

SCRIBE

QUARTERLY

The Food Issue



Contents

SUMMER 2025 Features 5785 קיץ



pg
40

32

“It’s very much tied to economics”

Running a kosher restaurant isn’t just a matter of faith — it’s also a complicated business proposition.

by **COREY MINTZ**

40

Kitchen Confidential

During the Spanish Inquisition, *conversos* had to prepare Jewish food in secret. We’re still unpacking the ways that has shaped culinary history.

by **CAITLIN STALL-PAQUET**

Contents

SUMMER 2025 | 5785 ק״ט

Letter from the Editor.....15

IN THE BEGINNING

15
Jewish Geography

20
**On One Foot:
Astrology**

Judaism has always been anti-pagan, and yet Jewish interest in the stars dates back to ancient times

by **AVI FINEGOLD**

25
**The Kibbitz:
Shani Mink**

The executive director of the Jewish Farmer Network on reconnecting to her Judaism through soil and seeds

by **AVI FINEGOLD**

CULTURE KLATSCH

47
**Eating Our Feelings:
Olivia Ostrow,
Matzah Ball Soup**

by **COREY MINTZ**

51
**Bookish:
Vera, or Faith**

Gary Shteyngart's new novel finds the humour in dystopia

by **PHOEBE MALTZ BOVY**



MATZAH BALLS, OF COURSE Chef Olivia Ostrow's recipe for the ultimate Jewish comfort food

56
Judaica
Unexpected offerings at the ice-cream parlour

ON THE COVER:

This idyllic picnic, set in Montreal's iconic Mount Royal Park, includes several of the foods discussed in this issue. Some have obvious Jewish connections; the history of others is less known.



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COREY MINTZ
“IT’S VERY MUCH TIED TO ECONOMICS,” PG 32

COREY Mintz, author of *The Next Supper: The End of Restaurants as We Knew Them, and What Comes After* (Public Affairs, 2021) is a food reporter and consultant focusing on the intersection between food, economics, and labour.



KAGAN McLEOD
“IT’S VERY MUCH TIED TO ECONOMICS,” PG 32

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CAITLIN STALL-PAQUET
“KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL,” PG 40

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Food for Thought

JEWIS AND FOOD. It’s a relationship that runs throughout history and shapes culture — the stuff of legend (and also many jokes). We are a people defined by, among other things, both by our food and our commitment to food: we love to eat and we love to talk about eating.

As with any aspect of culture that is so well-established and so familiar, it’s easy to lapse into cliché when writing about Jews and food. Our hope, in this issue dedicated to this classic combination, is to shed new light on an age-old theme. There is (it seems inevitable) some chicken soup in this issue — but also agriculture and finance and DNA testing, dishes created in present-day Texas and fourteenth-century Egypt.

We begin, appropriately, not with meals that we love to dig in to but with the ingredients that go into making them: though diaspora Jews aren’t often associated with farming, Avi Finegold’s interview with Shani Mink of the Jewish Farmer Network is a beautiful meditation on the temporality of Judaism — its distinct annual cycles shaped by a relationship to the land and the things we grow on it.

At the very other end of the food chain are restaurant meals. Hospitality is always a challenging industry; the degree of difficulty rises even higher when that restaurant is kosher, for reasons Corey Mintz

unpacks in his deep dive into the business of running a kosher kitchen. There are some obvious factors (kosher ingredients are more expensive, you need to shut down for Shabbat and holidays) — but, it turns out, some less obvious ones as well.

Between those two ends of the spectrum: dishes themselves. While the history of many staples of the Jewish kitchen is familiar, others were developed in secrecy. For her feature on the hidden history of some Sephardic foods, Caitlin Stall-Paquet interviewed historians and chefs who are still gleaning new insights about dishes that date back to the Spanish Inquisition, when Jews were forced to hide in plain sight.

Especially in Canada, land of long winters and short growing seasons, summer seems the right time to celebrate Jewish food. We hope that the stories in this issue help you appreciate it even more — and that you get to enjoy at least a few picnics as delicious as the one on our cover.

HAMUTAL DOTAN
EDITOR IN CHIEF
SCRIBE QUARTERLY

P.S. We always appreciate hearing from readers about the stories in the magazine, and hope to begin publishing some of your notes soon. Write to us at letters@scribequarterly.ca

Jewish Geography

BULLETINS
FROM AROUND THE WORLD,
BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE
JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY



Nearly 1,000 years old, this Kiddush cup will be up for auction in the fall.

HISTORY

SOTHEBY'S TO AUCTION EARLIEST KNOWN KIDDUSH CUP

by GRACE GILSON

A KIDDUSH CUP that may have been passed around the Friday night dinner table during the reign of Genghis Khan will be available for auction this fall.

The rare remnant of the Silk Road, the ancient Asian trading route that was home to vibrant Jewish communities, is the oldest known Jewish artifact from the Middle Ages according to Sotheby's, which will put it on the auction block. It is dated to the eleventh or twelfth century, a time when the Jews of Europe faced mass expulsion, exile, and massacres during the era of the Crusades. The inscription on the cup, which includes both Hebrew and Arabic, names its Jewish owner as "Simcha son of Salman."

"This cup is an extraordinarily rare record of the existence and importance of Jewish communities in Central Asia in the Middle Ages, and of their cultural and artistic exchanges with

the surrounding Islamic world,” said Sharon Liberman Mintz, Sotheby’s international senior Judaica specialist, in a press release.

The Arabic inscriptions on the Kiddush cup, which would have been used for the blessing over wine at Shabbat meals, include a series of blessings for its owner. “Bearing inscriptions in both Hebrew and Arabic, the cup was not only used to sanctify Jewish ritual, but also embodied a shared artistic language across faiths, and its survival for nearly a millennium is truly remarkable,” said

Liberman Mintz. “No other medieval Judaica artefact of this early date is known to exist.”

The Kiddush cup, which has been dubbed the “Cup of Joy,” has an estimated value of \$3 million to \$5 million (US) and will be auctioned in New York on October 29. Last fall, Sotheby’s also auctioned off a 1,500-year-old stone inscription of the Ten Commandments. It sold for more than \$5 million to an anonymous buyer who said they intended to donate it to an Israeli institution, according to *The New York Times*. **JTA**

Notorious officials mentioned in Argentina’s extensive documentation include Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust who was captured by the Mossad in 1960.

“rat lines” after the war. The documents are now publicly available through Argentina’s National Archive, the Argentinian government announced. The released documents include banking and financial transactions that show how Nazis were able to resettle in Argentina as well as records held by Argentina’s defence ministry, according to *The Times of Israel*.

Notorious officials mentioned in Argentina’s extensive documentation include Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust who was captured by the Mossad in 1960 and later tried and executed in Israel, and Josef Mengele, the Nazi doctor dubbed the “angel of death.”

The public received a glimpse of Argentina’s collection of tens of thousands of documents relating to its support for Nazis fleeing prosecution in a documentary in 2018. The government’s collection had been fully concealed until 1992, when Argentina’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs declassified 139,544 documents. **JTA**

GLOBAL

ARGENTINA DECLASSIFIES MORE THAN 1,800 FILES ON NAZI ESCAPE TO SOUTH AMERICA

by GRACE GILSON

THE ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT has announced the release of nearly 1,850 classified documents that show how Nazi fugitives escaped to the country after World War II. The trove of documents was made available to the public in late April at the urging of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish advocacy group named for the famed late Nazi hunter. Argentina’s Chief of the Cabinet of Ministers Guillermo Francos said President Javier Milei gave the order to release them “because there is no reason to continue withholding that information,” according to Argentinian outlet *Perfil*.

The collection will shed light on the financing of escape routes for Nazis, thousands of whom fled to South America via so-called



CULTURE

JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY LAUNCHES AN MFA FOR WRITERS

by ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL

THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, best known for training Conservative rabbis as well as Judaic scholars and communal workers, hopes to raise a new kind of crop: Jewish fiction writers.

The Manhattan seminary is launching a new Master’s in Fine Arts in Creative Writing, a two-year, low-residency program to be directed by the prize-winning Israeli author Etgar Keret and with a stable of acclaimed Jewish writers.

Although she included the idea for an MFA program in her 2022 strategic plan for JTS, Chancellor Shuly Rubin Schwartz said she heard subsequently from some of those authors that an MFA at a

Israeli writer Etgar Keret is the director of the new MFA program in creative writing at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Jewish institution could give a home to Jews who, since October 7, 2023, see the publishing world as increasingly inhospitable to Jewish themes and writers. JTS was already well into its accreditation process with the state, she said in an interview, when reports of cancelled bookstore appearances, calls for

PHOTOGRAPH BY LIELE SAND, ETGARKERET.COM

a boycott of Israeli literary institutions and a blacklist of “Zionist” authors began circulating.

“We’re living in an era where Jewish writers are having a hard time getting into writers’ programs, getting published even,” she said. “And if they do get into a program, they are reticent to do so and they’re not sure how [their writing] will be received.”

The American-Jewish novelist Jonathan Safran Foer will serve as the program’s founding advisor. Other “creative advisors” listed by JTS include the novelists Shalom Auslander and Nicole Krauss (who used to be married to Safran Foer), comedian Alex Edelman, *This American Life* creator Ira Glass, actor Liev Schreiber, singer-songwriter Regina Spektor, and Deborah Treisman, the fiction

“Jewish civilization is rich and broad and deep and includes literature and art in addition to rabbinic learning and historical scholarship.”

Singer-songwriter Regina Spektor (left) and novelist Nicole Krauss (right) are among the advisors to the new program for Jewish writers.

editor for *The New Yorker*. The advisors reflect Keret’s notion that storytelling includes numerous formats, Schwartz said.

The chancellor said she was inspired by the idea that a fiction writer or other storyteller could take advantage of the

faculty and assets that have been the seminary’s calling card, including learning from classical Jewish texts and the treasures in the institution’s library. She sees the MFA as a reminder that “Jewish civilization is rich and broad and deep,” and includes literature and art in addition to rabbinic learning and historical scholarship.

Schwartz said Safran Foer reached out to her when the idea was germinating to share his concerns about the marginalization that Jewish writers were experiencing and his thoughts about the role that JTS could play in addressing them. She said the writer’s enthusiasm for the project convinced her that the program could be viable. A writers’ festival is also being planned for each year of the program.

Keret, best known for his collections of short-short stories as well as the film *Jellyfish*, said in a statement about the new program that he learned about the power of storytelling from his mother, a Holocaust survivor. “I don’t know if the capacity to tell a story was what saved my mother’s life, but I can say beyond a doubt that it did save her soul,” he said.

JTS has turned out fiction writers in the past, although not by design. They include Milton Steinberg, author of the 1939 novel *As a Driven Leaf*; Chaim Potok, an ordained rabbi and author of the best-selling 1967 novel *The Chosen*; and Rabbi Burton Visotzky, an emeritus faculty member and author of the 2008 novel *A Delightful Compendium of Consolation*. **JTA**



PHOTOGRAPHS BY, LEFT: SHERVIN LAINEZ; RIGHT: MARIA SPANN



EDUCATION

HENRY VIII CREATED THE ROLE — AND FINALLY, A JEW WILL HELM HEBREW STUDIES AT CAMBRIDGE

by SHIRA LI BARTOV

SINCE 1540, a prestigious chain of scholars has held the title of the Regius Professor of Hebrew at the University of Cambridge. But not one of these scholars of Hebrew and Semitic studies has been Jewish. That will be changing soon: this fall, Aaron Koller will become the first Jew to join the university’s department of Middle Eastern studies as the Regius Professor of Hebrew, a role established by King Henry VIII. He is moving from New York City, where he has taught at Yeshiva University, specializing in Hebrew from biblical to medieval texts, since earning his doctorate there in 2009.

According to Koller, it’s no surprise that Jews never made the cut before. Henry VIII, who founded the Church of England along with the professorship, intended it for Anglican churchmen to teach Hebrew in the Anglican tradition. That idea persisted until recently.

“Fifty years ago, it wouldn’t have struck anyone as odd that no Jewish person had held the position,” Koller said in an interview.

Aaron Koller, shown here visiting Cambridge during the 2022/23 academic year, believes that Hebrew studies should be of interest to Jews and non-Jews alike.

“It was pretty clearly — not officially, but very clearly — meant for an Anglican professor of the Old Testament.”

In his new role, Koller wants to promote the study of Hebrew texts over the thousands of years between the Hebrew Bible and the modern state of Israel, drawing on Cambridge’s rich trove of manuscripts that includes the Cairo Geniza, the vast collection of medieval manuscripts that was discovered in Egypt in the late nineteenth century. Koller hopes that introducing students to these writings will open them up to new ways of studying cultural and intellectual history across the world.

Despite being the first Jewish Regius professor, Koller said he is wary of narrowing the department around “Jewish studies for the Jews.” In North America, Jewish studies departments tend to attract Jewish students looking to connect with their identity and heritage. That fills a valuable need, said Koller, but he wants to build out Hebrew studies as a home for any student with a humanistic interest in Hebrew, addressing the same historical and philosophical questions that draw people to studying ancient Greek or Latin.

“No one thinks that Greek studies would only be for Greeks,” Koller points out. “Greek studies spend a lot of time trying to explain to the world that this is of universal significance. It’s not for every single person, but it’s for any given person; [they] will find something interesting here. And I very much want to do the same for Hebrew studies in Cambridge.” **JTA**

The Kibbitz

Farmer **Shani Mink** on reconnecting to her Judaism through soil and seeds by AVI FINEGOLD



“THE PILGRIMAGE TO THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM? IT WAS AN ANCIENT FARMING CONFERENCE.”

SHANI MINK is the executive director of the Jewish Farmer Network, an organization she co-founded in 2017 along with SJ Seldin. The group works to foster community among Jewish farmers, with the aim of cultivating “social, cultural and spiritual well-being.” The organization hosts Shabbat dinners and creates educational resources, among other activities — in the process, shedding light on the deep and often underappreciated connections between Judaism and agriculture. I spoke to Shani about the importance of agricultural thinking for all Jews, and how farming is still a vital part of contemporary life.

What drew you to farming?

I grew up in suburban New Jersey, in a modern Orthodox community. My parents are fairly outdoorsy. I can't quite remember when I first got interested in agriculture, but I can say that when I was in college, my first year, I had a professor in environmental ethics who said, *You seem really interested in food ethics. I get a CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] subscription from an organic farm down the road. Why don't you call them and see if you can get an internship?* I called and asked if I could have an internship. And the guy said, *I don't do internships, I pay people for their time,* and I said, *Great, can I have a job?* So I ended up spending the rest of my undergraduate career also working on this organic farm. I came out of university with a degree in philosophy, but also nearly four years of practical experience in organic agriculture.

You went from always being outdoorsy to realizing that agriculture was something that you can literally sink your hands into.

Yes, and I will say one of my sassy answers to people asking me why I like being a farmer is that I'm not one of those people who come to the work from a values-based position — I like to be physical. I like to be dirty, and I like to be outside. And that's it. That's kind of how I ended up in agriculture. Now I sit behind a desk running a network for farmers, so I'm not actually doing that anymore. But it's a very embodied thing that brings me to farming.

Farming was not a Jewish practice for me at first. That didn't come until a couple of summers later, when I started working at Eden Village Camp, which is a Jewish farm-to-table sleepaway camp in New York State. The rabbi there, Pesach Stadlin, told us during staff training that Judaism is one of the oldest agricultural traditions still being practised today. I think, during my time in college, I was looking to my philosophical studies for spiritual, emotional, or intellectual substantiation for my feelings of connection with the work of agriculture. And that statement from Pesach was a kick in the

head for me. Everything that I'd been looking for elsewhere was here in my own tradition, and in my own body of ancestral wisdom. That sent me on this journey of reintegration of my farmer self and my Jewish self, and of understanding how those two can be mutually enforcing and a braided whole.

How did you start to see those points of connection between your farm life and your Jewish practice?

One of my teachers, Rabbi Psachyah Lichtenstein, says, *The Jew is the calendar.* The thing that makes us Jewish is how we move through time. For me, that is the most potent way of connecting with Jewish agrarianism: intentionally stepping into the Jewish flow of time, especially in terms of the *Shalosh Regalim*, the three holidays that are harvest festivals that anchor the Jewish calendar.

What's been meaningful for me has been bringing deep intentionality to these festivals: being with my farmer friends, who are often not Jewish, and inviting them to Pesach, bringing some of the first greens and fruits that are showing up on the farm on Shavuot. The stopping and appreciating where we are at in the season is so impactful for me, and for everyone that I've invited into that experience. It's not normal for farmers to take a break in June for two days — that's a busy time. *What, you're going to stop and take stock of where you're at?* No, there's shit to do. But Shavuot particularly makes you stop and say, *Wow!* That gratitude for the first of the season is something I think about as a farmer. When I think about growing cherry tomatoes or strawberries, the joy of the very first ripe one that you're able to eat is a perfect moment. Taking the moment to appreciate the first is so huge, and our tradition tells us to do that on Shavuot.



Hanging out with a hen at the Pearlstone Retreat Center in Reisterstown, Maryland.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY SHANI MINK

I don't think many people have this awareness of Judaism as an agricultural set of holidays. They think of all of the things that we map onto the holidays: the exodus from Egypt, getting the Torah, living in huts in the desert. How do you walk yourself through the year, through these holidays?

Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are all agrarian holidays. They are all pilgrimage holidays in which our ancestors brought some of their harvest to the

Temple in Jerusalem. That pilgrimage was an ancient farming conference, the time of year that you see all your farmer friends and you're just like, *How are you? How's your family? I heard your daughter got married.* You're reconnecting. It's when you see everybody.

At Pesach, we're coming out of the rainy part of the year, where we've been in our liturgy since Shemini Atzeret. Every day we've been praying for rain. On Pesach, we change

our liturgy and we start praying for dew because the rainy season's over. The rainy time is when we're seeding and when we want things to be greening and growing. When we enter into Pesach, we enter into this very special period of time that's centred around the harvest of grain, specifically of barley and wheat. [In hot climates, these crops are often harvested much earlier than they are in North America.] This period of time is very auspicious spiritually, but also very crucial practically because for the Jewish people, our central seed is wheat. We're wheat people. When I talk about this with our farmers, I talk about how the inner sanctum of the *Beit Hamikdash* wasn't filled with gold or piles of riches. There was a really elaborate table full of bread. I also think about the bitter greens that we're eating. The greens that come up early in the season are often bitter. The *maror* that we eat today is a legacy from Ashkenazi diaspora in Eastern Europe because there are no greens there in March or April: horseradish is one of the only things that's coming up green at that time.

Then we begin the period of counting the *Omer* between Passover and Shavuot. During this period, every day we are praying that it's not going to rain, because we're counting on our grain harvest, and when grain is harvested you want it to be dry. You need it to store up well; you need it to hold you through a whole year. So we enter into this very tricky time, holding our breath for 49 days, counting the days between Pesach and Shavuot, when we end the barley harvest, which was traditionally food for animals. We have finished our grain harvest, all of the wheat is in for the year, and we eat bread. People talk so much about Shavuot being a dairy holiday, but it's a fruit and bread holiday as much as a dairy holiday.

I don't believe in the dairy part, actually. I always say that if there's ever a custom that has multiple reasons for it, none of them are true. They are after-the-fact projections onto existing customs.

Do you want to know my agricultural reason why? Think about livestock. What do we traditionally eat on Pesach? Lambs. This is when lambs are being born. Seven weeks later, those babies have been weaned and there's dairy available.

That's really cool. I never thought about that.

I love hosting Shavuot, having cheese and bread and cheesecakes. Everybody brings a different cheese; there's lots of butter and lots of fruit.

And then we get to the fall. And for me, Sukkot is about so many things, but primarily taking a minute to appreciate the hard work of the season and all that we have grown, all that we have produced, and really inhabiting that abundance in the space of the Sukkah and living and sitting and eating amongst our harvest. Traditionally, they hung garlic and onions and peppers and all of these fruits from the sukkah, beautifying the space and being able to rest in gratitude. That time of year, you still have summer fruit along with the fall things. It is the most abundant time of the year.

You run this organization that connects Jewish farmers together, who are not necessarily working in a Jewish context, they're just Jewish and also farmers. Tell me about these people and what it means to have a network of Jewish farmers across North America.

We're connected to about 1,800 Jewish farmers, mostly in the United States, but definitely a lot in Canada, too. We have a bunch of British

Judaism is one of the oldest agricultural traditions still being practised today. For me, agrarianism is intentionally stepping into the Jewish flow of time.

Columbia Jewish farmers, as well as the folks at Shoresh in Toronto, and others. We work to cultivate the social, cultural, and spiritual well-being of Jewish farmers, and we do that by helping Jewish farmers connect to each other. Most farmers are pretty rural, pretty isolated from Jewish community.

A lot of them are also pretty alienated from Jewish community in virtue of having a very different lifestyle than the rest of the Jewish community. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard from a Jewish farmer some version of this story where they say, *When I started farming and I went back to my Jewish community, people asked me what I was up to and I told them I was farming and they said, Jews don't do that.* A lot of people feel really rejected from mainstream Jewish community. The story that most of us have been told about what it looks like to be Jewish in the world today is not one that includes the stories of Jewish farmers. The work that we do helps tie them back into the Jewish story. Being a Jewish farmer is the most Jewish job there is, because we

are an agrarian people at our core. A third of the Talmud is about agricultural law, and our ancestors, our sages, had so much to say about how to do agriculture in a way that is regenerative of self and community and soil. We offer Jewish farmers opportunities to tap into the surprisingly relevant rhythms and technologies of Jewish agricultural thought.

Our expectation is not for people to become religious or start "farming Jewishly," but just to shift the way they think about themselves in the context of the wider Jewish story, believe that they are an essential part of that story and not antithetical to it.

What are the options for people who live in cities to contribute in some way to the food system?

My recommendation would be to subscribe to a Community Supported Agriculture program, which supports your local farmers. CSA subscriptions are such an amazing way to support your local food economy because you are investing in your farmer at the beginning of the season. It allows them to buy the things that they need to buy to grow the food that they need to grow, and makes the year a lot less volatile for the farmer. And you are guaranteed to get amazing seasonal, well loved, well cared for, often organic produce. It keeps money in your local economy, and it's relational. Some CSAs have a model where, if you are a member of the CSA, you are invited to come volunteer on the farm or you can come pick your own produce. Some even have community events where you get to have a party on the farm with other CSA subscribers. It's an amazing way to support local food. Our country, our Western society, doesn't value farmers. ■

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

IS IT JEWISH TO READ YOUR HOROSCOPE?

Just like Hillel’s student, we all have complex questions that we want answered as simply as possible. Here, we consider a question of contemporary relevance and explore how sources both classical and modern address it.

by AVI FINEGOLD

TAKE A TOUR of Israel and you’re likely to visit one of the ancient synagogues that have been excavated in modern times. En Gedi, Beit Alpha, Sepphoris, and others all have large mosaics that, perhaps surprisingly, depict the Zodiac signs and their corresponding Hebrew months. If Judaism purports to take a more rational approach to religion now, why do we still say *mazel tov* — which literally means a good sign — expressing our good wishes via hopes that a given event is taking place in an auspicious time? Were the early Jews star worshippers? Are we still?

The internet is rife with astrology sites catering to all manner of Jews — Orthodox (kosherastro.com), witchy (alizaeinhorn.com), and everything in between. And yet, Judaism has always taken an anti-pagan stance and prohibited any form of fortune-telling. So what does Judaism actually say about astrology?

DEUTERONOMY 18:9-13

When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who consigns a son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to God, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you. You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God. **1**

1 THIS PROHIBITION is the source for talmudic codification of laws against astrology. The Bible, aware that the land that would be Israel was populated by people of many other faiths, warned Jews not to become like them, and to not even imitate them by bringing some of those practices into Judaism. However, readers of stars do not show up in this passage. This could be because Judaism did have a relationship with observing stars, or it could be that astrologers fell under the broader category of augurs or diviners.

TALMUD SHABBAT 156A

Rabbi Hanina says: A constellation makes one wise and a constellation makes one wealthy, and there is a constellation for the Jewish people that influences them. Rabbi Yohanan said: There is no constellation for the Jewish people that influences them. The Jewish people are not subject to the influence of astrology. And Rabbi Yohanan follows his own reasoning, as Rabbi Yohanan said: From where is it derived that there is no constellation for the Jewish people? As it is stated: “Thus said the Lord: Learn not the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the nations are dismayed at them” (Jeremiah 10:2). The nations will be dismayed by them, but not the Jewish people. **2**

MAIMONIDES, LAWS OF FOREIGN WORSHIP 11:17-18

These practices are all false and deceptive and were means employed by the ancient idolaters to deceive the peoples of various countries and induce them to become their followers. It is not proper for Israelites who are highly intelligent to be drawn by such inanities or imagine that there is any benefit in them, as it is said “For there is no enchantment with Jacob, neither is there any divination with Israel” (Numbers 23:23); and further “For these nations that you are to dispossess hearken to the soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, The Lord your God has not suffered you so to do” (Deut. 18:14).

Whoever believes in these and similar things and, in his heart holds them to be true and scientific and only forbidden by the Torah, is nothing but a fool, deficient in understanding, who belongs to the same class with women and children whose intellects are immature. Sensible people, however, who possess sound mental faculties, know by clear proofs that all these practices which the Torah prohibited have no scientific basis but are chimerical and inane; and that only those deficient in knowledge are attracted by those follies and, for their sake, leave the ways of the truth. The Torah, therefore, in forbidding all these follies, exhorts us, “You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God (Ibid 18:13).” **3**

2 THIS IS AN EXCERPT from an extended passage in the Talmud that begins by describing the various ways that the stars influence human behaviour and actions — writing, for example, that a person born under the influence of Mars will have blood in their life, which may manifest in fates ranging from becoming a murderer to working as a slaughterer. It then declares that the constellations do not affect the Jewish people. Constellations — in Hebrew *mazel* (the origin of the phrase *mazel tov*) are clearly believed by the Talmud to have a real effect on people, but this must be reconciled with moments when this effect is overcome, either by divine intervention or our own will. The Talmud explains that, while the effect of the stars is real, Jews are uniquely positioned to alter their destinies with good deeds and prayer.

3 IN A SHARP DISSENT, MAIMONIDES, the prime example of Jewish rationalism in the Middle Ages, rejects any possibility that the stars impact the human condition. This is a classic example of the Maimonidean principle that, when Torah and reason collide, we alter our understanding of the Torah to fit with reason. In this case, he sees the many examples of astrological influence in the Bible as metaphorical. The Rambam elaborated on this anti-astrology stance in a letter he wrote to the Jewish community in Yemen, which was dealing with a charismatic individual claiming to be the Messiah, leading many in the community astray. Local leaders wondered if the community was suffering this misfortune because it was under the influence of bad astrological signs. “Dismiss such notions from your mind,” Maimonides wrote. “Cleanse your mind of them as one cleanses dirty clothes. Accomplished gentile and certainly Jewish scholars refuse to believe in the truth of this science. Its postulates can be refuted by real proofs on rational grounds.”

SHULCHAN ARUCH, YOREH DEAH 179:1-2

One is not to consult star-gazers nor cast lots [because it says, “You shall be complete with Hashem, your God.” Moreover, it is forbidden to consult diviners, enchanters or sorcerers.]

It is customary not to begin (work) on the second or fourth and not to marry women except when the moon is full. Accordingly, it is customary to begin learning at the beginning of the new month because even though it’s not a prediction, there is an omen, and what a man knows is against the constellations he should not do, so as not to rely on miracles. However, one should not investigate this matter because of the commandment, “You shall be complete.” **4**

4 RABBI JOSEPH KARO, the author of the foremost code of Jewish law from which this is excerpted, tries to split the difference between the Talmud and Maimonides. While Jews are not permitted to personally consult any sort of astrologer, they can adhere to established practices that assume astrological influence: in the sixteenth century, when Karo was writing, Mondays were believed to be ruled by the moon, and Wednesdays by Mars, neither of which were seen as auspicious.

There isn’t much in the way of discussion of the topic for several centuries after this, but there are some indications of growing skepticism about astrology. In a comment on the original verse from Deuteronomy, early twentieth century Lithuanian rabbi Baruch Epstein quoted seventeenth century rabbi Moses Hagiz, who maintained that, since the light of God had now spread throughout the world (i.e., we live in a monotheistic world), the powers that are seen in the Bible no longer operate and are used only by fools.

RABBI ELIEZER MELAMED, YESHIVA HAR BRACHA WEBSITE

The halakha follows the overwhelming majority of poskim [halakhic authorities] that it is forbidden to attempt to inquire about the future through astrology. According to most poskim ... the person asking violates the positive commandment “You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God.” And there are those who say ... that he also transgresses the negative commandment “Do not practice divination.”

After learning that it is forbidden to ask astrologers about the future, we are left to clarify: Is it permissible to conduct a personality assessment with the help of an astrologer?

According to those who hold that astrology sometimes contains truth, it would be permissible for a

5 THIS IS A GOOD SUMMATION of how contemporary Orthodoxy sees astrology. Based on the last sentence, the author would likely exclude just about all the astrological wisdom floating around today: despite his apparent permissiveness, one would be hard pressed to find sound sources of astrological insight.

person to use astrology to deepen his understanding of his character and traits. For if one knows he is prone to a certain sin, he can be more careful to avoid it, and if he knows he has talent in a certain area, he can develop it further. As our Sages said (Shabbat 156a) about one born under the constellation of Mars, that by nature, he will tend toward bloodshed, but it is within his ability to choose whether to be a murderer, a ritual slaughterer, a doctor who performs therapeutic bloodletting, or a mohel (circumciser) ... However, it is preferable to refrain from doing so, since it is difficult to know who is truly an expert. **5**

JEWISH ASTROLOGER LORELAI KUDE ON HER WEBSITE

The Talmudic-era rabbis used their powerful corporate identity, personal piety, and superior knowledge exclusive to Torah scholars to triumph over the esoteric traditions of the dominant culture which threatened their authority. They institutionalized astrology in the *beit midrash*, which accomplished two things: first, it denuded foreign esoteric traditions of any legitimacy and condemned them along with their practitioners to the status of permanent outsiders. Secondly: it allowed them to demonstrate the superiority of Judaism’s native esoteric traditions on their own terms.

Two thousand years of Talmudic Judaism and the evolution of halacha (Jewish law) have run concurrently with Judaism’s mystical stream. Astrology is the bridge that crosses that stream, and re-crosses, and crosses it again.

Understanding astrology’s role in Jewish life throughout history is significant because it seeks to recover a rich and rewarding component of Jewish cultural heritage. Striving to resolve the dissonance between prohibitions against astrology in legal texts and the ubiquity of the artifactual evidence can reveal clues as to how community rabbis might have weighed the influence of folk life in regulating traditional communal norms. **6**

6 THE AUTHOR, an astrologer and horoscope columnist, is one of the few Jewish astrologers who seem to have done some work uncovering old Jewish traditions.

Here, she argues that astrology is not akin to many other beliefs that rabbis have maintained at earlier points in history that have since been proven wrong. In other words: in her view, astrology is like a belief in the world to come, which is unprovable but fundamental to many Jews, rather than like the “fact” that the sun revolves around the earth, which at some point rabbis (along with the rest of the world) believed but now know to be false.

PLACING YOUR FAITH in Judaism doesn’t mean automatically accepting all ancient ideas, especially when we have so much in our tradition that helps us separate between what is central and what resonates in a particular era. I am not the first to point out that Maimonides would not stand by much of the science that he promoted if he were alive today. That being said, astrology has been part of Jewish culture since its inception. If you want to claim that your horoscope and star charts are part of your Jewish expression (as opposed to something fun you like to read in the morning), maybe try to find readings that draw from Jewish wisdom. **■**

“IT’S VERY MUCH TIED TO ECONOMICS”

RUNNING A KOSHER
RESTAURANT ISN’T
JUST A MATTER
OF FAITH—IT’S ALSO
A COMPLICATED
BUSINESS
PROPOSITION

BY **COREY MINTZ**

ILLUSTRATION BY **KAGAN McLEOD**



BOAZ RACHAMIM LOVED HIS FIRST

feta cheese. It was soft and crumbly, perfect for the popular Greek salad at Eisenbergs Sandwich Co., his kosher dairy restaurant. When the locally produced cheese lost its *hechsher*, its kosher certification, Rachamim switched to another brand. Then they lost their *hechsher* as well. Now, Rachamim tells me, “we’re stuck using other feta that we think is not as good, and is also double or triple the price.”

It’s not like he can go to a supplier to choose another from a dozen feta-style cheeses — find a similar Greek or perhaps experiment with a grassy, creamy Bulgarian. It must be one of the options recognized by the Kashruth Council of Canada (COR), Eisenbergs’ kosher certifier. Unable to find a satisfactory replacement via commercial distributors, Rachamim is stuck buying an expensive import from the supermarket, rendering the dish, one of his best sellers, unprofitable.

As a result, Rachamim is exploring a menu change, a switch to another salad that may have better margins. For the swap to succeed, the new salad will also have to be flavourful, healthy, and colourful — he’s thinking maybe a fattoush with pomegranate seeds and goat cheese, which he can get at a better price.

Every restaurant in the world is struggling with the industry’s three main types of overhead: labour costs; fixed costs (rent, utilities, insurance, etc.); and what’s called the cost of goods sold (COGS) — the price of the raw materials, including not just ingredients but wine, packaging, and other consumable or disposable products. Historically, these have each been pegged at eating up 30 percent of a restaurant’s revenue, leaving just 10 percent for profit. That model, if it was ever the norm, is now long gone: the average full-service restaurant sees profits of between three to five percent. Food inflation, though easing off its 2023 height, has sent COGS into the stratosphere. (The cost of filling a deep-fryer with oil, hardly an ingredient seen by diners as a luxury that justifies high prices, has jumped 55 percent in five years.) A mass exodus of employees, and the resulting competition for staff, has been not just a cost increase but a drain on time and resources for owners and managers, who are constantly seeking, interviewing, and training new people. And fixed costs in Toronto and Montreal, where the majority of Canada’s Jewish population lives, are always climbing; every lease renewal threatens the bottom line.

Running a kosher restaurant means facing all these same challenges, and then adding in several more variables. First, there’s the matter of the COGS. Not all kosher foods are more expensive, but key ingredients like beef or cheese can be double or triple the price of their non-kosher equivalents. Obtaining kosher certification for the restaurant itself adds another layer of fees, as does the employment of a *mashgiach* who ensures a kitchen adheres to the standards of kashrut on an ongoing basis.

Then there are the hours of operation: many kosher restaurants, which need to be closed by sundown on Fridays, don’t open at all that day; some also don’t open for dinner after sundown on Saturday. (For most establishments, opening the business for a half-day is more trouble than it is worth.) These are the busiest days for restaurants: even those that do open for Friday lunch or Saturday dinner are forgoing some of the most lucrative meal services of the week. “They’re closed for 24 hours or longer every week, 52 days a year,” says kosher restaurant maven Dani Klein, a marketer who has operated the website *YeahThatsKosher* for the last 17 years. “And it doesn’t include Passover, Shavuot, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah,



Sukkot — that’s five holidays with multiple days they’re forced to close. And usually the day before those holidays, nobody’s going out dining because they’re at home preparing. That’s a lot of days to not have revenue.”

Finally, there’s the size of the market itself. Of the 15 million Jews in the world, just over 400,000 live in Canada. COR estimates that a fifth of those keep kosher at home. Nationally, that’s a market of roughly 80,000 customers — small enough to constrain the range of kosher products and businesses that would be sustainable, even absent other factors.

If following kosher dietary law is challenging, and the restaurant industry has notoriously thin profit margins, then making a dollar in the kosher restaurant game is practically a circus act — a financial and culinary tightrope walk where the rope is on fire and there is a bear behind you. Staying upright requires even more adaptability and attention to detail than regular restaurant ownership, since the bear has to be kosher and the rope has to be blessed by a rabbi.

BLINTZES OR PASTRAMI?

BARRY CHAIM HAS OWNED EDO, A JAPANESE restaurant in midtown Toronto, since 1986. It’s a neighbourhood with a large Jewish clientele, and members of the community regularly asked

him to open a kosher restaurant. He decided to look into it. Despite the required closures, he concluded, “you’ll get the support on the other days to make up for the loss of that Friday night. Because in Jewish tradition, Friday night is not what it is in Western tradition.”

Five years ago, the right opportunity came along. Scotiabank Arena, where Chaim has had an outpost of EDO since the venue opened in 1999, had terminated the contract of its kosher food vendor and asked him to take over the station. Very quickly, the business proved that overhead was a bigger concern than operating hours. “The

real challenge is the cost of food,” Chaim says. “Meat is so expensive. How many [kosher] restaurants opened and closed within the last 30 years? If they’re meat restaurants they don’t last.”

All aspiring kosher restaurateurs face a basic question: Meat or dairy? The answer doesn’t just affect their menu — it shapes their business models.

Rachamim operates two locations of Eisenbergs: a dairy kitchen inside the Prosserman JCC and a meat location in the Schwartz/Reisman Centre. He cites two elements as being central to understanding the meat versus dairy equation: the profit margins on ingredients and the range of services an establishment offers.

On the first count, Rachamim says, “dairy and pareve [are] where your margins are better.” Simply put: because the baseline cost of the ingredients is lower, restaurateurs can mark them up more than they can meat items. Over the last 15 years, beef has become a luxury ingredient for everyone: the price climbed 75 percent from 2009 to 2024. Kosher beef is at least 50 percent more expensive than that. But while the cost of beef seemingly knows no upper limit, there’s a hard cap on what guests will pay for it. As any restaurateur will tell you, they can charge only so much for a hamburger or a steak. “On the meat, unfortunately, you can’t really mark up so much. Nobody’s going to pay you \$30 for a sandwich.”

Not unless you’re an institution and tourism destination, like Katz’s Delicatessen, which can get away with charging \$28.95 (US) for a pastrami sandwich because people want to eat at the restaurant from *When Harry Met Sally*. At \$19.95 (Canadian, equal to less than half what Katz’s charges), Eisenbergs doesn’t expect such revenue — but sandwiches are still important to the restaurant’s operations. “You need those on the menu to draw attention,

as your loss leaders,” Rachamim says. “Like Costco — they have hot dogs for \$1.50, and [those] drive people in to buy other items.”

Profit margins aren’t the only consideration. Another factor that plays a distinctive role in the kosher food ecosystem is catering, which is far more common than in the mainstream restaurant industry. Catering is more profitable than restaurant service, and it can provide steadier income through contracts (such as standing arrangements to cater meals for a JCC, school, or synagogue).

This is helpful because margins tend to be higher on catering than restaurants. A caterer doesn’t just sell the food, which has thin margins: they sell services, like wait staff, and access to supplies — every glass, plate, and utensil is rented to the client at a much more advantageous markup than a steak. Restaurants, of course, provide services (waiting on patrons at their tables or packaging up their takeout orders) and require supplies, but, because guests aren’t charged for these separately, these costs get folded into the prices of menu items; there’s only so much mark-up that restaurateurs can add to those. In catering, each of these other items is invoiced separately, on top of the food: businesses charge for the hourly wage of each employee and the rental of every piece of tableware, each of which can then be marked-up.

STAMP OF APPROVAL

OPENING AND MAINTAINING A KOSHER COMMERCIAL kitchen goes far beyond the ingredients and recipes you use. Kashrut isn’t an honour system: it requires operating under the oversight of a certification organization — in Canada, that generally means COR (The Kashrut Council of Canada), MK (MK Kosher Global Certification Agency, née Montreal Kosher), or KSR (Kashrut Supervision du Rabbinat).

Kitchens must be regularly scrutinized by a *mashgiach*, an organizationally approved food inspector whose duties include lighting pilot flames (to make certain that an observant Jew is involved in the cooking), ensuring that fridges are locked (to guarantee that no one can tamper with the items in it, intentionally or accidentally), examining raw ingredients (produce must be washed to ensure it is free of bugs), and signing off on the *hechsherim* (the certification labels) on packaged products — not all of which are recognized by each certification body. Rates are different for every restaurant, but this supervision and approval costs thousands per year.

It’s also a system that can be hostile to those perceived as outsiders. In 2014, Alex Levy opened ELNA Bistro in-

side a medical centre in Montreal’s Côte Saint-Luc. Levy is not observant, and his application for kosher certification was rejected by MK and KSR. He appealed KSR’s decision, explaining that there was nothing in their rules prohibiting this: KSR had previously approved three other restaurants with similar ownership. Once Levy was approved by KSR, the first inspector was strict but respectful, taking the time to explain why a particular can of pumpkin couldn’t be used even though it had US kosher certification. The business grew over the next few years until the supervisor was replaced by a less pleasant *mashgiach*, who came into Levy’s kitchen demanding access to books, cameras, and fridges.

“He didn’t even introduce himself as the new supervisor, and he was walking in my kitchen,” says Levy. Asked why he was being treated with suspicion, the supervisor told him it was because Levy was not observant. On a second visit, things got more heated. “He points at the certificate and he snaps his fingers and says, *I remove this. You’re a nobody. You will do as I say or you’re not going to have the certificate.*”

For its part, MK said it would approve Levy’s restaurant at triple the rate he was paying KSR. Eventually they settled for the same fee, but without any transparency about rates and policies, the restaurateur was left feeling that the enforcement of kashrut was capricious. (MK did not respond to requests for comment.)

Public health agencies, which also inspect restaurants, often hand out letter grades to inform the public about an establishment’s status, with timelines for fixing minor rule-breaking, which is a restaurant’s responsibility. Kosher certifiers are more interventionist and generally work with restaurants on compliance, helping the operator meet their standards. “Most mistakes that happen are unintentional,” says Richard Rabkin, managing director of COR, “and can be corrected with better forethought and direction.” But when there are serious, intentional violations — for example, sneaking purchases of non-kosher meat — agencies can revoke a restaurant’s kosher certification. If a restaurant loses that, with it goes the trust of the kosher clientele. The only options then are transitioning to a being non-kosher restaurant or going out of business. There’s no coming back.

If monitoring for all this sounds labour intensive, that’s because it is. Some Canadian organizations, including MK and KSR, assign



the restaurant’s *mashgiach*. COR allows restaurateurs to select their own working *mashgiach* (who works directly in the kitchen and COR must then approve), with additional oversight provided by what’s called a “route *mashgiach*” — a COR *mashgiach* who has several restaurants, generally clustered close together, which they simultaneously oversee — who visits multiple times a day. They, in turn, report to a senior *mashgiach* in the head office. In 2016, COR launched a *mashgiach* training course that includes food safety and knife handling education. That’s a lot of labour and bureaucracy that the restaurateur is paying for through fees.

A contemporary tech upgrade to these long-established practices: installing cameras in the kitchen. This allows kosher agencies to both bring down their own labour costs as well as collect documentation in case of infractions. Like all security measures, the cameras are a double-edged sword. Employees don’t like it. But it helps ensure a kitchen’s kosher status and may be used to settle a dispute with a *mashgiach*, which is in a restaurant’s favour.

The single greatest increased cost to a kosher restaurateur is the requirement of employing a *mashgiach*, which becomes very pricy if that person only oversees kashrut and does not perform any other kitchen labour. “I’ve seen some [kitchens] where the other function and job for the *mashgiach* is the kosher supervision,” Klein says. “They literally will not lift a finger and do anything else, where they technically could. And in those cases, they’re a real financial strain on those businesses.” This is, to be clear, not due to religious obligations. “There are plenty of other *mashgichim* who are very hands-on and are working as if they’re a manager or a cook,” explains Klein. “They’re serving a dual purpose in the restaurant so they’re not bloating the payroll.” This, obviously, is a better situation for the restaurateur, but still an added cost: Klein says that someone in this role “is still going to cost more than a typical restaurant worker.”

In the United States, smaller certification agencies like DC Kosher and Lighthouse Kosher are working to lower this financial barrier. Focused primarily on vegetarian and vegan restaurants whose ingredients require less oversight, DC Kosher provides an easier avenue for businesses that aren’t aimed at a kosher audience but could easily reach them without too much additional effort. “That’s a quality of food that I want to model for our community,” says

Rabbi Uri Topolosky, a member of DC Kosher's kashrut supervision board. "I'm motivated to help out a small business owner when I know it can be a fully kosher operation."

The volunteer-based DC Kosher charges no fees. Though stressing that he does not oppose the work of the major certification organizations, Topolosky wants to provide another option in order to increase the availability and variety of kosher restaurants. "For some smaller operations, it's not tenable. They can't afford to drop another \$2,000 to these agencies. It cuts too deeply into their bottom line."

Topolosky stands behind his Orthodox kosher standards, but he does operate differently than other Orthodox certifiers, relying on collaboration with restaurateurs — for example, working with them to standardize their vegetable-washing processes — and casual visits from community members rather than a clockwork inspection process. Topolosky doesn't feel the need for daily checks, and would rather practise this as a trust-based partnership than require constant oversight. "The reality," he says, "is that we don't need what has become the standard in the kosher world. It's become a standard to require a kosher supervisor on site all the time. That has not been an easy option for many of these restaurants."

A SMALL MARKET & SMALL SELECTION

SOME KOSHER RESTAURATEURS SAY THE LACK OF competition among suppliers — manufacturers and distributors of items like the feta Rachamim was looking for — is one of their biggest challenges.

"There is no competition in *kashrus* in Montreal, in terms of meat," says Steven Lapidus, a professor at Concordia University and an expert in Montreal's kosher scene. "Most of the kosher beef manufacturers are all owned by the same company." Mehadrin (which alone distributes 75 percent of Canadian kosher beef) and Shefa effectively have a duopoly on the supply of kosher meat in this country. In addition to the high costs, kosher restaurateurs describe a lack of variety in the goods that are available, but with so few options they must choose from that limited selection and pay when prices rise, which is frequently. "It's debatable if the market is even big enough for multiple players," says Manny Azulay, owner of Ely's Fine Foods in Toronto. "The problem with the kosher guys in Canada is there's nowhere else to go. It's not that restaurant A is sourcing chicken from over here and it's cheaper than restaurant B, who's sourcing his chicken over there. We're all buying it from the same guy."

This isn't true of just meat: there's enormous concentration across the kosher food sector nationally. COR and MK don't just provide *mashgiach* services; they are also the two larg-



est kosher certifiers of packaged food and kosher slaughtered meat in Canada. "It's a double-edged sword," says Klein of *YeahThatsKosher*. "On one hand, the community probably trusts the option that's there, the COR or the MK. But it becomes an issue for kosher businesses because they're not really offered an opportunity to shop around. They don't have options. So whatever the price is, the price is. And that is in turn reflected in the price of kosher goods."

A MATTER OF FAITH

FOR SOME WHO KEEP KOSHER, RELIGIOUS adherence is not a question of fair business practices or affordability. "The restaurant business

complains a lot about it," says Ron Gersh, a government relations consultant who worked with a bidder, unsuccessfully, to secure a kosher chicken quota in Ontario. "But this is the business of kosher. You can't just say, *Trust me*. That's not okay for people who keep kosher like myself. You want it at the highest standards. For someone who is eating kosher, it's their connection to God. Eating food that is forbidden damages that connection."

Keeping kosher, but not trusting the health standards of kosher meat producers, Gersh bought his own grass-finished cow and hired a *shochet* to do the slaughter, at a cost that makes him laugh. "This is what it means to be kosher," he says. "And this is what God's people have to do. Everyone knew what they were getting into when they decided to live this lifestyle."

Lapidus says that hasn't always been the case. Over the last century, he says, Orthodox standards have become more strict, a phenomenon he attributes to a disconnection from living tradition.

In the wake of the world wars and the Holocaust, says Lapidus, "the tradition of doing what your father and your zayde did was gone. Because most of them were dead. So instead of the mimetic tradition, where you imitate your parents, you went to books." It took some time for the full effects to be realized: in North America in the '60s and '70s, Orthodox Jews were still guided by yeshivot that had been established before the war, which tended to be more liberal. Their eventual waning "led to a reliance on books, which make people more stringent. Because the book doesn't have a heart, the book doesn't give exceptions. The book is black and white, and you can't argue with it."

For example, says Lapidus, in the '70s, Orthodox Jews would have one oven, one sink, eat canned vegetables without a *hescher*, kasher their dishwasher for Passover, and even go to the movies — all behaviour that is now deemed too liberal.

It also took a couple of generations for upward social mobility to kick in, to the point where it was feasible for Jewish households to own more than one oven and pay for all the other infrastructure needed to keep meat and dairy as separate as has become the norm. "You go into houses today, you see two sinks," says Lapidus. "Back in the day of my grandmother, nobody's building a second sink. Nobody had the money. You coped with one sink and you managed to be kosher in one sink."

Speaking recently on The CJN podcast *Bonjour Chai*, Lapidus explained that MK's Orthodox standards also place a financial burden on the larger constituency of non-Orthodox Jews. "What I see is a *kashrus* setup that is not responding to the needs of individuals. One of the problems with contemporary *kashrus* is it's very much tied to economic social mobility. *Buy the bug-free broccoli for two or three times the price*. That's not fair or egalitarian for the whole community."

These more stringent standards don't just affect what happens in home kitchens: they put pressure on every stage of the restaurant supply chain. End consumers — restaurant customers — cannot absorb every price increase. When the economy is strong, people spend money. When it's not, they don't. Discretionary spending on dining out is always one of the first casualties of budgetary restraint. The harsh reality is that religious Jews must eat kosher food but are not obliged to dine in restaurants. When it gets too expensive, they stop eating out. This makes restaurateurs terrified of passing their increased costs on to diners. "You end up either eating the increase yourself, which affects your margin," says Azulay, "or you pass it along and it affects your business because people are not willing to pay for it anymore. Or you eat a little bit and pass on a little bit. All you get is margin erosion, a situation where you're making less money than you need to survive."

Despite all these obstacles, Rachamim is optimistic. Eisenbergs started out as a non-kosher restaurant. Then they had the opportunity to open in the JCC, which required becoming kosher. "That was a big decision," says Rachamim. "Restaurants are challenging. Being kosher is definitely more challenging. But going kosher for us was the best decision for our company. As soon as we became kosher, we realized that we levelled up and we're one of the top vendors in kosher."

For Rachamim, the smaller market, though it creates challenges, is an advantage. "The reality of a kosher business is: it's niche. It's a small pool. So there's less competition. Because of that there's opportunity, and it's easy to flourish. I think if you have a good product in the kosher game, you should be okay." ■

DURING THE SPANISH INQUISITION,
CONVERSOS HAD TO PREPARE
JEWISH FOOD IN SECRET.
WE'RE STILL UNPACKING THE WAYS THAT
HAS SHAPED CULINARY HISTORY.

KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

BY CAITLIN STALL-PAQUET



A PIECE OF LARD KEPT IN A COOL CORNER of the kitchen. A vegetarian dish prepared in tandem with a pork-rich analogue. A pot of Shabbat stew simmered ahead of time to allow for a hands-off meal later. Simple sights you might find in many a home kitchen — and also, sometimes, evidence of secret rebellion. It's a collection of findings all cited during the Spanish Inquisition trials, which ran from the late fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, peaking in the sixteenth. Food has a long history of getting mixed up with politics, and it was the weapon of choice for Catholics during this time: they used it to denounce the Jews and Muslims who had been forced by the state to convert to Christianity but secretly maintained their religious practices.

When Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II issued the Alhambra Decree (the edict ordering the expulsion of practising Jews) on March 31, 1492, Jews were given a choice: be baptized or leave. Over the course of the next 300 some years, somewhere between 200,000 and 600,000 converted.

40

SUMMER 2025




**GEFILTE FISH
A LA VERACRUZANA**
Developed by Ashkenazi Jews
in Veracruz, this version of the
classic poaches fish in
spicy tomato sauce with
capers, peppers,
and olives.

(Approximately 160,000 chose exile, and — estimates vary wildly — between 3,000 and 300,000 refused both expulsion and conversion, and were executed.) Of the Jews who stayed and converted, some continued to practise their religion secretly, though how many is impossible to know given the necessary secrecy of it all.

At first, explains Ilan Stavans, a Mexican-Jewish food historian, coercively converted Jews and Muslims were called *cristianos nuevos* (new Christians). The term *converso* eventually emerged to describe Jews who hadn't fully renounced their religion or who still acknowledged their background. "*Converso* became a term that, at first, was used in a derogatory way, and then those *conversos* appropriated it with a sense of pride," Stavans says. (The term *marrano*, meaning pig, was more widespread, and an insult with extra heft given that Jews don't eat pork; unlike *converso*, it hasn't been reclaimed as thoroughly.) Later on, the term *crypto-Jews* (from the Greek word for hidden) was coined, perhaps a more accurate reflection of these people who were forced to hide their true selves. (In Hebrew, the term is *anusim*, which translates to "coerced ones.")

Bordeaux-based historian, chef, and cookbook author Hélène Jawhara Piñer is of French and Spanish heritage and grew up Sephardic; she had always been interested in the relationship between food and religion and devoted her PhD to the subject. In 2016, when embarking on that research, she wanted to dig up the oldest Jewish cookbook but struck out, instead finding elements of Jewish culinary practices tucked into broader works. Jawhara Piñer did find six Jewish recipes within a thirteenth-century Arabic-language Andalusian cookbook and two others gleaned from a fourteenth-century Egyptian cookbook.

Many other sources for her PhD relating to Sephardic cuisine were less traditional and required some detective work to locate, not to mention being able to read Italian, Catalan, Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese: "[This food] was not something that could have been shared openly, so you have to delve into sources like shopping lists, letters or poems, or other kinds of literature," says Jawhara Piñer. "Because of the Inquisition trials, you have to gather all those different kinds of sources to be able to understand the culinary history of the Sephardic Jews." She combed through food-related writings from the Cairo Geniza, a repository that contains over 400,000 Jewish manuscript fragments from all sorts of sources, dated between the sixth and nineteenth centuries. On a twelfth-century scrap of paper, the historian spotted a shopping list written by an Andalusian woman living in Egypt, addressed to her husband and asking him to buy chicken and lemon for Shabbat. However, when it came to gathering details about the food practices of medieval Jews, no sources were more helpful than the Inquisition documents that mentioned food: according to Jawhara Piñer, approximately 60 percent of the trials used food as evidence. "They unveil the real life of the crypto-Jews, from Spain, from Italy, everywhere where the court of the Inquisition settled in order to spy on *converso* practices," she says.

Crypto-Jewish lives were defined by secrecy to avoid violence and expulsion from their Iberian communities, but these people maintained a covert connection to their culture through food. Shrouded in secrecy, food remained a cultural thread within the diaspora of Jews who left Spain and its threats of execution. Sephardim dispersed around the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic to Latin America, which was illegal as Spain spread its discriminatory concept of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) and wanted to prevent *conversos* establishing openly Jewish communities elsewhere. In these new homes, encounters with a whole new set of ingredients redefined *converso* food. Something it did retain was its air of secrecy, with generations of Jews trying to blend into Catholic majorities, leaving it all but forgotten, present mostly in traditions practitioners don't know are Jewish. But a more recent wave of people curious about their lineage is uncovering those long-buried roots, often connecting with the formerly secret culture by way of its food.

MARKERS OF SECRECY



Given the Inquisition's famously repressive and violent tactics, Jews who wanted to maintain both their religion and their homes needed to exercise extreme caution. "They obviously had to hide their practices, including their food practices," says Jawhara Piñer. "It was so easy for people to spy on the food practices of the Jews in order to denounce them." Despite precautions, many *conversos* were found out and turned in — often due to a whisper network of women denouncing other women, Catholic servants in Jewish households sharing *converso* indications with the authorities. They would report being asked not to come in on Friday, or to use different spoons to stir pots of stew, only one of which contained pork, or describe a piece of lard (a Christian home staple) kept as a decoy for guests. Jews often became identifiable not because of a specific dish but rather by abstention: in Spain, avoiding pork became a tell.

However, a rich culinary culture continued to proliferate. Adafina — an overnight Shabbat stew of chickpeas, chard, and meat, thickened with eggplant — was already being prepared by Sephardic Jews in medieval Spain before the Inquisition, but it became a *converso* staple. According to Jawhara Piñer, trial documents were the first source that tied *conversos* to the stew. Foods also turned into an unspoken signifier between Jews, a kind of secret code that you deciphered when you saw who gathered for Saturday lunch or brought over stewed eggplant seasoned generously with garlic and olive oil, with unleavened bread on the side during Passover. Though eggplant — which grows easily in hot climates and arrived in Spain in the tenth century after a long trek on the Silk Road — was also eaten by Muslims, Christians stayed away from this food and associated it with Jews.



TURCOS
These savory-sweet turnovers were originally eaten on Sukkot; hailing from Portugal, they're now popular in South Texas.

Jawhara Piñer dug up instances of Christians using the culinary preference in mockery, namely comparing Jewish dark skin to the eggplant's exterior.

Maintaining secrecy requires adaptability; for *conversos* this meant tweaking recipes to incorporate local ingredients. These shifts were a survival mechanism of sorts, ensuring that certain traditions would continue while also blending into the surrounding culinary landscape. Changing ingredients meant that what defined certain Jewish foods as Jewish was often more about how they were prepared than what they were made with: "The process is really important," Jawhara Piñer says of dishes like adafina — of which there are countless versions, depending on where

they're made in the Sephardic diaspora. "In fact, most of the time, the process is more a way to identify the *converso* family than the food itself."

That adaptability became only more relevant as *conversos*, expelled from Spain, boarded ships headed for Latin America, becoming the first wave of Jewish immigrants in the New World. Proof of their passage can still be tasted in dishes that survived undercover for centuries, like a Mexican version of the Iberian meatball soup, *sopa de albóndigas*, inflected with local herbs and spices in the broth. As with the coded communication back in Spain, these foods were legible to those in the know. "Those that participate in the secret ... will feel that they are members of a

PREVIOUS PAGE, PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNY HUANG

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE BUTLER

group that nobody else can recognize,” says Stavans. “And that gives them a sense of authenticity and uniqueness.”

Having grown up amid a confluence of traditions in Mexico City, Stavans has long been interested in how Jewish food becomes Jewish. He’s travelled throughout Latin America gathering recipes born from mishmashed waves of immigration: Sephardic Jews in the late nineteenth century, the Ashkenazim and Sephardim fleeing the Second World War and, finally, Israeli and Mizrahi Jews in the 1960s. The *converso* immigrants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have seniority; private documents describing their food culture help tell their story. “We have a lot of letters, diaries and autobiographies, and other types of writings including recipes of *conversos* in those cities,” Stavans says.

Stavans and Margaret E. Boyle, co-authors of *Sabor Judío: The Jewish Mexican Cookbook*, both come from Ashkenazi families. The two also share a similar — and specific — culinary lineage. “We discovered that, in our respective families, there was this very precious document,” explains Stavans. “A recipe book that has travelled through the generations. It was written by women and came from [Eastern] Europe and then shows the fusion with Mexican food.” The two texts have entries in common, which then took on Mexican twists with subsequent generations. The introduction to *Sabor Judío* describes Stavans’s mother putting her own spin on the classics, spicing up the matzah ball broth with jalapeño or adding Mexican coffee to honey cake. However, the people who wrote down these foods lived in Mexico in ignorance of *conversos*. By the time they arrived, *converso* traditions had been absorbed into the Christian majority, leaving the newly arrived Jews to think they were the first People of the Book to settle there. The buried-but-present history is visible in a photo of Stavans’ sown grandparents kissing in the famous Alameda Central park, where the Mexican extension of the Spanish Inquisition executed accused witches and Jews in the seventeenth century: “They are oblivious to the fact that, in the back, there is a plaque that says this is the Plaza del Quemadero, the very place people were burned at the stake,” he says.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT



Much like Stavans’s grandmother wrote down her recipes, *conversos* also passed along their culinary traditions, leaving out the fact that these practices were Jewish. Over time, as their descendants were raised in Christian homes, that omission manifested in families whose culinary habits had unexplained quirks: they would eat fish early on Saturdays while neighbours feasted on meat hours later, or undertake a spring cleaning of the kitchen that actually coincided with Passover.

For Stavans, what makes these dishes and practices inherently *converso* is how the discernible details aren’t necessarily overtly Jewish. “If you tell somebody [about] gefilte fish with salsa or mango, they will say, ‘Oh, I see the Jewish and the Mexican connection,’” he says. By contrast, if you describe a dish of fish cooked in tomato sauce, “people will not immediately think this is Jewish food. But, for those families, it was something that you cooked so that the neighbours would not suspect you, and that passed on from one generation to another.”

As Jawhara Piñer sees it, the change food underwent as it arrived in a new location is a marker of identity: Sephardic Jews “are so diverse, and this diversity makes our strength,” she says. “We have a very singular food identity that has been shaped thanks to the different foods we were able to find in our locations.” That trusty Shabbat stew is the perfect illustration of her point. What came to define *converso* food outside of Spain is how it adapted to its new home. Its superpower was blending in by taking up ingredients that were widely used locally, leaving the process of cooking the dish as the strongest tie to history and tradition. The ingredients of *adafina*, which is mentioned repeatedly in Inquisition trial documents, vary wildly depending on location and climate. Italian and Portuguese varieties mixed in freekeh and chestnuts. When *adafina* arrived in South America, tomatoes and sweet potatoes made their way into the pot, while Mexican versions incorporated corn. “I really love when one dish is mentioned in different kinds of sources,” adds Jawhara Piñer, “from different territories and different centuries, different periods, because it really shows that this is a Sephardic food, because when people move, food moves.”

Years of research inspired Jawhara Piñer to write cookbooks, including *Sephardi: Cooking the History*, based on historical sources and mostly staying true to original concoctions. One of her favourite recipes in the book is for a haroset that tracks the movement characteristic of *conversos*. It was created by a Portuguese family that was expelled and went to Italy before settling in Mexico, where it was cited in Inquisition trial documents. This version of the Passover staple combines chestnuts, vinegar, figs, soaked dates, apples, and thinly cut cinnamon sticks, all shaped like a meatball and rolled in almond.

Jawhara Piñer points out that, though they might not always be understood as such, hints of *converso* Jews are widespread in foods that have been absorbed into Christian culture. Turcos, for example, are savoury-sweet turnovers of Portuguese origin that were prepared for Sukkot; they were brought to Mexico by *conversos*, documented in the Mexican Inquisition, and are now popular with South Texans. This absorption of Jewish culinary history isn’t limited to foods that left the Iberian peninsula for the New World, either. Hojuelas — a fried dough dessert of Spanish Sephardic descent — is now prepared mainly for Easter in Andalusia. Foodstuffs also travelled in the other direction: chocolate, which came to Europe after coloniza-



ADAFINA

Left to cook gently overnight, ingredients in this Shabbat stew vary from chickpeas and chard to tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and corn.

tion, was brought there by Sephardic Jews who left Mexico to return to Spain, and eventually settled in France. Jewish chocolate makers set up shop in the southwest Basque city of Bayonne. In Mexico, *converso* Jews sometimes substituted the wine in the Shabbat blessing of the *Kiddush* with a chocolate-based drink, a practice they adopted from local Indigenous people. In Bayonne’s historic Jewish quarter, residents, over time, became versed in chocolate manufacturing. Eventually, they created the gelt prized by sugar-hungry kids on Hanukkah.

REDISCOVERED LEGACIES



When Jawhara Piñer started digging into *converso* culinary history, it was a relatively unstudied field: the food had never garnered much attention. Stavans points out that rising

curiosity about *converso* traditions is partially attributable to many Latin American families discovering their Jewish heritage via contemporary ancestry databases. As they have, long-hidden traditions have become a source of pride: “It’s an amazing life under the surface that is about tricks — it’s about silences, and it’s about using metaphors for certain things because you can’t name them directly,” says Stavans. “That, I think, is what crypto-Jewish food is about. It’s the emotional attachment that comes with a secret.”

Havana-born Genie Milgrom is familiar with the experience of uncovering that secret. Raised in a Catholic family, the Miami resident found out about her Jewish ancestry only as an adult. The truth came to her by way of food, specifically a collection of hundreds of recipes found in her mother’s belongings, many dating back to the Inquisition. (After this discovery, she realized that there had been clues: in a 2019 interview, she told NPR that her grandmother had taught her customs she later learned were Jewish, like checking eggs for blood.) One of the found recipes was for *chuletas* — the Spanish word for pork chops — which are actually sweet bread-based snacks akin to French toast, shaped like the thick slices of meat they are named after. Milgrom ended up converting to Judaism, undoing her ancestors’ forced conversion to Catholicism some 500 years earlier, and writing books about her experience, including one titled *Recipes of My 15 Grandmothers*.

As more and more Latin Americans discover their Jewish histories, that interest has rippled outward. In Mexico City, says Stavans, “*Kosherismo* is really a widespread term... It can mean that something is kosher or it can mean that something is deliciously Jewish, though it really isn’t kosher. Today, being Jewish is complicated, but Jews are no longer in the shadows, so I think it’s part of the new Jewish identity that is much more recognized and widespread.”

In contemporary Spain, though, the culinary impacts of the Inquisition are both obvious and invisible. As Jawhara Piñer points out, Spanish officials were very successful in placing Christianity at the centre of society, positioning their power in opposition to Jewish and Muslim culture via food. They essentially pork-washed history. “People think that the people from Spain have always been eating pork, which is totally crazy because it’s totally wrong,” says Jawhara Piñer. “There has only been a Spanish cuisine since the fifteenth century, erasing all the populations that were living in Spain before.” As it turns out, the winners not only write history — they also often write the recipe books. ■

PHOTOGRAPH BY APRIENA JUGOO PUMMER



Olivia Ostrow: Matzah Ball Soup

by COREY MINTZ

NO ONE LIKES TO BE SICK. But if we're lucky, we do at least get a bit of pampering to help us through. To be cared for when you're unwell is to receive a transfer of love. This usually takes the form of that most basic of needs: food.

So what happens when it's a chef whose got the cold?

Like many people who work with food, chef Olivia Ostrow usually makes the meals at home, too. "No one cooks for me" she laments. "After 25 years I'm still complaining to my husband that I don't even get a coffee brought, ever, in bed." Except if she's sick. When Ostrow has a cold, she spends her days on the sofa watching British

The ultimate Jewish comfort food, Olivia Ostrow's version of chicken soup has a distinctly French twist.

crime shows, while her husband and children buy a whole chicken and make matzah ball soup. As with many Jews, the emotional bond with this soup goes back to her youth.

Born in France and raised among two sets of Holocaust-survivor grandparents, Ostrow recalls childhood Shabbat dinners that were a mix of French and Ashkenazi comfort food: gefilte fish with horseradish, *pot au feu* — meat braised in stock on the stovetop, which Ostrow describes as akin to a French version of brisket — and, of course, challah dipped in chicken soup. These indelible family dinners gave her a lifelong hunger for classic French and Jewish cooking. “Everything in my childhood food was comfort food,” she says, “which translates in my food today. Even at the restaurant, which is fine dining. I like to say that my restaurant is a fine comfort food.”

In 2023, the chef opened Ostrow Brasserie in Miami, a restaurant she is keen to identify as serving French food that is kosher rather than the other way around. French cooking, famously, relies on heavy doses of butter the way the Earth relies on the sun. Asked how she navigates without it, Ostrow says there are two magic words: duck fat. (She has also concocted a butter alternative that she uses in a few dishes; it’s a recipe she prefers to keep secret until the cookbook she’s writing is published.)

Aside from these substitutions, her restaurant is strictly French: there is no matzah ball soup on the menu, none of the



ungapatchka that many kosher restaurants indulge in, trying to offer something for everyone or dress up old standards. “I’m not a fusion person,” says Ostrow. “In my restaurant, there’s no smoke coming out of your steak. I don’t put sushi on my en-dive and blue cheese salad.” It’s

Matzah balls are best made by touch rather than measurement; a little olive oil on your hands will make it easier to roll them out.

a sense of purity that cuts both ways: just as much as she isn’t going to dilute French classics, she says, “I’m not going to make a Thai or Chinese version of my matzah ball soup.”

And so, Ostrow taught her husband and children to prepare her favourite comfort food to her

standards, starting with a whole chicken, a bit of dill, and cloves. “I like the clove because it adds a little spice” says Ostrow. “And I also enjoy the smell in my house while it’s cooking.”

She instructs her family to simmer for hours. “The longer you cook it, the better it’s going to be,” Ostrow says. “That’s when you’re going to have that aroma and that brownish colour that’s lovely.” (There’s no one right way to make matzah ball soup. Though there is a wrong way. I loved my bubbe, but she was the worst cook. Her chicken soup contained no meat. Or matzah balls. Or salt. The chicken was removed and served on its own, with the rubbery skin attached.)

After making the broth, shredding the meat, adding carrots and celery and, if they are truly making it to her specifications, caramelizing onions, her family brings the soup to Ostrow to eat on the sofa. The only downside to this effort, the delivery of love and nourishment through cooking, is the mess they make in her kitchen. “They’re terrible,” laughs Ostrow. “It’s also probably why my husband doesn’t want to cook. Because if he cooks, and he leaves a mess, then I go a little nuts.”

Not that Ostrow is one of those chefs who cleans as they cook. “I like to create new dishes and taste flavours — to put music on and have a hundred ingredients out. And then it has to be cleaned up the moment I’m done. Not by me. Unless it’s at my house. I have the luxury of owning a business. Because I pay all the bills, someone is going to clean for me.” ■



CHICKEN SOUP WITH MATZAH BALLS

SERVES 6

- whole chicken, cut into pieces
- cloves (easily overpowering, so start with as few as possible)
- fresh dill
- onions, thinly sliced
- olive oil
- carrots, sliced into coins
- celery, roughly chopped
- matzah meal
- eggs
- salt
- pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place the chicken, cloves, and some of the dill in a large pot. Cover with water and bring to a boil. (Adding salt during the simmering will make the broth too salty once the liquid has reduced; do not add it until the end.) Reduce heat and simmer for two hours. (“But when you’re sick, you want it fast,” says Ostrow. “So an hour and a half at the minimum.”) Strain the stock and transfer the chicken to a bowl to cool. Return the chicken stock to the pot.

2. Meanwhile, place the onions in a wide pan with a splash of oil. Cook on low heat until caramelized — sticky, brown, and sweet — stirring only occasionally. (You’ll find many recipes online claiming that this can be done in 10 minutes. It can’t. These recipes are lying to you to make things seem easier. But doing this correctly requires no additional effort or skill, only time — at least 40 minutes. All you have to do is stir the pan gently every five or 10 minutes.)

3. In a mixing bowl, combine matzah meal, eggs, salt, and some herbs (I added what I had — dried oregano and fresh parsley) until a dough forms. I used two eggs for one cup of matzah meal. Pour a little oil on your hands and shape the dough into golf-ball-sized spheres. Add the matzah balls to the strained soup, along with the carrots and celery, and simmer for 25 minutes.

4. When the chicken is cool enough to handle, separate the meat from the bones. Discard the bones. Shred the meat and return it to the soup. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve with a spoon of caramelized onion in each bowl and garnish with a bit more dill.



Kids Say the Darndest Things

Gary Shteyngart's *Vera, or Faith* finds the humour in dystopia
by PHOEBE MALTZ BOVY

WHEN I LEARNED that a new Gary Shteyngart novel was coming out, I figured I'd be reading it, being a Shteyngart near-completist. (Top picks: the 2006 novel *Absurdistan* and the 2021 *New Yorker* essay "A Botched Circumcision and Its Aftermath.") But after seeing in publicity materials that *Vera, or Faith* was about a family, "told through the eyes of their wondrous ten-year-old daughter," I hesitated. A child was dubious enough, but a "wondrous" one? This sounded cloying. But Shteyngart doesn't do cloying — at least, he hadn't thus far. What was I in store for?

Vera is many things, but cloying isn't one of them. This is in part because it's not actually narrated by Vera, the ten-year-old protagonist, but rather by a third-person narrator who puts us in Vera's thoughts, adding an adult's knowing edge. "Wondrous eyes of a child" notwithstanding, the narrator knows that "Daddy's special juice" refers to alcohol, even if Vera herself is oblivious. While this stylistic choice can, at times, read as gently mocking childhood naïveté, it preempts any accusations of sentimentality. It's a book about the frustrations of childhood, when it can seem like there's a world just out of reach, but also about the grimness of that world.

Who, then, is Vera? She's an anxious loner, abandoned by her Korean-American mother and being raised by a stepmother, Anne Bradford — Anne Mom, to Vera — who prefers her biological (and white) son, Dylan. Igor Shmulkin, a.k.a. Daddy, is an American Jew who immigrated from the former USSR and is quickly recognizable as a Shteyngart alter ego (similarities: age,

heritage, profession, educational history). Daddy isn't a particularly engaged father, preferring to squabble with Anne Mom and lament career setbacks. Vera is a genius at a Manhattan school for the gifted. She's seen as a know-it-all by her classmates (they call her "Facts Girl") and struggles to make friends. Miserable at home, Vera eventually goes on a quest for her Korean birth mother. It is a book of missions, each chapter title beginning, "She Had to ...". (As in, "She Had to Tell Anne Mom the Truth.")

If 2021's *Our Country Friends* was Shteyngart's great American Jewish COVID-19 novel, *Vera, or Faith* is the same for the MAGA 2.0 era. The book is set in a near-future dystopian New York (the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines is a decade in the past, putting this circa 2030), at a time when menstrual cycles are checked lest people cross state lines for abortions. There's a Trump-ish regime: it's not called that, but it both is and isn't that, in the manner of a dream where something is and isn't quite like in real life. "Pious Jews," whom the secular Jewish Igor calls "Hasidics," support the newly dominant nativist movement. They join "MOTH" ("March of the Hated") processions: MAGA-rally-like parades that sometimes pass by Vera's New York City home. Igor thinks these far-right Jews are being set up, in part because they are followed, in the parades, by a group of white working-class (or decked out to look as such) children, walking behind a sign saying, "THEY HAVE TAKEN MY FUTURE AWAY FROM ME." Igor senses antisemitism, but this is not a book that will say, outright, that that's what's going on. It's instead presented thusly: "When [Vera] asked Daddy what the sign meant, he said that 'they' was a clever reference to the 'Hasidics' marching ahead of the 'benighted white working-class kids,'

a 'classic trope' according to Daddy (the word 'trope' headlined her *Things I Still Need to Know Diary*)." Vera may not know, but the narrator sure knows what to highlight, and Igor just might have a point.

There's something about the lightness of tone — even when the subject matter is serious — that makes *Vera* read as speculative rather than prognosticating: it works best as a comment on (an indictment of) the world we're already in rather than a forecast of what may lie ahead. Two of the characters are AI entities: one (Kaspie, after Garry Kasparov) an electronic chess set that functions as Vera's confidant, the other (Stella) a self-

While the stylistic choices in the book can, at times, read as gently mocking childhood naïveté, it preempts any accusations of sentimentality. *Vera* is about the frustrations of childhood, when it can seem like there's a world just out of reach, but also about the grimness of that world.

driving car capable of holding up its own end of a conversation. Vera asks her chessboard what "horseshoe" means, wanting to know about horseshoe theory in political science but not knowing to ask that, and Kaspie answers, "A horseshoe is a product designed to protect horse hooves from wear. Horseshoes originated ...". The woes of an AI BFF. Even if such things are not technologically inconceivable, they're presented in a funny, silly way that makes the effect closer to Woody Allen's 1973 film *Sleeper* — comic sci-fi with a Jewish twist — than to anything one imagines a real-life tech bro coming up with. You're free to read this as a book about the potential trajectory of the self-driving car, but that would be to miss the point.

Along with Taffy Brodesser-Akner (*Fleishman Is in Trouble*, *Long Island Compromise*), Shteyngart is a living, prolific middle-aged writer who nevertheless produces the kind of novels that feels not just American-Jewish but mid-century American-Jewish. They create fictional universes rife with neuroses and nose jobs and *shiksas*, whose resonance for Jews today may be limited but whose motifs align their authors with the American-Jewish canon: Allen, Philip Roth, all the way up to *Seinfeld* in the 1990s.

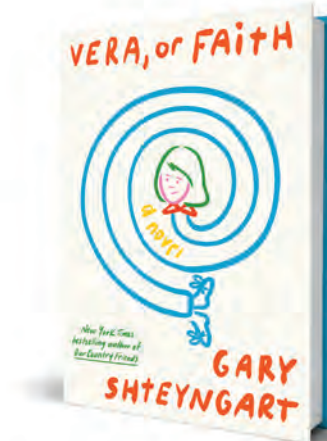
Igor's female partners are, successively, a Korean-American woman and a WASP, but we're perhaps not quite in a world of happenstance intermarriage. In a 2006 *Forward* interview with Mark Oppenheimer, Shteyngart elaborated on his own sexual aversion to Jewish women: "I kissed one once — she tasted like me. I couldn't take it." The remark struck me at the time less as upsetting to me as a Jewish woman (I'm good, thanks) than as a kind of bat signal to the Roth-Allen nostalgists that a tradition lives on. (Alexander Portnoy, *shiksa*-mad pro-

tagonist of Roth's 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, is physiologically incapable of consummating things the one time he gives a Jewish lady a try.)

The very contours of the authoritarianism Shteyngart imagines in *Vera* are themselves mid-century if not older. The new overclass consists of Americans whose ancestors, as a teacher explains it, "landed on the shores of our continent before or during the Revolutionary War but were exceptional enough not to arrive in chains." Daughters of the American Revolution. Mayflower stock. These are phrases one does not hear so much in the 2020s: this standard for nativism would exclude even Donald Trump.

VERISIMILITUDE — an author's capacity to conjure characters and scenes convincingly — is often invoked as a measure of artistic success. And yet: *Vera* is fantastic, but Vera is not a particularly convincing ten-year-old, or at least, she is unlike nearly all ten-year-olds. Where exactly she sits on the atypical-to-implausible spectrum is for each reader to decide, and would probably take a child psychologist to answer. (I lean toward implausible.) But it is Vera's exceptionality that makes the book work. She is less a child than a literary device — an outside observer uniquely positioned to cut through a parent's BS and see them for what they are.

Vera mainly functions as a conduit to the story of Igor, who keeps sneaking in through her experiences. Vera, for instance, keeps a log of things adults say that she doesn't understand, her *Things I Still Need to Know Diary*. These terms and expressions ("pontificate," "whipped out," "done a number," etc.) appear sprinkled throughout the book; the list-making comes across less like the behaviour of a language-oriented child and more



VERA, OR FAITH
By Gary Shteyngart
Random House, July 2, 2025

like how an adult would approach learning a foreign language. Along the way, in a parenthetical that adds to this effect: "Daddy supplied a lot of the words for her *Things I Still Need to Know Diary*."

What, then, is the reader to make of Igor? He's an egotistical intellectual who gets annoyed at "tourists" for not recognizing him in a neighbourhood restaurant and has a side gig of sorts as a fountain-pen-collecting "man-fluencer." (Shteyngart collects watches.) He's a selfish jerk who takes the business class seat on trips while his family roughs it in coach. As a young man, he published a book of essays called *Kindertransport* (a reference to Nazism reminiscent of the novelist Karl Ove Knausgård's choice to call his multivolume 2009–2011 autofiction *My Struggle*, itself a reference to *Mein Kampf*), copies of which are now prominently displayed on a bookshelf in their home, serving as a shrine to what once was. To the great artist that could have been.

But Igor, unlike Knausgård or, for that matter, Shteyngart, is not accom-

plished enough to be an art monster. Vera's function is to unknowingly lampoon her self-important father, and to do so all the more cuttingly, via innocent observations about him. She notices his hypocrisy but doesn't flag it as such: "Daddy hated the private park on account of he was 'of the left,' but he also used it frequently to escape from Anne Mom." And she has a front-row seat to his low points, as household members do: "Daddy was by the window, his face slightly orange. He was smoking one of his 'special cigarettes.'"

Vera is both in awe of her father and impressed by adults generally. She can't wait to join their world, or possibly sees herself as already in it: "They were having a super-adult conversation, the kind of conversation Vera loved, her mind becoming a recording device for all the incredible new words, all the postures and expressions." This is where some of the implausibility enters in: unlike most actual children, who (in my experience with them, and having been one) find their own parents ancient bores, at most intermittently interesting, children who are literary devices in service of stories about grown-ups pick up on every nuance of the middle-aged world. It's not that it's implausible for a kid to care at all about grown-up stuff. Many children have professional aspirations (i.e., answers to *what do you want to be when you grow up?*). They may also have an interest in their caregivers' earning a living, once they're old enough to connect this to their own comfort and the adults' stress levels. But it pains Vera not to understand, in more detail, her parents' finances and workplace travails. *Please, father, tell me more about the office*, said no child ever (apart from Bea in Amy Schwartz's delightful 1982 children's book, *Bea and Mr. Jones*, in which a kindergartener swaps places with her

office-worker dad). Vera, however, is desperate to learn what will come of her father's magazine, and knows all about how a "Rhodesian Billionaire" (detecting hints of Musk) can make or break it.

Vera is aware of cliques and interpersonal drama among her classmates, but it is adult-world tension that has her hooked. Her closest non-chessboard friend is Anne Mom's college friend Aunt Cecile. That's whom Vera goes clothes shopping and gets a haircut with. That's her confidante. Vera doesn't just want her squabbling parents to make it work — she is next-level attentive to her father and stepmother's marriage, down to the role Anne Mom's trust fund plays in the union. Vera doesn't put posters on her walls the way her peers do. There are children, and then there's Vera. It's hinted that she may be neurodiverse in an unspecified and undiagnosed manner (the hand-flapping, the weighted blanked). But the possible clinical explanations for her alienation from the mainstream culture of childhood matter less than the fact of her outsider stance, and what that quality permits her to do for the novel.

VERA IS (and, yes, subjectivity disclaimer applies) hilarious.

There's a scene where classmates lightly bully Vera, prompting her to reflect, "Adults didn't have it any easier, she knew. 'How many cocks do I have to suck to get this deal done?' Daddy had said in the car, and even though this was surely a metaphor for something involving their male chickens up in the country, it implied that Daddy's status in the world was sometimes as precarious as her own."

This does not ring true for a ten-year-old, but as prose, it's spectacular.

And the idea that the new super-citizens — descendants of white co-



It is Vera's very exceptionality that makes the book work. She is less a child than a literary device — a uniquely positioned outside observer.

lonial Americans — are something called "Five-Three" is not just a clever inversion of the Three-Fifths Compromise (which saw enslaved people in the pre-emancipation United States 'counted' as three-fifths of a person

when determining a state's population) but a phrasing that gives the illusion of a new overclass of moderately short people (as in, five feet, three inches tall, what "five-three" is shorthand for in contexts other than this novel). It's maybe not one of the book's laugh-until-you-cry moments, but as a five-two, I got a kick out of it.

I was also crying — though this time not from laughter — when I read the book's ending, though this is only partly a testament to Shteyngart's writing and the intensely moving scene that wraps up the story. It is also a comment on his uncanny premonitions (off only in specifics) about American authoritarianism and state violence. The ending is a profound defence of a multicultural vision of American identity — one that will sound heavy-handed if I try to describe it, but absolutely convinces on the page.

Intentionally or not, the book reads like an homage to Anne Frank's diary. Or, in keeping with the mid-century theme, like a nod to Roth's nod to Frank in his 1979 novel, *The Ghost Writer*. Anne Mom, we learn, was born Ann, but added the "e" after a formative experience reading *The Diary of a Young Girl*. (She may be a self-righteous WASP with unchecked biases and a trust fund, but she means well.) Vera is slightly younger than Anne Frank, and the story isn't written in the first person or the form of a diary. And, need this be stated, one is a comedic novel, the other the real-life journal of a girl murdered by the Nazis. But both are about girls living through scary and unpredictable eras, particularly for their kind. Both are about girls forced to grow up too quickly because their times are too grim and they're too attuned to the world around them — girls whose only shot at something approximating adulthood may be the here and now. ▣



Would You Like a Cigar with That?

Unexpected offerings at the ice-cream parlour

“Abraham Walerstein’s Ice Cream Parlour,” writes the Ontario Jewish Archives, “was a gathering place for Kensington Market’s Jewish community.” Located on Spadina Avenue in Toronto’s Kensington Market, this shop, like many others, offered its customers an eclectic mix of goods — in this case, ice cream and cigars (Walerstein had once worked in a factory that made them) — as well as space to relax and socialize. Sarah Walerstein (left) and her mother, Taube Walerstein (right), were two of the many family members who worked at the store, which operated from 1917 to 1933. ▀