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Life as a [Three-Part] Novel**Senior Dinner**

May 10, 2001

My dear seniors, soon to become rabbis, teachers, and hazzanim in Israel: Some of you may know that I have been spending my free time writing a novel. I hope to finish by Labor Day, provided my summer months don't get eaten up by the ever-growing volume of e-mail. So the first thing I want to say to you is this: **If I can write a novel, you can write a novel.** And the second message I want to leave you with is: **You are a novel.** And one more thing: If you ever want to write the novel of your life, **follow The Rule of Three.**

Now to those of you sitting in this room who have studied with me

- the Jewish novel in the twentieth century, or
- Yiddish writing in America, or
- the image of the shtetl in Hebrew and Yiddish fiction, or
- modern Jewish storytelling, or
- Jewish autobiography, or
- Yiddish folklore,

you already know the Rule of Three. You already know that **everything important in life happens in clusters of three.** But since this is my last chance to drive the message home -- and for some of you, alas, my first chance, too -- I will explain this rule as if I've never taught it to you before.

The Rule of Three has nothing to do with Hegel's dialectic of thesis-antithesis-and-synthesis, which is predicated on the belief in progress and inexorable change; and of course has nothing to do with the conception of God as a trinity. Rather, it has everything to do with our lived experience of time and space.

The present moment is always situated between a remembered past and a hoped-for future: The Rule of Three.

Space is always located at the intersection of two vectors: The Rule of Three.

So here I am spending every free minute of my time writing *The Last Yiddish Novel* -- that's my working title -- and threes are popping out at me every step of the way.

The three cities where my parents lived before they immigrated to Canada -- Vilna, Krosno, and Czernovitz.

The curriculum of the Folkshule, the Yiddish day school that first laid out for me a map of Jewish space, with Montreal situated midway between the shtetl, the source of authentic yiddishkayt, and the Land of Israel, our utopian future.

My student years, straddling Somerville, New York, and Montreal.

My adult life, straddling New York, Jerusalem, and Moscow/Lublin.

The ubiquitous Rule of Three.

Then, delving deeper, I find to my amazement that even the institutional affiliations of my life obey the Rule of Three. And this is where you come in, where you may derive some real and lasting benefit from knowing of my true-life stories and adventures.

You see, the moment I entered adulthood, and made a conscious decision to live my life as a Jew -- I'm groping here for a way to express in English זיך אויסצולעבן ווי אַ ייד -- more properly translated as "to Jew it through-and-through," I could make one of three choices:

(1) form a Jewish start-up;

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(2) join a going concern, an already viable institution, and add my voice to the choir; or

(3) try to breathe new life into a moribund institution.

The reason you will find my narrative so illuminating is that I ended up doing all three.

In June 1969 I joined the original neohasidic dot com: Havurat Shalom. We were the people who brought you the *Jewish Catalogues*, the Shulhan Arukh of do-it-yourself, countercultural Judaism. We were the ones who discovered that being Jewish was synonymous with the counterculture. The story of this amazing group of revolutionaries has never been properly told, and God only knows if I have the talent to do it. (I haven't gotten to that chapter yet.) It was a messianic moment in time, akin to Isaac Luria settling in Safed with his stellar group of kabbalists, or to Israel Baal Shem Tov joining forces with an elite group of mystics in Medzybozh.

Picture yourself twenty-one years old, fresh out of college, living on the second floor of a rambling wooden building on College Avenue, a building that you and your buddies have just finished repainting bright yellow, and at 6:30 in the morning you come downstairs to eat breakfast and there in the main besmedresh sit the *gdoylim*, the senior members of your Havurah:

Arthur Green, your rebbe, and a disciple of Abraham Joshua Heschel;

Buzzy, known to everyone else as Michael Fishbane, soon to become professor of Bible at Brandeis;

Hillel Levine, another *musmakh* from JTS now doing his doctorate at Harvard;

Stephen Mitchell, who taught himself Hebrew by translating the Book of Job, and maybe someone else whom I've already forgotten.

Then try to imagine the roster of wanabees, those haverim of the second tier who were not privileged to study together at the crack of dawn: James Kugel, Barry Holtz, James

Sleeper, Lawrence Fine, Gershon Hundert, Seymour Epstein, George Savran, Richard Siegel, Joel Rosenberg, Michael Swirsky, and of course, yours truly, to name but a few.

We were making history, and we knew it. And so did everyone else. We granted interviews to *Time Newsweek*, and *Ha'aretz*. "We are the heirs of Bavel," Art Green told a television crew from Israel, "the diaspora equivalent of Jerusalem." In Somerville, he neglected to tell them, we were writing a new Talmud. Free to reinvent Jewish prayer, Jewish study, and most importantly, Jewish society. We chose only those parts of the past that were existentially compelling, and all the rest we discarded. The only authority figure we heeded was **Nahman of Bratslav**, who died in 1810. We davened on the floor, Eastern style. One shabbes all we did was breathing exercises. We meditated, endlessly, alleviated only by the singing of dveykes-niggunim, those haunting melodies without words that we learned from the original hasidic LP's that still carried warning labels not to play them on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. Another shabbes morning, we heard the Brandenburg concertos, in honor of Bach's birthday. The first woman ever to lead a traditional service did so at Havurat Shalom. Since most of our teachers were Seminary graduates, we adopted a curriculum that owed nothing to the Seminary. We cribbed instead from the course offerings at the Frankfurt Lerhaus, as reconstructed by Nahum Glatzer in the pages of the *Leo Baeck Yearbook*. We ate together, lived together, sang together, marched on Washington together, dreamed together. It was a heady experience, even without the grass and LSD.

So that was choice Number One. Judaism as a start-up.

Soon thereafter I landed my first real job at the very place that so many of my haverim had run away from: JTS. What a shock to my system! I sat at faculty meetings, surrounded by Profs. Lieberman, Zucker, Dimitrofsky, Gordis, Ginsberg, and I couldn't understand the jokes, the punchlines of which were always in Aramaic. Last time I addressed the graduating seniors, all these men were still alive, and were sitting in this room, as was my mentor and

surrogate father, Gerson D. Cohen, and I regaled them with Yiddish folklore, since they were the last generation of Seminary professors who still pretended not to know Yiddish.

When you join a going concern, what's exciting and anxiety-provoking is not whether the venture will succeed but whether **you** will succeed. You focus your energies on getting socialized. Paradoxically, I had a much easier time of it than did my colleagues Shaye Cohen, Gershon Bacon, and Ivan Marcus, all of whom were Seminary graduates, because they were surrounded by the teachers who had ^{known} them when they were young and foolish, while there was no one around as yet who had ever seen me lying on the floor doing breathing exercises in lieu of *pesukei dezimrah*. (The one exception was Joe Lukinsky, always a model of discretion.) So in no time, I embraced the ethos of JTS, and built my professional life upon its three pillars:

- 3-2/2
- 1) the culture of Hebrew
 - 2) the primacy of Torah
 - 3) Wissenschaft as Torah

I taught all my literature classes in Hebrew; I labored to anchor my scholarly work within the classical curriculum of Bible and Rabbinics; and I channeled my anarchic and mystical energies into the pursuit of bibliographical references.

Soon, however, my past caught up with me. After several years of *shtibl*-hopping along West End Avenue and some of the side streets, I learned about a group of refugees from the old Havurah, who were now meeting in different apartments, like a floating ^{circled} crap game. They called themselves Minyan M'at. So intent were they on remaining small that Alan Mintz warned me to join as soon as possible, before the gates were closed. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah I entered Barry Holtz's book-lined apartment on West End Avenue and 95th Street. The living room was packed. Obviously, they allowed visitors on the High Holidays. And it was there that I first heard Arlene Agus lead musaf, the most haunting, soaring,

celestial musaf, the nusach of which, I later learned, was composed by her father, and I knew that I had come home.

This proved to be an auspicious moment, because within a year of my joining, the Minyan, along with a few other countercultural entities, were negotiating the take-over of a moribund synagogue named Ansche Chesed. And I mean moribund! Elvin, the Black maintenance man, was for a time the shul's only paid official, and as such, would sign the death certificates of departed members. With each death, the membership dropped. Leading us in this reconstruction was the indefatigable Sharon Strassfeld, who knew a valuable piece of real estate when she saw one. What Sharon neglected to tell us was how much it would cost over the course of our lifetime to drain all the water out of the basement, put down a new floor, rebuild the ball room, painstakingly restore the main sanctuary, put in new windows, repoint the brickwork, install new plumbing, rewire the whole building, remodel each and every public space, and when we were done with all that, reconstitute the synagogue along egalitarian lines.

We were ill-prepared for this enervating job. For unlike the sex-appeal of a start-up, and unlike the satisfaction of joining forces with a viable entity, when you try to breathe new life into dead bones, you discover why the prophet entrusted this task to God. As a mere mortal, you quickly tire of administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and have no breath left over to run the extra mile. The old-timers, meanwhile, proved a lot more tenacious than we gave them credit for, and they had their own way of doing things -- or of not doing things. Indeed, only someone divinely inspired could juggle all the requisite tasks and master all the requisite skills: social work and managerial skills, programming, fund raising, running interference, politicking, public speaking, and hardest of all, אהבת ישראל. How could you make long-range plans when every day brought up old and unfinished business?

So you see, it all comes down to the Rule of Three. A start-up, a going concern, or reviving a dysfunctional and sadly neglected institution. And what I've learned about the Rule of Three in the course of writing my novel is something that you might be interested to know: **No one path is morally superior to any other.** And **let no one tell you otherwise.** Every choice you make in life is multidetermined, and has the potential to bring out both the good and the bad. Each path has its own pitfalls. When you're part of a dot com, for example, a very-new enterprise, you tend to be very judgmental of everyone but yourself. Rarely do you question your own motives, so caught up are you in reinventing the world. Maybe the reason you chose to go it alone was your innate distrust of authority, or your thirst for power and celebrity? Is not the search for spiritual purity always a selfish act?

What's more, the choice you make reflects who you are at a given moment, and is subject to change. This is why you should think of your own life as a three-part novel. This is why you should be reading novels about other people's lives.

Remember what our master, Bakhtin, has taught us:

(1) that the novel is specifically designed to capture the real and ever-shifting landscape of time meeting space.

(2) Remember, that unlike a romance, which must end happily; unlike an epic, which must build to a morally satisfying ending; and unlike the Torah, which insists upon the cyclical nature of life -- you end in order to begin again -- the novel represents life as unfinalizable. It ain't over till it's over. The ultimate word, as Bakhtin has taught us, has not yet been uttered.

And finally, remember that the novel is **dialogical**. That is what makes it unique and great and indispensable as a form of modern self-understanding.

We have just seen how looking at our work-lives through a novelistic lens reveals their three-part structure. But I would be remiss as a teacher -- and as a Jew -- working in this great, vibrant and ever-evolving institution, were I to leave you with a mere **descriptive** paradigm. As your teacher, and as a voice in the Jewish choir, I feel duty-bound to leave you

with a **prescriptive** message as well. And this message will not be pleasing to hear. My parting message to you, based on studying the great Jewish novels of the twentieth century, is that you have just spent the best years of your life **mastering forms of Jewish self-expression that are monological -- and therefore, obsolete.**

You, soon-to-become rabbis, and you, soon-to-become hazzanim, have labored long and hard to master the sermon and the nusach, and neither the sermon nor the nusach can express what your congregants are actually living, can give voice to what they are struggling with and striving for. There is good reason that their eyes glaze over the moment they hear you enter the sermon mode. There is good reason that you start losing them an hour into the Rosh Hashanah Musaf. And the reason is one and the same: Your congregants, your students at the Solomon Schechter school and on campus, your patients in the hospice, are no longer living the lives that our ancestors lived. Outside of shul, outside of the organization that you have chosen to run, because of who you are at this moment in time, your constituency is living the complex, confusing, and contradictory life of a novel, **just as you are.**

But do not fear. **הפה שאסר הוא הפה שהיתיר.** Help cometh from the very source that points to your undoing. You have learned to deliver a sermon in the voice of **Reb Benush Ashkenazi**, the voice of moral authority and halachic certainty. But having read and struggled with I. B. Singer's brilliant novel, you know what happens to Reb Benush, the rabbi of Goraj. He is vanquished by the first scrawny bookseller who rolls into town peddling salvation.

So here's something you might want to try, maybe even during the coming summer months, before the awesome Days of Awe. Try rewriting your sermon in a different voice: in the voice of **Rechele**, for example, the voice of an ecstatic but slightly deranged visionary.

Then try something even harder. Try writing a sermon in the deracinated voice of **Josef K.**, or in the metaphorically compressed voice of **Lyutov**, or in the repressed voice of **Hirshl Hurvits**, or in the urbane, eminently civilized voice of **Artur Sammler**, or in the wounded voice of **Swede Levov**, and then, just for fun, try rewriting the same sermon in the ironic,

proverbial, argumentative voice of **Tevye the Dairyman**. Do it in front of a mirror. Do it in front of your spouse. Or do what I do -- try it out in front of your mother-in-law.

The same holds true for you, ^{Lisa Kendal} hazzan~~im~~. Try out one of those dveykes-niggunim. Surprise them with a syncopated rhythm. Throw in some Bach -- not to speak of Carelbach. And if your grown-up congregants are too stodgy for this kind of musical syncretism, for an experiment in dialogical davening, why not introduce it to your junior congregation? Or do a run-through with your mother-in-law?

Just as there are different career paths to choose from, each path morally compelling, you carry within you many different voices -- sacred and secular, lyrical and satiric, cerebral and emotive -- each voice existentially valid. And this is the reason we insisted on teaching you how to read novels. **It is the novel form that validates your own lived experience.**

After so many years of trying to master an ancient and classical curriculum, of rehearsing *mi-Sinai* melodies, the time has finally come to give voice to what's inside you. **It's that voice I want to hear.** And the only way that voice will be heard is if you integrate your life and your work, your dream and reality. Reading and internalizing great novels, I submit to you, is the surest way to learn how.

זיל גמור.

You have plenty of time to *write* the novel of your life. Besides, you don't have tenure yet, the way I do.

Your job right now is to go out and live it, to live the novel that is your luminous, open-ended, unfinalizable, life.

I love you guys. And I thank you for the privilege of being your teacher.

David Roskies