philosopher’s subsequent writings fulfill traditional Judaism’s promise to the modern world?

When one reads Rosenzweig’s *oeuvre*, it becomes clear that his prime concern is idolatry. His approach focuses not on “graven images” themselves, however, nor their prohibition: It has to do with how human beings misapply the second commandment, in practice more than in mere theory. Maimonides, to cite just one of Rosenzweig’s precursors, considered the second commandment, properly understood, to be the soul of Judaism. Contemporary scholar Leora Batnitzky writes in *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered*: “It is no accident that Maimonides begins his great philosophical work *The Guide for the Perplexed* with a discussion of anthropomorphism”—i.e., the projection of human traits onto God, an animal, or an inanimate object—as the error behind idolatry. Rosenzweig would take issue with Maimonides over the word “anthropomorphism,” but such refinements are to be expected: Disagreement is the motor of the Midrash.

Rosenzweig never explicitly recounted exactly what happened to him during and immediately after Yom Kippur 1913. It’s likely that he never explained in detail the rationale behind his decision not to convert for fear of offending Christian friends. But in light of his subsequent writings, we can surmise that the second commandment’s injunction against idolatry must have played a role in his Yom Kippur epiphany. In fact, the second commandment, viewed through Rosenzweig’s post-1913 thought, might also serve to assuage “perplexities” for Jews today.

As a product of a German university in the first years of the 20th century, Rosenzweig (born Dec. 25, 1886) came of age within a rationalist *Weltanschauung* imbued with faith in history and belief in progress. His thesis, titled *Hegel und der Staat* (*Hegel and the State*), explored the phenomenological idealism prevalent then in German academic philosophy.

But Hegel's view of history, as inexorable patterns of phenomena to be contemplated from the lofty heights of philosophy, no longer satisfied Rosenzweig. "For Hegel and his 'school,' history was divine theodicy," wrote Alexander Altmann, paraphrasing Rosenzweig in a 1944 essay. "[But] for us religion is the only true theodicy."

As early as 1910 such a "true theodicy"—that is, a valid explanation to man concerning the ways of G-d—presented a life-altering challenge to Rosenzweig's youthful Hegelianism. At the same time, the prospect of embracing Christianity began to supplant his neglected, agnostic Judaism. Rosenzweig felt that this spiritual "battle" was a matter of life and death; the crisis would culminate between July and October 1913. His contentious friendship with Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, a fellow student of Jewish upbringing who had converted to a profoundly "conscious" Christianity, is documented in a series of letters published under the startling title *Judaism Despite Christianity*.

"[Rosenzweig] was the son of an old Jewish family that had lost most of its Jewish heritage," wrote Altmann, à propos of the exchange of letters between the two young men, in his essay "About the Correspondence" in *Judaism Despite Christianity*. "True, there was a certain loyalty to the old faith and community, both on his and on his parents' part. But it was of no vital importance to him. And, rather than pretend to be a Jew, he tried to ignore the fact, seeing that, assimilated as he was to German cultural life, his mind had already become Christianized."

For his part, Rosenzweig would come to believe that Rosenstock was correct in his revelatory faith—thus, Rosenzweig's earnest need to become a Christian as a means of accounting for revelation. The uniquely "revealed" answer to the post-Enlightenment disenchantment confronting the modern world, for Rosenstock, was the one embodied by Jesus of Nazareth and retold in the Gospels. Braced as he was in an armor of such profound certainty, "Rosenstock regarded his friend's [Rosenzweig's] superficial Judaism as merely 'a personal idiosyncrasy, or at best a pious romantic relic' that could not address itself" to modernity, wrote Glatzer.

The two friends engaged in heated, "to the death" arguments about theology. During one such discussion, Rosenzweig asked his Christian friend what he would do if all the answers founded on his faith were utterly to fail. "I would go to the next church, kneel, and try to pray," Rosenstock replied. Again, paradox plays the crucial role in this dialogue: Rosenzweig's friend's sincere, fully conscious statement of Christian faith would plant a seed in Rosenzweig's Jewish heart that would lead to the latter's decision *not* to convert to Christianity.

In effect, Rosenzweig experienced a paradoxically non-mystical enlightenment on Yom Kippur 1913: a "meta-historical" breakthrough, yet at the same time one solidly anchored in time; a theoretical, yet thoroughly pragmatic epiphany; a revelation irreconcilable with Christian religion, yet committed anew to *Hashem* via the *Neilah* service, the final prayers spoken on the Day of Atonement. Just as it is not possible to "unring" a bell, Rosenzweig clearly could not "un-sound" the shofar he heard in 1913.

"Had it not been an experience of his own life," Glatzer writes, "all of this [i.e., Rosenzweig's subsequent works and writings] could not have been accomplished. This is the voice of a man [born and raised a Jew] who broke with his personal history, and—in an act of conversion—had to become a Jew."

So, a Jew walks into *shul* on Yom Kippur and . . . converts to Judaism! A truly circular paradox like this represents a logical extreme of mere, mundane ambiguity; indeed, the inherent ambiguities generated by the taboo against "graven images" (including the signifiers of language) are directly responsible for a perennially long shadow cast upon the history of Western philosophy.

Christian revelation, in this play of shadow and light, cannot be represented properly by the image or statue of a crucified body without risk of confusion. If a given crucifix, painting, or statue is in fact believed to represent the Son of God, how can it not trigger an "anti-idolatrous" reaction in a Jew?

Continue reading: The problem of idolatry

But this is not the whole story for Franz Rosenzweig. Batnitzky shows how he treats the crux of idolatry not as deriving from *how* we humans *think* about G-d, via image, object or fetish; instead, the problem derives from how humans improperly *worship* G-d, in our actions: “The rabbinic term for idolatry—*avodah zarah*—is ambiguous. It means alien worship, but what is alien, the object of worship or the type of worship?”

In the context of modern philosophy, then, the problem of idolatry for Rosenzweig becomes hermeneutical (from Hermes, Greek god of messengers, crossroads, thieves, and boxers): focused on the message-spark that jumps the gap, not on the objects determining the width of the gap itself. “Rosenzweig’s emphasis on idolatry as improper worship means that images are not intrinsically idolatrous,” writes Batnitzky. “The second commandment’s ban on graven images is not an all-out ban on visual representation. Rosenzweig argues that images are both potentially redemptive and idolatrous.”

Hence, another paradox: “The possibility of idolatry for Rosenzweig cannot be dismissed merely by thinking about God properly,” writes Batnitzky. “Rather, idolatry is always a possibility, especially for those who know the true God. Adherence to the ban on idolatry, then, means that one must always risk idolatry.”

The many such paradoxes underlying Rosenzweig’s post-Yom Kippur 1913 writing led the professor in him to reject academe, the theologian in him to reject theology, the philosopher to reject philosophy, even the writer to reject writing in favor of speech, as the “living word” through which he might embody the personal and communal renewal necessary for a Jewish community to thrive. In a letter written in 1920 to his teacher Friedrich Meinecke, he played down the importance of his masterpiece *The Star of Redemption* as mere “armor which protected him until he learned to get along without it.”

Rosenzweig wrote most of *The Star of Redemption* on postcards that he mailed to his parents from his artillery observation post near the front during WWI. For the final eight years of his life (he died at age 43), he suffered from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known in the United States as Lou Gehrig’s disease. Having “sworn off” philosophy, he also established the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt as a means to convey to young people an unmediated, or at least minimally dogmatic, relation with G-d: In the hermeneutic process of studying images and languages, he taught, one is able to become Jewish without need for “idols” or “eternal truth.” This did not exclude artworks and texts; in fact, personal and even heterodoxical interpretation of artworks was the skill most emphasized in the *Lehrhaus*.

As the disease worsened, his gradual loss of speech and motor skills led him back to writing, for which he used a specially designed typewriter upon which he could type while holding a pointer-rod in his mouth. Friends and family who knew him during this illness unanimously celebrate his strength, faith, and ability to bear such an affliction—and painstaking mode of communication—with never a complaint.

It seems fitting that one of the Torah portions (Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17) pertaining to Elul—the Hebrew month of preparation prior to the beginning of Rosh Hashanah—is called *Re’eh* (“See!”). It begins with a clear choice: “See, this day I set before you a blessing and a curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey . . . but turn away from the path . . . and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced.”

This portion may well have served as inspiration for Rosenzweig’s epiphany as he approached and avoided the altar of Christian faith on Yom Kippur 1913. The *Re’eh* stresses the difficulty of *the path*, the demanding and often perplexing *practice and enactment* of wisdom and faith, even as it proposes a curse upon prospective

idolaters. It enjoins not a theory, but a corporeal realization of *halakhah*, the system through which any Jew acts to bring God into the world. Thereby, the Torah accentuates each individual's embodiment or incarnation as the shape available to a living, renewed Jewish life; it forms a metaphorical, invisible yet indestructible bridge connecting the antique sources of Jewish wisdom with a most vibrant philosopher of the persistence of immediacy, even unto the epochal paradoxes of modernity and the postmodern condition.

Brian Eno, best known as a musician and creator of ambient, aural space, has said something to the effect that everything is an experiment until one has a deadline; only then comes action, productivity, connection, and community. For Franz Rosenzweig, as for all Jews, there is no better deadline than Yom Kippur.

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Yechezkel Taub, the Yablone Rebbe, in Kfar Hasidim, circa 1982. PHOTOCOLLAGE: TABLET MAGAZINE; ORIGINAL PHOTOS ALL COURTESY THE AUTHOR.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Amazing Return of the Yablone Rebbe

An astonishing true story of a man's encounter with fate

BY PINI DUNNER

SEPTEMBER 16, 2018

IT WAS A HOT, BALMY DAY in June 1975, and the sun beat mercilessly down on the Cal-State campus in Northridge, California, as crowds of parents, grandparents, siblings and friends arrived to celebrate the graduation of their loved ones. Once inside the graduation hall, families eagerly looked for their graduate among the

hundreds of graduates, who were seated in the front few rows. Proud mothers waved at their sons and daughters and blew them kisses, and the graduates, in their caps and gowns, sheepishly grinned back.

A little old man, shuffling slowly into the hall, did not seem to belong to any family group. Dressed in a black gown and cap, he was actually one of the graduates—at almost 80 years old, he was senior to the second-oldest graduate by a margin of many decades. Seemingly oblivious to the noise around him, he slowly made his way forward, nodding almost imperceptibly at the few people who made eye contact. As he reached halfway toward the front of the hall, a man in his mid-30s suddenly stepped into the aisle in front of him.

“Hello, uncle!”

The old man looked up. His face crinkled into a broad smile, and his sad brown eyes twinkled with pleasure.

“Ehud, wow, I really was not expecting you. That is so nice of you. Thank you so much for coming. You know it wasn't necessary ...”

“Don't be ridiculous,” Ehud replied, “how could I have missed your graduation?”

The old man grinned broadly, and shook Ehud's hand. An usher urged him to find his seat, and he slowly walked towards the graduates' section, where the nondescript octogenarian was nothing more than a slightly out-of-place curiosity. Those who knew him called him George, or Mr.

Nagel. That was his name—George T. Nagel, an elderly Jewish man with a foreign accent, who lived in a room in the dorm building, and more often than not could be found reading in the library.

In the five years he had been at CSUN, although he lived in the dorm building, George had made no real friends among the young students. No one knew exactly how old he was, nor why he was so keen to graduate with a degree in psychology. But truthfully, nobody cared enough to ask.

George Nagel was a loner. Although he was unfailingly polite in his interactions, interactions were limited to mealtimes, and he clearly had no interest in socializing. He was unobtrusive and studious, a phantom who had been living under the name George T. Nagel for over 40 years. His real name was Yechezkel Taub, and he was the scion of one of Poland's most illustrious Hasidic dynasties, having inherited his father's title at the age of 24, along with a thriving Hasidic "court" and a sect numbering thousands of loyal followers.

In fact, although no one at CSUN on that hot day in 1975 knew it, George T. Nagel was none other than the once-acclaimed "Yabloner Rebbe," the founder of a unique village called Kfar Hasidim near Haifa in what is now the State of Israel, to which he led hundreds of his loyal followers from Poland before the Holocaust. What not even Taub realized on the day of his anonymous graduation was that a process had started that would see the Yabloner Rebbe reunited with his past and reconnected with the unique project from which he had desperately tried to escape, but with which he would forever and unavoidably be identified.

Yechezkel Taub was born on Oct. 7, 1895, in Nowe Miasto (Neishtot in Yiddish), a small town in Poland just east of Płońsk, north of Warsaw. His father, Rabbi Yaakov Taub, was "Rebbe" of Jabłonna (Yablona), a small rural town close to Warsaw that was home to a vibrant Orthodox Jewish community. Revered across Poland as a mystical Hasidic leader, Rabbi Yaakov was a great-grandson of the original Yechezkel Taub—after whom he named his newborn son—the illustrious Rebbe of Kuzmir (Kazimierz Dolny), progenitor of several Hasidic dynasties, most famously the Modzitzer sect, renowned for their love of music and for their numerous beautiful musical compositions sung at Sabbath and festival gatherings.

Rabbi Yaakov's father, Rabbi Yosef Moshe Taub (d.1866), had moved to Jabłonna from Nowe-Miasto, where his father Rabbi David Tzvi Hirsch Taub had founded a branch of the Kuzmir sect. Pious and devout, Rabbi Yosef Moshe was married to a descendant of Rabbi Yisrael Hopstein, the legendary Maggid of Kozhnitz, and he set up his own branch of the Kuzmir dynasty in Jabłonna, becoming known as the Yabloner Rebbe. Tragically he died young, leaving his 6-year-old son, Yaakov, to be raised by his grandfather.

In 1882, Rabbi Yaakov married Beila Gurman, and in the years that followed they had five children—Yechezkel and four daughters. Unusually, it was Rabbi Yaakov's son-in-law, Chaim Yosef Halevi Vanchotzker, married to his oldest daughter, Michal Rachel, who was groomed to be the

successor, rather than his son, Yechezkel. When Chaim Yosef unexpectedly died at a young age, the burden of expectation suddenly fell upon Yechezkel. Nevertheless, this unpredicted turn of events was not of great concern. At the time of Chaim Yosef's death, Rabbi Yaakov was still in his 50s, and it would surely be many years before Yechezkel would inherit the Rebbe's title and responsibilities.

But Rabbi Yaakov was not in good health. Soon after WWI began, he moved from Jablonna to Warsaw, to be closer to Poland's best medical doctors and facilities. Sadly, it was to no avail. In the summer of 1920, at the age of 60, Rabbi Yaakov passed away, and Yechezkel, not quite 25 years old and barely prepared for the position, suddenly found himself at the head of one of Poland's prestigious Hasidic sects.

With the help of his wife, Pearl, a Kozhnitz descendent whom he had married in 1915, and his widowed elder sister, Michal Rachel, Yechezkel threw himself into the task of leading and inspiring his followers, intent on living up to the legacy of his father and the Kuzmir Hasidic heritage. Genuinely concerned for the welfare of his followers, he was very warm and personable, in addition to being learned and highly intelligent. He became involved in every aspect of his followers' lives, making sure that the rich helped the poor, and that the less well-off devoted time to community affairs so that they wouldn't feel like takers. The Hasidim adored him and flocked to his weekly Friday night *tisch* gatherings, where he sang with them and regaled them with Torah discourses. The new Yabloner Rebbe was considered a rising star among the Hasidic Rebbes of Poland, and a future leader of Polish Jewry.

Yet everything changed in 1924, with the visit to Jablonna by a distant relative of the young Rebbe, the charismatic Rabbi Yeshaya Shapira, a crown prince of the Polish Hasidic world. Rabbi Yeshaya's late father, R. Elimelech Shapira, had been the revered Rebbe of Grodzisk, whose followers numbered in the tens of thousands and were spread across Poland. Tragically, Rabbi Elimelech's eldest three sons had predeceased him, so he remarried in his 60s and had two more sons, the first of whom, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman of Piaseczno, would later become immortalized as Rebbe of the Holocaust-era Warsaw Ghetto, whose inspiring sermons to demoralized ghetto inhabitants, recorded on scraps of paper, were recovered from the rubble of the ghetto after the war, and published in a book titled *Esh Kodesh* ("Sacred Fire").

Rabbi Yeshaya Shapira was Rabbi Elimelech's youngest child. Within a year of his birth R. Elimelech died, and his widow moved back to her parents' home, where the two boys were brought up and educated by her father, Rabbi Chaim Shmuel Horowitz-Szterenfeld of Chantshin, a descendent of the "Seer" of Lublin and one of the most unusual Hasidic Rebbes in Poland at that time. Incredibly studious and



The Yabloner Rebbe, Palestine, 1925.

with a gifted intellect, he
was renowned for
completing the entire

Talmud and Shulchan Aruch each year, and also known for his very ostentatious “court.” But most of all, he was notorious for his eager support of the proto-Zionist movement, Chovevei Zion, and for advocating settlement of the Holy Land.

It was this aspect of his outlook that would capture the heart of his grandson, Rabbi Yeshaya. Rejecting attempts to get him to lead his own Hasidic sect, Rabbi Yeshaya became consumed by the idea of Jews resettling the Land of Israel. In 1914, he visited Ottoman-controlled Palestine, where he was overcome by the headway made by the Zionist pioneers who had settled there. Despite his elevated Hasidic pedigree, he became an active member of the Zionist movement, which was then dominated by secular Jews openly hostile to religious observance.

With the outbreak of WWI, Rabbi Yeshaya was expelled from Palestine by the Turks, and so returned to Poland, where he founded the Polish branch of Mizrachi, and enthusiastically promoted the immigration of Torah-observant settlers to Palestine. In 1920 he managed to return to Palestine with the intention of moving there, even though his wife initially refused to join him. In 1922, he presided over the founding of Hapoel HaMizrachi, an organization devoted to setting up agricultural settlements in Palestine for religious Zionists. His ultimate dream was the relocation of an entire Hasidic sect from Poland to a new home in Palestine, together with their Rebbe, so that the stigma attached to Zionist immigration would be offset by the success of a mature Hasidic community who had immigrated en masse, without any depletion of their Torah observance or Hasidic identity. With this in mind he set out on a mission back to Poland in 1924, and came upon the Yabloner Rebbe and his community.

The impact of Rabbi Yeshaya’s visit to Jabłonna was electric. He regaled his hosts with vivid descriptions of the Holy Land, and told them about the opportunities available to those who bought land and created agricultural settlements. The Ottoman Turks were gone, and the British were now in control. In 1917, Great Britain’s foreign secretary, Arthur J. Balfour, had dispatched a letter to Lord Rothschild in London, a letter that would later become known as the Balfour Declaration, which formally declared that the British government viewed “with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,” and would “use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.”

Not since the days of Cyrus the Great had a gentile power urged Jews to return to their homeland, said Rabbi Yeshaya. The declaration by Cyrus in ancient Persia had resulted in the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the reestablishment of Jewish supremacy in the Jews’ ancestral territory. Now, thousands of years later, that same opportunity had arisen once again. How was it possible that religious Jews, who had so tenaciously clung to their heritage over millennia, would cede this opportunity to reprobate Jews who had discarded Torah and Judaism? This

was a chance for a religious renewal of biblical proportions, said Rabbi Yeshaya, and what greater way was there to embrace this chance than by moving from Poland as a complete community, old and young, rich and poor, and to relocate to the heaven-on-earth that was the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Yeshaya's passionate presentation and infectious enthusiasm had a profound effect on the Yabloner Rebbe, and on many of his Hasidim. The Rebbe immediately called together a gathering of all his followers, during which he forcefully advocated for the Yabloner sect to immediately begin preparing to move to Palestine. Initially, he suggested, the less well-off members of the sect would go together with him and lay the necessary groundwork. The purchase of the land and all the initial expenses would be funded by the wealthier members of the community, who would ultimately join the new settlement once everything was set up.

The response to this vision in Jablonna was jubilant and euphoric. It was as if the Messianic era had arrived. Those who were planning to travel with the Rebbe to Palestine began to prepare for the trip, while the Rebbe himself feverishly fundraised among his followers, and from anyone who had an affiliation to the Kuzmir Hasidic groups. He also sought the blessing of senior Hasidic leaders, to boost the concept of large-scale Hasidic immigration to Palestine and to reassure his own followers that they were doing the right thing.

But the Yabloner Rebbe encountered unexpected disapproval at a meeting with the esteemed leader of the Gur Hasidic sect, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter. Known as the Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Alter presided over tens of thousands of Hasidim in Poland—many of whom were themselves in prominent leadership positions—and he was widely acknowledged as one of the principal leaders of European Orthodoxy. Although the predominant view among the Hasidic leadership was strongly anti-Zionist, Rabbi Alter was less hostile towards the new realities in Palestine, and was even supportive of Orthodox immigration, in marked contrast to many of the Hasidic rabbis at the time, who considered any action by Orthodox Jews which might be interpreted as tacit support for Zionist ideals as catastrophic. But the meeting did not go as planned. After probing the Yabloner on every aspect of the proposed project, the Gerrer Rebbe dismissed it as a terrible idea.

“Don't take any money or help from the secular Zionists,” he warned ominously, “they do not have your interests at heart and any financial dependence on them will be an utter disaster.”

Surprised by the harsh advice, the Yabloner Rebbe was still determined to carry out his plans. Within months he was on a boat to Haifa with a couple of hundred Yabloner Hasidim, armed with cash from hundreds more who wanted to own some holy land and to participate in this unique endeavor. Travelling with him on the boat was Rabbi Yisrael Eliezer Hopstein, who was en route to Palestine with a group of Kozhnitz followers. The two rabbis decided to join forces and build a Hasidic settlement together. They arrived in Palestine, where they were feted by Zionist officials. Although they were offered land near Tel Aviv, the Yabloner Rebbe preferred the mountains overlooking the Jezreel

Valley close to Haifa, and asked the Jewish Agency and JNF to help him purchase land in this area.

The principal landowners in the Jezreel Valley were the Sursuks of Beirut, one of the most prominent Christian families in Lebanon. At one time they had planned to build a railway line across the valley, and the legendary British diplomat and Christian philosemite, Sir Laurence Oliphant, had worked hard to find investors to fund the construction, but the plans were never realized. The land had been in the Sursuk family for generations, tenanted by Arab farmers who paid for the right to work the land. But these farmers had no legal rights to the land, and the British authorities confirmed that the Sursuks could sell land to JNF without giving notice to Arab residents, who could be summarily evicted without compensation.

With the help of JNF and the legendary Zionist land purchaser, Yehoshua Hankin, several thousand acres were purchased, encompassing the Arab villages of Sheikh Abreik, El Harbaj and El Harchieh. The Arab residents were given compensation to vacate the land, and the two Hasidic groups began building homes on a hill overlooking the Jezreel Valley and the Kishon River. The Yablone Rebbe had decided to call his section of the village Nachalat Yaakov, after his late father, while the Kozhnitz neighborhood was called Avodat Yisrael (“Labor of Israel”)—a reference to the founder of the Kozhnitz dynasty, R. Yisrael Hopstein, the Maggid of Kozienice, whose published work was also called *Avodat Yisrael*.

The Rebbe reached a financial arrangement with JNF, who agreed to treat the down payment for the land as a loan, to be repaid to the 90 families after two years, once the settlement was up and running and on condition that the families remained. The deposit amounted to a quarter of all the monies the group had brought with them from Poland, but both JNF and the Rebbe were confident that sufficient funds remained to set up the settlement, which they agreed would be a dairy farm.

High-profile visitors flocked to the new settlement, to see the remarkable phenomenon of Hasidic Zionist farmers for themselves. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine, visited the settlement together with his Sephardic counterpart, R. Yaakov Meir, and a large delegation of Jerusalem rabbis. Zionist philosopher, Ahad Ha'am, was another notable visitor during his last visit to Palestine. He was joined by the celebrated Zionist writers Yehoshua Ravnitzky and Chaim Bialik. The future president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, even visited with Lord Balfour, whose 1917 declaration had been the catalyst which led to the British control of Palestine along with the new wave of immigrants after WWI.





At center, the Yablone Rebbe with Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Palestine, 1925. To the right of Rabbi Kook is the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of British Mandate Palestine, Rabbi Yaakov Meir.

Weizmann, in his role as head of the Jewish Agency, had been particularly critical of Polish immigrants who refused to work the land, and particularly the Orthodox, who set themselves up in new urban enclaves, such as Bnei Brak. His visit to the Yablone Rebbe's village and farm was deliberately promoted and widely publicized to highlight the Hasidic pioneer's dedication to the Zionist ideal, so that it might act as an example to others.

Not everyone was happy with all the attention the Yablone Rebbe was getting. The secular Zionist movement had been running intensive training programs for pioneer settlers for years, and were horrified that the Zionist leadership was tripping over itself to accommodate untrained—and in their eyes, untrainable—Hasidic immigrants. David Ben-Gurion, who headed the powerful *Histadrut* trade union umbrella organization, scathingly attacked those who were promoting the Hasidic farming community. “How dare these Hasidim from Jablonna and Kozhnitz be allowed to immigrate to Eretz Yisrael and waste precious land,” he railed during his keynote speech to the Zionist Congress in Vienna in 1925, adding, “if they must come, let them settle in Tel Aviv and leave the real work to people who know what they are doing.”

Ben-Gurion had a point. The 90 families who had joined the Rebbe in Palestine were comprised of all ages—including elderly grandparents, nursing mothers, and little children, and none of the adult men had any training in construction or dairy farming. Rose-tinted idealism would only carry them so far; ultimately the community would need to become self-supporting if it was to become the beacon of Orthodox agricultural immigration that its promoters hoped.



At center, the Yablone Rebbe appears in a Yiddish poster issued by JNF, late 1920s.

Conscious of the animosity the project was generating, in 1926 JNF published a gushing pamphlet—“*Hasidim Alu El Ha'aretz*” (The Hasidim Have Gone up to the Land). The short pamphlet described the ethereal atmosphere of spending Shabbat in the pioneer Hasidic village. Singing, dancing, spirituality—all in the setting of a utopian agrarian community devoted to turning the barren landscape of the Holy Land into a “land flowing with milk and honey.” The Yablone Rebbe featured prominently in the pamphlet, and was described as the engine of the enterprise, working from the early morning until late at night, focused on the minutest details, and available for every single one of his devoted followers, young and old, as they struggled to turn the dream into a reality.

Tragically, however, whatever could have gone wrong went wrong. The former Arab tenant farmers refused to leave their land and villages, despite the compensation they had received. There was heavy rain and the Kishon River overflowed, flooding the valley and turning it into an unmanageable swamp. The Hasidim made a vain attempt to drain the swamp, but to no avail. Soon the water-sodden land was infested with mosquitoes, malaria broke out among the settlers, and some of them succumbed to the sickness and died.

“We don’t have any money, and we are drowning in difficulties, but we have come this far, and we are not giving up now.”

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The bridge they had built over the Kishon River was wrecked by Bedouins who were camping locally. The heavy rain continued, and the swamp grew. Meanwhile, the Arabs killed one of the cows and threw it into the well, contaminating the fresh water supply. Venomous snakes hidden among the ubiquitous thorns bit farm workers, killing more than

one. Bedouin marauders murdered some of the newcomers. Money was scarce, and the dairy farm seemed unable to make ends meet. Despite the initial enthusiastic moral and financial support from Yablone Hasidim in Poland that continued after they arrived, funding from abroad slowly dwindled and then dried up completely, and soon the Hasidim were literally starving.

In 1928, the Rebbe went to the United States, where he visited various communities to raise money for the settlement. Although he was warmly welcomed wherever he went, he had limited success finding philanthropic support, and returned empty handed. In desperation, the Yablone Rebbe turned to the Zionist organizations for help, but soon discovered that they were going through their own challenges. Palestine was experiencing a serious recession, and financial support from Zionist philanthropists in Europe and the United States had decreased. Nevertheless, the Rebbe was unrelenting and would not let the mounting challenges destroy his dream, nor would he let the difficulties devastate the lives of all those who had joined him to realize it.

“We don’t have any money, and we are drowning in difficulties,” the Rebbe told Zionist officials when they met, “but we have come this far, and we are not giving up now.”

The JNF and Jewish Agency administrators sat there stony faced. This enterprise was no longer the propaganda vehicle of 1925, and they were in no mood to waste time or money on a project that was by all measures an unmitigated disaster.

But the Yablone Rebbe had a plan up his sleeve. He would arrange for a skilled group of Hapoel HaMizrachi religious Zionist farmworkers to be brought in, he told them, to train and work alongside the Polish Hasidim. Each of the new farmworkers would be given their own plot of land to build a home, free of charge, in addition to some land that they could farm for themselves. The mountaintop village would move down into the valley, which would give farmers easier

access to the farms, and the Rebbe would trade excess land with JNF and the Jewish Agency for food and other supplies.

“We may not have any money to give you,” he told the Zionist officials, “but we have plenty of land—far more than we need to make our community successful. We can give JNF land in exchange for whatever is needed to turn our project into a success.”

Suddenly the Yabloner Rebbe became emotional, as he explained what was at stake. “Please don’t abandon us to our fate,” he pleaded, “my Hasidim are dying, and I need to save them!”

Ultimately the two sides reached an agreement. The Zionist administrators insisted that the elderly and infirm would have to return to Poland until everything was sorted out, as they were a drain on resources. Secondly, the dairy farm would need to close and make way for orchards and crops. Thirdly, the land would have to be signed over to JNF ownership, pending future developments. The Yabloner Rebbe reluctantly agreed to all of these conditions.

In exchange, the Jewish Agency provided the settlers with a stipend, while JNF took care of accumulated debts. The two Hasidic branches of the settlement were combined into a single entity called Kfar Hasidim (Village of Hasidim), and they were also joined by a third group—religious Zionists from Germany and Holland who had trained at Hachshara camps in Europe, recruited to change the farming community’s fortunes for the better.

In May 1930 work was finished on a paved road connecting Kfar Hasidim to the Haifa-Nazareth highway. The Rebbe immediately arranged for those Hasidim who were not working on the farms to obtain jobs in Haifa, and a commuter bus was organized to pick them up and drop them back each day—a remarkable innovation for the time.

Sadly, although matters had improved for residents of Kfar Hasidim, the Yabloner Rebbe soon found himself in the midst of a financial scandal. With the situation for Jews in Poland rapidly deteriorating, especially after 1935, Hasidim from Jablonna began turning up in Palestine, expecting to take possession of the plots of land they had paid for over a decade earlier. Since the Yabloner Rebbe was unable to give them any land nor refund their money, they accused him of being a thief. He begged them to understand that their land had been used to help the settlement survive, but in their eyes the rebbe was a crook who had fraudulently taken their money and not given them what he promised in return.

After the outbreak of the Arab Revolt in 1936, and the increasing violence against Jews in Palestine, longtime residents of Kfar Hasidim also demanded money from the rebbe so that they could go back to their families in Poland. But he had no money for them either. Kfar Hasidim was just beginning to pay for itself; there was no money to spare. With outstanding debts to JNF and the Jewish Agency and the threat that they would repossess land and homes in Kfar Hasidim, while at the same time battling accusations of theft from his own followers, the Yabloner Rebbe traveled to the United States in 1938 to see if he could interest some

wealthy Zionist Jews to offer him financial support. He would not return to Kfar Hasidim for over 40 years.

The rebbe arrived in New York, and moved in with his niece, Arella Mezrich, daughter of his sister Rivka Grafstein, who had tragically died in 1931 after being bitten by a snake. Arella was raised in Kfar Hasidim, but some years earlier had decided to leave for the United States. In 1935 she arrived in New York, and soon afterwards married Mordechai Mezrich, an immigrant from Russia. The Mezrich family had a bag-manufacturing business based on the East Coast, and were moderately prosperous. The Yabloner Rebbe used the Mezrich home as his base, and began visiting Orthodox communities sympathetic to the Zionist cause to generate support for the expansion of Kfar Hasidim. To broaden his appeal, he partnered with the Federation of Polish Jews in America, an organization founded in 1908 to assist Polish Jews who had settled there, but which more recently had started to provide relief for Polish Jews in distress. By the late 1930s anti-Semitism in Poland had reached a new peak, fully enabled by the Polish government via legislation and also by a deliberate policy of refusing to reign in anti-Jewish violence. This situation motivated the federation to offer their full support for the Rebbe's plans to bring Polish Jews to Palestine.

In July 1939, the *New York Daily News* reported the purchase of 400 acres of land in Palestine by the federation for the settlement of 500 Jewish families from Poland. The report declared that the "colonists" who would move to Palestine from Poland would be "extended credit for building houses and other necessities," and added that the project was "under the direction of Rabbi Ezekiel Taub of Palestine," assisted by a special committee of the federation.

Tragically, the ambitious plans never had the chance to materialize. Two months later the German army marched into Poland, and the Yabloner Rebbe now found himself stuck in the United States as a war refugee. He immediately abandoned his fundraising campaign and attempted to volunteer for the war effort. At first he attempted to join the army and the navy, but they were not particularly interested in the idea of conscripting a Polish Hasidic Jew in his mid-40s. Undaunted by this rejection, the Rebbe began to look for construction work in the military-supplies industry that was quickly gathering pace during the early months of the war thanks to the Lend-Lease Act, which authorized the transfer of arms and defense materials to "the government of any country whose defense the President deem[ed] vital to the defense of the United States."

As the war in Europe escalated, the Yabloner Rebbe moved out west, where he found work in California shipyards. In 1942, *The Jewish Floridian* reported that the Rebbe was working as a riveter at a shipyard in San Francisco. A few months later the same newspaper reported that he had moved to Los Angeles, where he had found work as a designing engineer in another shipyard. "The Rebbe solves the problem of observing the Sabbaths without losing hours," the paper reported, "by working overtime on weekdays."

In June 1942, the BBC broadcast a report claiming that over 700,000 Polish Jews had been deliberately and systematically exterminated by the Nazis. By November American newspapers had confirmed the slaughter but revealed that the BBC had underestimated the true magnitude of the genocide. Millions of European Jews had been murdered by the Nazis, they reported, and the grisly rumors that had been emerging from the European continent for over a year were all true. These emerging details of the Holocaust had been reliably relayed to the press via Gerhart Riegner, the World Jewish Congress representative in Switzerland, who sent a series of communications to Rabbi Stephen Wise through the U.S. State Department. Initially the State Department tried to suppress the information, which officials considered exaggerated and sensationalist, but after conducting their own independent investigation the information was finally released to the public, and the full horror of the Holocaust was confirmed.

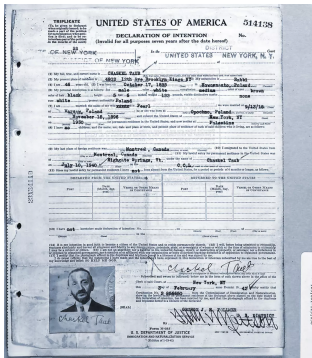
Jewish communities in Allied countries across the world held rallies, prayer days and vigils, and Wednesday, Dec. 2, 1942, was declared an international day of mourning. Jews who had family in Nazi-controlled countries, or in countries with ties to Nazi Germany, were panic stricken, and across the world they desperately lobbied the Allied leadership to attempt something—anything!—that would bring the relentless killing to a halt. But besides empty declarations, and meaningless platitudes, nothing was done, and the slaughter continued.

In January 1944, under pressure from his Jewish-born secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, President Roosevelt withdrew the State Department from any role relating to the Nazi murder of Jews, and instead he created the War Refugee Board, under his personal authority, to address the issue. In November 1944, the board published a one-page announcement that confirmed both the existence of the sprawling operational death facility at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the extermination of the vast majority of European Jewry.

For Polish-born Jews the board report was a devastating bombshell. It substantiated once and for all what they had most feared, namely that all the Jews of Poland were dead—gassed, shot, burned—murdered like animals in death camps and killing fields. Before the war Poland had been home to the most vibrant and most populous Jewish community in the world. Now that community was gone, wiped out.

For the Yablonek Rebbe, erstwhile rabbi of Jabłonna near Warsaw, the emerging news of the Holocaust came as a double blow. Besides the fact that the entire Jabłonna community had been obliterated along with the rest of Polish Jewry, there were those—including the extended families of many of the Kfar Hasidim pioneers—whom he had sent back from Palestine to Poland, because they served no useful purpose in the farming settlement and were a pointless drain on its resources. This had been a non-negotiable condition for the continued involvement of JNF and the Jewish Agency with the Hasidic settlement, and however reluctant the Rebbe may have been to go along with it, he had allowed it to happen. In his own mind the Rebbe

began to believe that the deaths of those who had gone back to Poland were his fault.



Declaration of Intention, 1942.

The pain was overwhelming. And moreover, where was God in all this? Did He even exist? If He did, was it not crystal clear that He had utterly abandoned the Yablone Rebbe? So many people's lives had been lost or devastated—and he, Yechezkel Taub, had been the agent of their destruction. His entire Hasidic sect had been wiped out, and those who remained alive in Kfar Hasidim despised him for his role in wrecking their lives.

In late 1944, as the full weight of his distressing predicament became clear, and his anger at God grew and kept on growing, the Yablone Rebbe decided on a drastic course of action. Without Hasidim, he decided to himself, he was no longer a rebbe—a rebbe has to have Hasidim, and his Hasidim were gone. Meanwhile, his Kfar Hasidim project in Palestine was an utter failure—whoever remained there certainly didn't need him, and it was more than likely that they didn't want him either. The best thing for him to do, he concluded, would be to disappear into oblivion in the United States of America, like millions of other faceless immigrants who had done the same.

And just like that, one day, Rabbi Yechezkel Taub—the revered Yablone Rebbe, scion of the Kuzmir Hasidic dynasty, at one time leader of thousands of devoted followers, and trailblazing Orthodox Zionist settler—removed his yarmulke, cut off his sidelocks, shaved off his beard, quietly changed his name, and filed immigration papers to become a naturalized citizen of the United States.

On Aug. 1, 1945, two non-Jewish acquaintances, Margaret Depew, a hotel manageress, and Albert Crapo, a rigger, both vouched that they had known "Chaskiel Taub" since December 1944 as a "man of good moral character" and then witnessed him take the oath of allegiance, after which he was confirmed as a U.S. citizen. His naturalization papers referred to him as "George Ezekiel Taub Nagel." He avoided all contact with the Jewish community of Los Angeles, and severed all contact with Kfar Hasidim, except for secretive communications with his family, who referred to him by the codename "Uncle Dod," combining the English and Hebrew words for uncle. He stopped keeping kosher, and also stopped observing Shabbat and festivals, including Yom Kippur. He abandoned the study of Torah or any religious texts, and almost never visited a synagogue. For all intents and purposes, the Yablone Rebbe was no more, replaced by an urbane Polish immigrant with slicked-back hair and a sad, faraway look in his eyes.

With WWII over, the shipyard no longer needed George Nagel, but his many years working in construction and engineering would not go to waste. Southern California was in the midst of a massive construction boom, particularly in the San Fernando Valley adjacent to Los Angeles. The small suburban communities which had previously dotted the valley landscape suddenly blossomed and bloomed, rapidly overtaking the citrus orchards and farms that had dominated the area during the early decades of the 20th century.

Between the ever-expanding defense, space, and aircraft industries located in Southern California, there was a constant supply of new job opportunities, and these industries in turn attracted electronics companies, the atomic energy industry, and of course companies specializing in research and development. Add to all these the requirement for services catering to the new residents and their families, with all the associated jobs—and the need for new housing was urgent, and meeting that need could be extremely profitable.

George Nagel immediately seized his opportunity. He borrowed money to buy plots of land, on which he constructed the type of modest homes that were becoming ubiquitous across the valley. His knowledge of construction had its origins in the difficult, hands-on work he had supervised during the early years at Kfar Hasidim, and this experience ensured that his development projects were all successful, quickly making him a wealthy man with an ever-expanding empire of development projects.

Occasionally he would partner on a project with one or more of the enterprising group of Orthodox Jewish Holocaust survivors who had landed in the Fairfax area of Los Angeles, particularly the Kornwasser brothers, Mottel and Yankel. The Kornwassers were originally from Sosnowiec in Poland, and had lost their entire families in the Holocaust. Some of the survivors, like the Kornwassers, knew who George really was, but at his request they kept his identity a closely guarded secret.



George Nagel in Los Angeles, 1950s.

Another one of George's friends in the strictly Orthodox community was Yidel Rottenberg, son of the Kossonye Rebbe of Kleinwardein, Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Rottenberg, who immigrated to the United States from Hungary in the early 1930s, and moved to Los Angeles in 1937 to take advantage of the mild climate, which alleviated the symptoms of his chronic asthma. Yidel was a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), and a charming conversationalist. His brother Rabbi Ephraim Asher Rottenberg presided over a tiny Hasidic synagogue in Fairfax, but

Yidel frequented Rabbi Yitzchak Pinchas Ginsburg's synagogue, which was close by. He encouraged George to

join him there, and on rare occasions George relented and came to the shul—but only on condition that no one would be told who he really was.

Truthfully, no one gave him a second glance. He was just another lost soul of European origin who had somehow landed in Los Angeles, no longer religious but yearning for an occasional connection with the traditional Jewish life of their youth. There were dozens of such visitors at the tiny Fairfax synagogues all the time, and no one pried into their backgrounds or their current situations; after all, everyone had plenty of their own baggage to be concerned with.

When the Sadiger-Przemyśl Rebbe, Rabbi Mordechai Sholom Yosef Friedman, visited Los Angeles in the 1950s, he presided over a gathering of local Los Angeles Hasidim one Saturday night at Rabbi Ginsburg's synagogue, and Yidel Rottenberg persuaded George to attend. At the time, Rabbi Friedman was one of the foremost Hasidic rabbinic personalities in the world, a prestigious leader from a prestigious dynasty, and a visit from someone of his caliber was extremely unusual.

There was quite a crowd at Rabbi Ginsburg's synagogue to share in the Rebbe's post-Shabbat meal—considered a special privilege in Hasidic circles—but there were not hundreds of people, as there would certainly have been in New York, or in Europe before the war, where there might even have been thousands. Los Angeles had no real Hasidim, just a small handful of Holocaust survivors who had been brought up Hasidic, and who were nostalgic for a taste of their youth. The Sadiger-Przemyśl Rebbe went through the motions for them, but some of those who came were very disappointed.

"You call this a *tisch*?" one of them said to his friend, within earshot of George and Yidel.

"This is a joke. A shadow of what a real *tisch* should look like," he continued, "I remember the *tisch* of the Yabloner Rebbe—my father took me to one when I was a child. Now, that was a real *tisch*, with proper singing, and a real spiritual atmosphere that uplifted everyone there. Not like this one." And with that he got up and left.

Little did the man know that directly across the table from where he had been sitting, listening to every word, was the Yabloner Rebbe himself—the very man who had inspired him and hundreds of others all those years ago—now a nondescript, cleanshaven, nonobservant Jew, who built cheap homes in the valley. But George said nothing, and neither did Yidel Rottenberg.

The California economy took a nosedive in the late 1960s, and unemployment began to climb. Bank deregulation had changed the dynamics for savings-and-loan institutions. East Coast and Midwest money, which had previously flowed generously in California's direction as a result of higher interest rates for savings in California, now stayed at home, as the interest rates in New York and Chicago began to match those in California. Bank loans were consequently less readily available for real-estate speculators. The housing boom was slowing down.

A couple of years earlier, George had decided to invest in an apartment complex development project, which was quite an upgrade from his previous focus on subdividing small lots to build cheap single-family homes. As the economy deteriorated, George discovered he was in over his head. Substandard contractors did not meet deadlines, and when the apartments were finally ready they looked terrible and didn't sell. Eventually the banks foreclosed and took possession of the apartments. George was almost completely wiped out financially. Suddenly, without any warning, George was taken ill and rushed to hospital. It took weeks for him to be properly diagnosed and treated. In his 70s, and acutely aware that both his father and paternal grandfather had died young, he did not believe he would ever make it out of the hospital alive.

As he lay sick in hospital, George was regularly visited by his great-nephew, Ehud Yonay. Ehud was the grandson of his older sister, Michal Rachel, whose daughter Erella had married Ehud's father, Mordechai, the rebellious son of an ultra-Orthodox Russian Jewish pioneer who had joined the Kfar Hasidim settlement soon after it was founded. The very secular Mordechai was considered scandalous by the devout Hasidim of Kfar Hasidim. His son Ehud, who was also not observant, had moved to California after his army service to become a journalist for *California Magazine*. It was in California that Ehud met his great-uncle for the first time. They spent a lot of time together, becoming very close. As soon as Ehud heard that George was in hospital, he rushed over to see him. As the weeks went by, Ehud dropped in regularly to spend time with George in an effort to cheer him up.

"Why don't you come back to Israel?" he asked George.

"What are you still doing here in America by yourself, with no family?"

"I can't go back," George replied. "I messed up their lives, and they all think I stole their money. There's no way I could ever go back. Forget it. That part of my life is done."

"How about you just come back for a visit?" Ehud suggested.

George looked at his nephew. "I'll think about it," he said.

But Ehud wouldn't relent. The topic kept coming up. No one cared about the past, Ehud maintained—life had moved on. But George wasn't convinced. After decades of self-imposed exile, he just could not see himself returning to Kfar Hasidim, the source of so much painful anguish and trauma.

"So what are you going to do if you get better and get out of the hospital?" asked Ehud.

"I'm not getting better so fast," said George, "and maybe I'll never get out—except in a box."

"Don't be so morbid! Don't be silly! What if you do get better? Will you go back into business?"

"Never!" said George emphatically.

"Then what?" The journalist in Ehud could not leave a question unanswered.

"I think I want to go to college and study psychology."

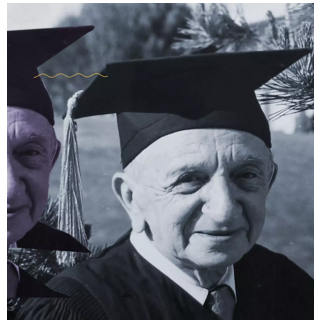
Ehud laughed. “Are you kidding? College? Psychology? Why don’t you just come home to Israel?”

George sighed. “All my life I’ve been interested in studying psychology. I’ve got just about enough money to live, so if I don’t die in hospital I’m going to apply to university and study psychology. That’s what I want to do.”

George looked across at Ehud, his face resolute and determined. Ehud shrugged his shoulders. The idea seemed utterly preposterous. But as soon as George was discharged from hospital he applied to San Fernando Valley State College, did his admissions interviews, and enrolled as a psychology undergraduate. Rather than rent an apartment in Northridge, near the college campus, he opted to live in the dorms with all the students.

George was in his element; it was as if he had been reborn. His sole interest was learning, and he spent most of his time in the library—reading, writing, researching. He still retained a few investment properties, through which he was able to modestly support himself, but he refused to get involved in any business-related activities—that part of his life was over. He had come to the realization that every day he had left was precious, and he wasn’t going to waste any of his remaining time trying to make money, which he realized he didn’t need and would never use.

Before long George had become a minor celebrity at the college, which in 1972 was renamed California State University Northridge (CSUN). Newspapers reported on the veteran student dorming alongside anti-war protesting students, many of whom adopted him as a surrogate grandfather. George was a good listener, and always happy to offer advice—and countless students beat a path to his



Graduation, 1975.

door. But none of them knew who George really was. He had stripped his backstory to the most basic information so that no questions were asked. He told everyone that he had arrived in the United States via Palestine just before WWII—a poor refugee with no wife or children, and no money or prospects. He was the embodiment of the American Dream—he had become a successful businessman and now wanted to spend the remainder of his life studying, catching up on all the time he had lost in his younger years, educating himself in subjects that had always interested him, but for which he had never had the time.

George was joined at CSUN by his young “relative,” Joseph Chudy, nephew by marriage of his niece Arella Mezrich. The Chudy family lived in California, having moved there in the 1940s, and they treated George like family. Joseph was particularly close to George, but he, too, knew nothing about the old man’s true background. The only person who knew anything about the unique history of the Yablonek Rebbe and his alter ego, George Nagel, was his great-nephew, Ehud.

In 1975, George T. Nagel graduated with a bachelor's in psychology. It was a landmark event, and Ehud believed that with the education bug out of his system, George would finally agree to come back to Kfar Hasidim. Immediately after the graduation, Ehud brought up the subject again. It was time to visit Israel. Unexpectedly, George was more open to the idea than ever before, and he promised Ehud that he would visit Kfar Hasidim at some point very soon.

But he was still anxious. "What will I do if they all still hate me? If they treat me with contempt? If they still think I'm a thief!" he asked Ehud.

"What's the big deal?" Ehud replied. "If you're not comfortable in Kfar Hasidim, you'll take a taxi to Haifa, stay in a hotel, and take the next flight back to L.A."

George shook his head. He still wasn't sure.

"I'm not moving back—you know that," he said.

Ehud smiled. "We'll see."

George was not quite ready yet. He had decided to go for a master's degree, but rather than attend classes and take exams, he contributed volunteer hours at a drug-rehabilitation facility, where he counseled recovering drug addicts from the margins of society. He carefully documented each case, offering his candid account of his encounters and his reflections. The final result was a book—*Paradise Cove—They Escaped the Cuckoo's Nest*—a reference to the multiple Academy Award-winning movie of 1975, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In the movie, a group of patients at a mental health facility are confined there by fear and intimidation. In George's dissertation, he eases people out of their mental jails and introduces them back into society.

George had come full circle. Suddenly he was back in his role as a Hasidic Rebbe, even if he did not realize it himself. He was helping people to improve their lives by healing them, teaching them, and bringing the best out in them. In this guise he was no longer George Nagel, the immigrant businessman escaping from his miserable past; instead he was the Yablone Rebbe, giving people with no hope a better vision of the future.

It was 1978, and he was ready to return to Kfar Hasidim. He told Ehud that he had booked a roundtrip ticket to Israel, and the dates. Quietly, without letting George know, Ehud informed his mother that her uncle was coming back.

The day arrived, and George landed at Ben-Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. A car was waiting to pick him up for the one-and-a-half-hour ride to Kfar Hasidim. The car drove through the entrance of the village and stopped at the nondescript house on Rechov Hameyasdim where George's niece Erella lived with her husband, Mordechai. He hadn't seen her for 40 years.

Erella ran over to George and hugged him. "Welcome home, Uncle!" she bubbled, "we have a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" He wasn't sure if he liked the idea of a surprise.

“Yes,” she replied, “but we need to drive up the road to the social hall. There are a few people there who are waiting to meet you.”

They arrived at the hall, which was packed with hundreds of people who had gathered to meet the man who had put Kfar Hasidim on the map. Old and young, religious and secular—everyone connected to the village was there. A seat at the front was left empty for George, and as a hush descended he slowly made his way toward his seat and sat down under the large welcome sign that adorned the front wall. An elderly man stood up and turned towards George.

“Rebbe, do you remember me?” he asked.

George looked at him, trying to figure out who he was.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Are you Chaimke? Chaimke Geldfarb?”

Chaimke smiled. “Yes, Rebbe, it’s me.” His voice was hoarse with emotion. “On behalf of all the residents of our Kfar, I want to welcome you back home. You were probably nervous to come here. You probably think we are angry with you. You probably think that because you brought us here from Poland, away from our homes, away from our families, to build your dream, not ours. And then it all went wrong, so you think we are angry that it all went wrong. But Rebbe, if that’s what you think, you’re mistaken. Because Rebbe—you saved our lives—if it were not for you, we would all have been killed by the Nazis.”

“Look over there ...” Chaimke pointed toward a group of people in the middle of the hall. “That’s my son with his wife and children, and next to him my two daughters with their husbands and children. My parents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, and their children—all murdered by the Nazis. But we came with you, Rebbe. We built this place. We founded this village. We survived. And you were the one who saved our lives. And for that we thank you. Thank you for our lives, and for the lives of our children and grandchildren. We can never thank you enough.”

Chaimke sat down, and an old woman rose to speak.

“Rebbe, do you remember me?”

George looked carefully at her.

“Sheindel, is that you?”

“Sheindel, yes, but now they call me Shoshana.”

Sheindel had a lump in her throat as she spoke, and she struggled to get the words out. “Rebbe, Rebbe, where have you been for so many years? We missed you! We needed you! Without you we would all be dead, and we would not have had our beautiful lives in our beautiful Israel. Why did you leave? Everything turned out OK in the end. Look at us, look at how lucky we are. We escaped from the murderers and built our own homes in God’s promised land. You said we could do it, and we did it.”

Sheindel began weeping. Tears flowed down her cheeks, as her daughter next to her put an arm around her shoulder.

“Rebbe, come home,” Sheindel sobbed, “you’ve been gone for far too long. It’s time to come home.”

There was dead silence, besides Sheindel’s muffled sobs. George looked around the hall. Everyone was looking at him. He looked down at his hands, and then at the floor. Slowly he got to his feet.

“My friends, my dear, dear friends,” he began, “I am so moved by this warm welcome. I don’t have very much to say. I have missed this place and all of you so much for all these years. I never understood how much this place meant to me, and how much I meant to you—until now. I never thought about what you just said. I never thought about the fact that I saved your lives, only about all the lives that were lost. I never thought about what I gave you, only about what I took away from you. But now it’s all become clear.”

He paused for a few seconds. You could have heard a pin drop. Then George whispered, slowly, deliberately, “It’s time. I’m ready. I’m coming home. I’m ready. I’m coming home,” and he sat down.

There was a moment of silence, and suddenly the hall erupted in applause. Everyone rose to their feet and applauded. It went on and on, as George made his way through the hall and shook everyone’s hand, smiling broadly. The Yablone Rebbe had returned to Kfar Hasidim, and now he was going to move back.

George flew back to Los Angeles to wrap up his affairs and prepare for the move to Israel. But sorting everything out took him longer than expected. Although he had wanted to finish his master’s at CSUN, he soon realized that this was not going to happen, and that he would have to make the move to Israel before he became too old. Over the next couple of years George visited Israel for extended periods, until, in November 1981, he gave away his last few possessions and flew off to Israel to settle there for good. He had just turned 86.

After more than 40 years away, he was finally back living in Kfar Hasidim, loved and valued. It was at this point that George Nagel returned to his roots, changing his name back to Yechezkel Taub. Moreover, he became the revered Yablone Rebbe once again. He grew back his beard and sidelocks, his yarmulke returned, and so did his religious observance. The Rebbe was given a seat at the front of the Kfar Hasidim synagogue, where he prayed regularly, and several times a week groups of eager youngsters would gather on a patch of land outside the house in which the Rebbe lived, and he taught them Torah, and told them stories of their heritage in the Hasidic tradition.

Very few people knew about his return to Israel, and truthfully, few would have cared. The pioneering challenges of Palestine in the 1920s and ’30s were a distant memory, replaced by the flourishing and vibrant State of Israel. The Yablone Rebbe was a relic of the difficult past best left forgotten, of interest to no one outside his own family and the residents of Kfar Hasidim.

Even Kfar Hasidim had changed substantially since those early days, with the addition of a new ultra-Orthodox neighborhood—Kfar Hasidim Bet—home to an

internationally renowned yeshiva, ironically of the non-Hasidic Lithuanian persuasion. But the lack of interest in his return to Israel didn't bother the Rebbe at all. He was not interested in attracting attention to himself. After more than four decades living under a pseudonym in Los Angeles, any publicity would only have dredged up unnecessary attention, and potentially unpleasant stories and dormant resentments.

In early 1986, the Rebbe began to weaken and decline, and he passed away peacefully on May 22. He was 90 years old. The funeral was modest, attended by the residents of Kfar Hasidim, with a low-key service. The Rebbe was buried in the heart of the cemetery, among the graves of all those who had followed him from Europe to create a Hasidic settlement in Eretz Yisrael over 60 years earlier. Although things had not turned out quite as planned, together they had dared to dream, and to persevere. Kfar Hasidim had endured despite the many hardships and challenges, and despite the absence of its foremost activist and leader for so many years. But he had ended his life in their midst, closing the circle that had begun in 1924.

The Rebbe's headstone was installed within a month of his burial, as is the custom in Israel. The inscription focused on the Rebbe's distinguished lineage and his single greatest achievement:

Here lies Grand Rabbi Yechezkel Taub, the 'Rebbe of Yablona,' son of Grand Rabbi Yaakov Taub. Last scion of the dynasty that began with Grand Rabbi Yechezkel of Kuzmir, disciple of the 'Seer of Lublin' ... in 5685 he led his Hasidim up to Eretz Yisrael where he redeemed the lands of Harbaj, Harchieh and Sheikh Abreik. Founder of Nachalat Yaakov, later known as Kfar Hasidim.

His remarkable trajectory from revered Polish Hasidic leader, to Zionist pioneer, to reviled failure, to war refugee, to shipyard worker, to successful real-estate developer, to bankruptcy, to geriatric college student, and back to his roots as a revered Hasidic Rebbe, is surely one of the most astonishing Jewish stories of the modern era.

Pini Dunner is the Senior Rabbi at Beverly Hills Synagogue, and the author of *Mavericks, Mystics & False Messiahs: Episodes from the Margins of Jewish History*.

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