Second Generation Voices

Reflections by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators

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For One Person, It Doesn't Pay to Cook

BARBARA FINKELSTEIN

> When I loved Him who was overall, as when I thanked Him on my knees for guiding me to where I had heard so sweet and mysterious melody, or hated and defied Him as now, it all came from Him—love and hate, good and evil.
>
> —W. H. Hudson, *Green Mansions*

Here is a joke about good people and bad people: A good man dies. In heaven an angel leads him to a little table and gives him some bread and water. The good man begins to eat when he notices hundreds of people in another part of the sky dining on steak and wine. The good man asks, "What's going on over there?" The angel says, "Oh, that's hell." The good man is taken aback. He asks, "If you please, why can't I have what they're having?" The angel replies, "You know for one person, it doesn't pay to cook."

Abraham the Patriarch took a different view of the matter. In *Genesis* he pleads with God to save a city of sinners for the sake of one righteous soul. To its credit, Jewish culture tolerates contradiction, and thus my father, an observant Jew, can appreciate the joke and the biblical text. His willingness to embrace paradox, and to do so with no apparent bitterness, is all the more stunning because he is a Holocaust survivor. In 1942, at seventeen, he watched his Polish neighbors cart his father off to the woods where they beat him to death. He last saw his mother and four younger sisters on a Nazi transport to the Sobibor death camp. His only remaining

family, a half brother, died after other Polish neighbors fed him rat poison. My father, Jake, as people call him now, escaped from a slave labor camp, was caught, was sentenced to die, and escaped again. Now, as always, he prays to God three times a day, strictly observes the Jewish dietary laws, and, every Friday morning, checks the *eruv,* a symbolic marker that lets Orthodox Jews honor the spirit of Sabbath while performing tasks such as carrying house keys and pushing baby strollers. My father's observance, punctilious in degree and fervor, is a reminder that God is in the details.

Every so often, my father and I have a conversation that goes like this:

ME: Why do you believe in God?

FATHER: (*With disbelief at my naïvete*) Because my father believed in God, his father believed in God, and his father believed in God.

ME: Do you ever wonder why God allowed the Holocaust to happen?

FATHER: A person can't ask himself that question.

ME: Aren't you ever angry at God?

FATHER: What good does anger do? Anger isn't going to change His nature.

ME: What is His nature?

FATHER: (*Crossing his arms and smiling ironically*) I think that if I get to heaven, and God wants to beat me up, I'll bend my neck so He can take better aim.

ME: Is that what you expect to happen?

FATHER: (*He laughs*) Maybe I'll look across the skies and notice that my former tormenters are sitting at a banquet and feasting on steak and wine.

ME: Wouldn't that bother you?

FATHER: (*Shrugging, as if to say, "That's life."*) Look at Genesis. Cain kills Abel. We're all one big family and we all kill each other. It's in our blood.

In short, this Holocaust survivor reveres an omnipotent God who witnessed the murders of his three little sisters and let Josef Mengele, Auschwitz's Angel of Death, live until 1979. My father might say, with less malice than Shelley's Prometheus, who once told Jupiter, "Be thy swift mischiefs sent / To blast mankind, from yon ethereal tower. / Let thy malignant spirit move / In darkness over those I love."

Like my father, Rivka Shuster Finkelstein is an observant Jew. Every Sabbath my sixty-eight-year-old mother invites a dozen-odd lonely hearts to her suburban New Jersey home for lunch. If not for her, Congregation Sons of Israel's octogenarians and born-again Jews would spend the Sabbath alone eating canned gefilte fish and Meal Mart cholent. Unschooled

in the Jewish texts, my mother relies on her ground chicken meatballs and kreplach to educate her flock in the ways of Yiddishkeyt, Yiddish for "Jewish tradition, culture, character, and religion." Only occasionally does she mention that, for her, being a Jew once meant hearing the screams of her father and two sisters as the Gestapo machine-gunned them to death.

Here is what one of our conversations sounds like:

ME: Do you ever wonder why God spared you and not your father and sisters? [Her mother died before the war.]

MOTHER: I think I was spared for a purpose.

ME: What purpose?

MOTHER: To help my two older brothers. In my life I was meant to take care of them.

ME: Why would God want to spare them?

MOTHER: (*Matter of factly*) I think somebody interceded on their behalf.

ME: Like your mother or father?

MOTHER: Or some other ancestor. Maybe one of my ancestors was a saint, and God rewarded him, or her, with a favor.

ME: Your own life wasn't worthy of being spared?

MOTHER: I think of myself as an agent.

ME: Of God?

MOTHER: Of my ancestors.

ME: Are you ever angry at God?

MOTHER: For what?

ME: For not stepping in and protecting your family.

MOTHER: (*Lightly*) I have a discussion with God.

ME: An angry discussion?

MOTHER: Just a talk, like the talk we're having now.

ME: What do you say to Him?

MOTHER: What I have always said: "Please, God, don't let anybody kill me. Let me spend the rest of my life in a cold barn, but let me live!"

Thus, my mother too refrains from rebuking God for His apparent malevolence. Wasn't it for her that Keats wrote, "What am I that should so be saved from death?"

More than once, I have wondered why my parents, who lost family and country, should be fervent in their faith while I, who have not seen war, famine, or persecution, am tentative. As a child, I believed that God, like Santa Claus, knew "if you've been bad or good," and would reward my parents with long, happy lives. Moreover, I thought that all the Jewish deaths in the 1930s and 1940s would serve as a moral escrow account from

which several post-Holocaust generations could borrow. Through my association with my mother and father, I would be rewarded with a long, happy life too. This line of reasoning served me well until, one night at Hebrew School, it occurred to me that God neither thwarts man-made evils such as Nazis nor natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. To my chagrin, I realized that God had taken a decidedly un-Santalike approach to a Holocaust survivor-friend of my parents. Instead of granting *her* long life, He watched as she stuck her head in an oven and killed herself. If God was really good and all-powerful, as the Hebrew prayerbook posited, He would not let evil gain the upper hand time and time again. Adolescence rarely being the province of subtle thought, I concluded that God could not possibly exist.

Children of the Holocaust survivors have the dubious option of turning the Holocaust into a TOE, a theory of everything. As the surrogate for God, the Holocaust becomes a shadowy but pervasive force that coordinates one's place of birth, family relations, capacity for emotional maturity, choice of mate, and general outlook on life. I, for one, have seen the Holocaust as a First Cause from which everything bad in my life flows. Elevating the Holocaust in this way has been largely damaging. For one, it does not account for the existence of goodness in life, without which children would grow up to be sadists and killers. For another, it paints the world in such bleak colors that meaning and joy move into the realm of the unattainable. A TOE that offers a reasonable but depressing calculus of life is like the successful operation that kills the patient. In the short run, it may provide a theoretical guide, but ultimately some psychic complication makes the hypothesis harmful to body and soul.

As with all lives, mine began before I was born. My parents emigrated to the United States in 1950 from Bindermichel, a displaced persons camp in Linz, Austria. They lived in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn with my older sister and brother for several months and then moved to Camden County, New Jersey. My father had bought twenty-three acres of farmland sight unseen after reading in the Jewish *Forvertz* that other Jews had made a living as chicken farmers in Jersey towns such as Vineland and Lakewood. He and my mother planned to stay on the farm for a few years and then come back to New York. My birth, and my younger sister's, might have put a strain on my parents' finances, but it did not have to keep Rivka and Jake on the farm until 1983. As I see it, virtually all decisions in my family fell victim to economic necessity, happenstance, and shortsightedness.

Living in rural south Jersey may have had several detractions—isolation from other Jews, to name the most obvious—but, according to my parents, it had one overriding selling point: My parents could observe the Sabbath. In Brooklyn they had worked seven days a week flipping burgers in a luncheonette. They believed that running a farm would let them rest on the seventh day as they had in Poland before World War II. The speciousness of this argument did not hit me until recently when I realized that, as owners of the luncheonette in a Jewish neighborhood, my parents also had the option of observing the Sabbath in New York among fellow Jews. Besides, chickens must eat seven days a week, and they are not dextrous enough to feed themselves. My parents' reason for leaving Brooklyn strikes me as irrational, and like their thirty-three-yearlong stay on the farm, the result of financial pressures and poor judgment. Perhaps their self-imposed exile from any Jewish community was a lot less logical, maybe more tragic, than they themselves have ever understood.

A road trip I took in the mid-1980s from Virginia to New York confirmed what I sensed as a kid in the late 1960s: Camden County is the northernmost outpost of the American South. Many of our neighbors, black and white, were originally from Virginia and the Carolinas. The rest of the local population consisted of Italian fruit farmers and Protestants with jobs as truck drivers, landscapers, and shipyard workers. The big events in my town included the crowning of the Memorial Day Poppy Queen, spaghetti dinners at the fire hall, and the Annual Citizenship Award by the American Legion. My parents viewed even these mundane activities as Christian and pronounced them off-limits. My forbidden entry into this world of community get-togethers puts me in mind of the Eddie Murphy routine in which Murphy, masquerading as a white man, gets on a bus full of white people and discovers that whites are one big happy family, eager to offer one another friendship and moral support. To me, the gentile world felt like Eddie Murphy's bus, a magical place from which I was excluded.

Our segregation from the Christian mainstream made Gentiles exotic, even when they were clearly *uncivilized*. According to my parents, goyim ate meatballs out of a can, wasted their time at the local dragstrip, and threw money away on excesses such as movies and vacations. Unlike my thrifty parents, who saved every penny for their children's college education, wastrel Gentiles blew money on bicycles, Barbie dolls, sports equipment, and all sorts of other entertainments that my parents derided as *Narishkeyt*, Yiddish for "nonsense." Being Jewish was a no-frills way of life that, if suffered with good cheer, promised a sensational payoff someday. It

was also the moral ground. According to my parents, Gentiles might look like fine people, but besides hobbies such as fishing, they killed Jews. Nothing personal, but Christians took in bloodlust with their mother's milk. My mother reminded us about her Polish best friend, who stood on the street cheering as the Gestapo rounded up the Jews.

My parents hoped that an unflattering characterization of Gentiles would frighten me into preferring the Jewish world, a perplexing goal in my circumstances as I hardly knew any Jews. Their animus succeeded only in glamorizing the enemy. I would have sold my birthright—whatever that might have been—for a spaghetti dinner at the fire hall.

My parents attempted to undo the Christian influences in our lives by sending us to Hebrew School. The tactic backfired. As radio commentator Dennis Prager observed recently, "It is much easier to be the liberalizing and universalizing influence on a religious child than to be the religious influence on a secular child." To wit, I went to Hebrew School kicking and screaming all the way.

In social terms, the kids at Hebrew School were my superiors. They lived in affluent suburbs, had fathers with professional or white-collar jobs, and belonged to Conservative youth groups. (The Orthodox school in Camden, ten miles farther west, made four round-trips a week unrealistic for people trying to run a chicken business.) To enter this world of Jewish youth groups and mall-bought clothing, I took the Atlantic City–Philadelphia Cities Service bus to Haddon Heights, a trip I shared with south Jersey hairdressers, sewing machine operators, janitors, and hookers. Any one of them might have given me enlightening advice about the world outside the farm if I hadn't been so scared of talking to them. By the time I sat listening to stern old Mrs. Levin conjugate Hebrew verbs, I was too done in by a kind of psychic dysautonomia to learn anything.

Like most twelve-year-olds, I wanted to look, act, dress, live, and think like my friends. With my Christian peers, I did. They were part of my everyday life. They lived in rural towns like mine and went to my public school. They invited me to their homes during (Christian) holidays. They were my high school thespian pals and tennis partners. It's no wonder that the Hebrew School kids saw me as an outsider. To their mind, *I* was a foreigner like my parents, *too Jewish* to travel to a Conservative synagogue on Saturdays, *too Jewish* to eat the nonkosher food in their homes. Sadly, the circumstances of my family life prevented me from belonging in either camp. The occasional anti-Semitic insult from a Christian was upsetting, but it wasn't nearly as alienating to me as the baffled expressions I encountered in the faces at Hebrew School.

My parents themselves appeared to have little in common with any of the Jews we knew. The few in our town, all of them chicken farmers, were secular and participated in the town's life. The parents of my Hebrew School classmates were Americans, financially successful but, as my parents saw it, spiritually impoverished. My mother and father must have felt very alone in the American-Jewish world of Portnoys and Catskill bungalow colonies. Their loneliness accounts for the spontaneous, heartfelt conversations they used to have with observant Jews they met on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, where we spent several Rosh Hashanas and Yom Kippurs. I still remember one elderly Jew, a man dressed in a tweed suit and white Hush Puppies, saying, with a sigh, "*Avec a velt!*" (Vanished—a world). He didn't even need a full sentence to express the vastness of his loss, and my parents'. My mother and father understood these Jews—total strangers—in an instant. All the others were just hollow Americans.

In the late 1960s, synagogues and Jewish community centers rarely organized Holocaust memorials. At Hebrew School and at the after-school Midrasha I attended in my junior year of high school, I thought I was the only descendant of Holocaust survivors. This misconception grew legs in the light of an incident that happened one afternoon at Hebrew School. A girl named Esther drew a swastika on the synagogue wall and joked that she, a Nazi, was desecrating a Jewish place of worship. You could have blown me over. I was so shocked by her—vulgarity? Sophistication? Self-hatred? When I came to New York after college, I met other Jews, especially children of Holocaust survivors, who might have seen Esther's swastika as an example of Jewish gallows humor. In fact, a son of survivors I knew told me that whenever he wanted to get his brother out of the bathroom, he would shout, like a Nazi, "*Juden, raus!*" I suppose my shyness and discomfort among Jews made me look pretty alien to the kids at Hebrew School. I was just *disconnected.*

It didn't help that whenever I misbehaved—a common response to my frustrating circumstances—my parents threatened to send me to Stern College, the women's division of Yeshiva University, in New York. I thought that meant living with truly pious girls, dressing in Amish-style frocks, and speaking in whispers. This picture corresponded more exactly to the personality of a Christian girl I knew whose parents were Rhodesian missionaries. Despite the kosher food I ate and the Hebrew prayers I recited at home on Saturdays, I was obdurately secular, and I quailed at the thought of living with religious Jews 'round the clock. The truth is, I was almost as ignorant about Judaism as my Christian friends who occasionally asked me if I liked

being Jewish. I didn't, but I had too much pride to say so. One of my best moments as a kid came on a Sunday in 1966, when my Hebrew School teacher pointed to me, the blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter of Polish Jews, and said I was an excellent example of the Aryan type. I went home and told my father. He was aghast. I felt honored.

By the end of my second week at Douglass College, I stopped observing the Sabbath. Holding a pencil on Saturday made me nearly as delirious as sneaking off to the movies with a gentile boy, which I did in my last days of high school. Toward the end of freshman year, I ate my first nonkosher food, an Oscar Meyer wiener that a Lutheran girl in my dorm dared me to eat. Every artifact of my parents' shtetl Judaism soon cracked under the tender pressure of secular Christian college life. I was not the only daughter of Orthodox parents who succumbed to some variety of religious truancy. One Orthodox girl I knew at the university Hillel, the kosher dining hall, averred that no woman should consider getting married until she had slept with at least twenty men. After achieving her quota, she got married and moved to one of Israel's religious West Bank towns.

As I see it now, the main impetus for my disaffection from Judaism was not public school, college, or Christmas with my Christian friends. It was my fractious relationship with my parents. My life with them was a battle royal. As ambitious Jewish kids in Poland, my parents had expected to better their circumstances, and probably would have but for the war. In America, they could not understand why their children weren't happy all the time and dedicated to making a million bucks. My parents wanted me to be a *voil*, modest, Jewish daughter who, while raising a family and practicing law, might also run for a seat in Congress. Yet, nothing in my life on the farm prepared me for this caste, and I felt like a cripple for not coming within spitting distance of it. Rivka and Jake knew how to survive, but they did not know how to live. Their Holocaust and their orthodoxy had brought us to a New Jersey backwater, and had set me at odds with Jewish and Christian society. I wasn't about to look for guidance in *their* Torah.

A great revelation hit me in July 1975. I had just graduated from college with a B.A. in literature. In my desperation to avoid the farm, I took a job with the Oppenheimer Management Corporation, a mutual funds company, as a typist. On my first day at work, I sat at a black IBM typewriter with a Dictaphone headset in my ears, transcribing letters to disgruntled holders of mutual fund portfolios. I was in a state of stupefaction. How had I gone from being the member of a chosen people to being a back-office secretary? In my misery, I sought an immediate explanation and,

like my parents, found it in an easy-to-spot enemy. My foe was the capitalist system. It could not see past my youth, sex, or inexperience to the wondrous potential inside me. On Wall Street, I was nothing more than a pair of hands, paid just enough money to keep me from starvation. My crowning humiliation came when Oppenheimer's president asked me to bring him a pitcher of water. How could he? Couldn't he tell what stuff I was made of? In my ignorance of the workaday world, I did not see that this man had taken an interest in a green, unsophisticated twenty-one-year-old. If he was exploiting my labor, he was also watching to see how I responded to taking direction. By five o'clock that day, I believed that the Oppenheimer Management Corporation had done me a grievous wrong. I do not exaggerate when I say that I arrived at Wall Street the atheist daughter of Orthodox Jews and went home on the subway a damn socialist.

My nature tended to seek a simple, unifying explanation of the world. Now I had a new religion that satisfied all my questions and tied the answers up into a neat bundle:

Q: Why was I so miserable sitting at a desk for eight hours a day with a Dictaphone in my ears?

A: I was suffering under the yoke of capitalism, whose industry captains were buying my labor for $135 a week.

SUBTEXT: Capitalism, not my lack of vocational preparation, was the reason for my lousy job.

Q: Why had I always felt like a misfit among Jews?

A: I was the victim of class differences. What could a girl from a chicken farm possibly have in common with girls whose fathers were doctors, lawyers, and accountants?

SUBTEXT: All misfortune was rooted in external economic reality, not in personal character.

Q: Why did I have no lasting friendships with the girls from public school?

A: Because of their petty bourgeois prejudices, *my parents* had thwarted the natural solidarity that could have arisen between my Christian friends and me.

SUBTEXT: My parents knew nothing about human nature, which was fundamentally good if unimpeded by religious and class bigotry.

Q: Why did the Holocaust happen?

A: It was in the Fascists' interest to disunite the international working class. The Fascists appealed to the admittedly base nature of some human

beings and told them that the international Jewish conspiracy was their true enemy.

SUBTEXT: Economic greed, not aggression, disfigured human relations.

In short, my socialism blamed systems and family for the bent of my personality. Like a child, I saw corporate presidents and parents as two-dimensional monoliths, hell-bent on maintaining their power through cruelly arbitrary institutions. Looking beyond the facade of my anger for some historical or psychological interpretation of life would have demanded my compassion—for my parents and for myself. I was not capable of that. Shaped by my parents' black-and-white view of life, I thought of my socialism as all good and my parents' orthodoxy as all bad. For the next two years, Judaism struck me as bleak, dead-end, negative. My own ideology expressed my faith in the corrigible side of humankind. If taught the tenets of socialism, every person had the potential to become good. Why shouldn't I have believed that? I saw what sort of life Torah, faith in God, and religious sequestration had brought me. My parents' Judaism bore no trace of buoyancy. I wasn't about to carry their mistakes into my generation.

In the late 1970s, I discovered another way of distancing myself from my parents and their Judaism. I moved to the Virgin Islands with my boyfriend, a scraggly haired Jewish socialist whose contempt for "money-grubbing rabbis" summed up his family's attitude toward the religion. Naturally, my parents couldn't stand him. But if he was my *besherter*, my destined love, they wouldn't stand in my way. All I had to do was marry the guy. The reasons why this fellow and I stayed together for six years could probably fill the rest of this essay, but suffice it to say, they had little to do with destined love. With his marxist cant, he was a suitable foil to my parents' dogmatism. He may have been my partner in my war against life-as-it-was, but he was not the love of my life. I refused to marry him. After we flew off to the Virgin Islands, my parents stopped talking to me.

Cut loose from my Jewish moorings, I became, paradoxically, sentimental and hostile toward Judaism. In the middle of the Caribbean, I read fiction by Isaac Bashevis Singer and got teary-eyed over Yiddish folk melodies sung by Natania Davrath, an opera soprano. At the same time, I looked to a slew of leftist periodicals, including *Mother Jones*, *In These Times*, and the *Guardian*, a New York-based marxist newspaper printed in hysterical orange and black ink, to hammer out a political perspective of life. Fueled additionally by C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite*, I would get into a lather about the exploits of multinational corporations, and I attributed the financial

policies of the American ruling class to the "underdevelopment" of the third world. About the Holocaust, and especially about Israel, I would read nary a word. As a testament to the self-serving, self-preserving circuitry of the human brain, those subjects bored me to death. They were my parents' preoccupations, not mine.

One night in St. Thomas, my boyfriend and I went to the movie theater and saw an all-star, made-for-TV movie called *Victory at Entebbe*. In the movie, the German Red Brigades hijack an Air France jet bound for Israel and isolate the Jewish passengers. Yakov, played by Theodore Bikel, fears for his life and hides his Jewish identity. At some point, possibly after Col. Yonatan Netanyahu leads the Israeli commando raid on the Entebbe airport, Yakov breaks down. He quotes from Psalm 137, King David's poem about the Babylonian exile: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning./If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." After hearing these lines, I was a wreck. I cannot attest to the quality of *Victory at Entebbe*, but I left that movie in tears. Yakov's shame struck at the heart of my tormented identity.

Soon after this, when Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur rolled around, I had a hard time muting my petit bourgeois religious yearnings. I visited the St. Thomas synagogue, a picturesque landmark with a sand floor and an elaborate chandelier. Its raison d'être appeared to be cadging money from tourists to fix the ceiling. My secularism notwithstanding, I was a purist at heart—aren't all fundamentalists?—and the reform service, complete with organ music and English liturgy, made my stomach lurch. I may have strayed from the rabbinic teachings, but I expected them to remain intact until the time when I might need them again. In any case, that wasn't to be any time soon.

Every religion requires a church. My church became Liberation News Service, a left-of-center news collective I joined when I returned to New York. The writers there were all seasoned habitués of the anti-Vietnam War movement, and had grown up in middle- and upper-middle-class homes much like the kids from Hebrew School. Ironically, the only socialist I had ever known was my boyfriend. After a couple of weeks as an "LNSer," I quickly discovered that I was as untutored in leftist culture as I had been about the Jewish world. At LNS, I was met by a cabal that spoke a language I barely knew. "Homophobia" and "white skin privilege" spiced up the LNSers' speech like croutons in a salad. These graduates of Swarthmore and Harvard championed the presumed victims of capitalist and imperialist

oppression, including blacks, Puerto Rican nationalists, Sandanistas, Eritreans, secular Iranians, gay people, women, the mentally ill, workers, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, and the "third world" prisoners at the Green Haven Correctional Facility, whom the LNSers referred to as "the brothers." Several women in the news collective criticized me for doing too much research for each article; excessive intellectualism in a woman made her "male-identified" (a bad thing). To my mind, however, I was years behind these "movement activists," and if I spent nights and weekends reading about the class struggle, well, I was only playing catch-up.

During my twenty-two-month stint as a political writer, Jews and half Jews made up 50 percent of LNS. They could be relied on to pen the occasional vitriolic article about Zionist abuse of Palestinians. As my beat was the environment and Central America (two issues about which I, the girl from a south Jersey chicken farm, knew zip), I was spared the challenge of vilifying Israel. I had less hesitation, though, about taking up with a new boyfriend, the Irish-American son of a Fortune 500 CEO, whose main extracurricular activity was an entity called the Palestine Solidarity Committee. He said that Israel was as guilty of apartheid as South Africa, and that one of its biggest crimes was stealing "Arab" water for use in Israeli factories and swimming pools. As a Trotskyist, he was convinced that the permanent revolution was just around the corner, and he even managed to write about Khomeini as a latter-day Lenin, leading the masses in a crusade against the morally bankrupt capitalist West. He had punk tendencies and kept a poster of a crematorium over his bed.

Two gay women, one white, one black, were predictably platitudinous on gay issues, but they couldn't swallow the LNS line on Israel. They found the group's anti-Zionist rhetoric offensive. They knew my parents were Holocaust survivors—a category that one of the half Jews wrote off as an exaggeration—and told me that LNS's anti-Israel screeds were not merely anti-Zionist, they were anti-Jewish. Turns out that my former boyfriend, the Virgin Islands socialist, had contributed an article subtitled "Zionist Oppression of Palestinians" from his new digs in San Francisco. I think the two gay women looked to me, the daughter of survivors, for some moral compass. Thoroughly mystified as to where my loyalty lay, I said that the article was in keeping with LNS's policy of defending the oppressed, whoever they may be. For many years I thought the women disapproved of my heterosexuality, but in recalling this incident, I wonder now if they didn't see me as a coward. As I kept reminding myself, Israel was not my beat. It was my parents'. I had telephoned them several times,

and they still refused to talk to me. Damned if I was going to speak out on their behalf.

In the end, LNS's narrow view of journalism wore me down. We writers could write about racism, black nationalism, gay rights, labor strikes, third world women, affirmative action, and occasionally the antinuclear movement, but subjects unamenable to leftist dogma were verboten. These included the Kool Aid massacre in Guyana, the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries, the Mafia, Idi Amin, Entebbe, Legionnaire's Disease, Elvis Presley, Son of Sam, Russian Jews, and Ireland, which was nothing more than a bunch of white people killing one another. Personnel tensions escalated when two members left to join a Maoist group and my boyfriend, more and more enamored of Leon Trotsky, joined the Socialist Workers Party. The blacks resented the whites for not feeling black pain, the lesbians said straight women were male-identified homophobes, and one poor heterosexual chap, a virgin, felt that I, the only straight woman, should do the politically correct thing and make him a man (I declined the job). By 1980, when I was ready to defect, LNS was on its deathbed. In its postmortem, the group concluded that LNS began falling apart when the Vietnam War ended, but I think it hoisted itself on its own petard.

After I ditched my Trot boyfriend and made a mental jailbreak from my marxist prison, I wrote a letter in semiliterate Yiddish to my parents asking if I could interview them about their wartime experiences. Ever since my days in the Virgin Islands, when I was reading Bashevis Singer and getting moony over Netania Davrath, I wanted to write a book about the effects of the war on my family. Three years after issuing their decree of excommunication, my parents relented. I used to think that my rapprochement with my parents and my departure from Liberation News Service were coincidental events. I suspect, though, that with my disaffection from "the world of the brothers," I was ready to reenter "the world of my fathers."

Despite my prodigal return, I was still without a philosophy to guide me in my thoughts and behavior. Nature abhorring a vacuum, hedonism rushed in to fill the breach. I spent the next two years in a whirl of sybaritic activity that would have made the Hellenists blush. I applied all the passion of my previous political quest to my latest religion, whose sole purpose was anesthetic. Fun, my anodyne, prevented me from facing the pain of my parents' grief, their decades-long depression, and the losses that hung over our family at every meal, every holiday, every Sabbath. [As Keats wrote, "[T]he sharp anguish of my shriek/Stung my own ears—I strove

hard to escape/The numbness." Or, to paraphrase General MacArthur, fun was hell.

Writing *Summer Long-a-coming*, a novel about the ripple effects of the Holocaust on a family like mine, had some therapeutic benefits for me. First, it taught me that to accomplish anything good, I had to sit still and focus my ideas. Second, it let me look over my shoulder at a subject that was too complicated and too painful to approach head-on. Third, it helped me see that the Holocaust, whatever else it was, was also a mindless cataclysm that did not necessarily have anything against me and my family personally. We were just little people that got in its way.

We leap over a decade to 1996. I live with my eight-year-old son in a Jewish section of New York City. I am not the weirdo I perceived myself to be in Hebrew School, or in public school, for that matter. Time and an anthropological bent of mind make it possible for me to see everybody as a bit of a misfit.

Still, my odyssey surely sets me apart from most of my neighborhood friends and acquaintances. I have passed through a range of ideologies and experiences to arrive at a destination they never seriously questioned; many of them went to yeshiva and spent time in Israel. I got married late and divorced early; nearly everyone I know is married to men they met in their twenties. I feel nervous and emotional in *shul;* they build their social life around *shul* activities. Yet, by this point in my life, I would find a wholly secular existence thin. It's the radical insufficiency of culture and community that turns my head toward the unseen and the unknowable. ("I always seek in what I see the likeness of something beyond the present and intangible object," said Shelley.) A life without faith would place a heavy burden on activities such as writing and work, which would necessarily become my main sources of meaning. And, perhaps most devastating of all, it would separate me further from my family.

In preparing to write this essay, I dug up a notebook I kept in the mid-1980s while I wrote *Summer Long-a-coming*. During that time, I attended a lecture series on Job given by Shlomo Riskin when he was the rabbi of Manhattan's Lincoln Square Synagogue. My notebook is full of his pithy comments, the most resonant among them being "The Torah says that wrongs are righted in historical time." If I had to cite one Jewish belief that frames all my questions about God, it would be this one. This axiom works only if I suppress a longing for balance in my life. But doing so would force me to assume a Panglossian—even a Joblike—belief that everything is as it should be in this not-so-perfect world. I can accept this way of thinking as

it applies to my petty grudges, and I'll-show-'em state of mind in which I occasionally indulge. It does not stand up, however, against the colossal barbarisms, perpetrated in the name of one ideology or another, that disfigure human lives for generations. What exactly is historical time? Can we see signs of retribution within a span of fifty years? A thousand? Is retribution a desirable outcome? If it is, then Rabbi Riskin's statement may boil down to "What goes around, comes around." Like Voltaire's warring Bulgars and Avars, then, nations and peoples can expect to take turns killing, raping, torturing, maiming, and exiling one another. As Peggy Lee in a song once asked, "Is that all there is?"

Recently, I came across this gruesome description of Auschwitz in *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl, a psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor:

> "[A] twelve-year-old boy was carried in who had been forced to stand at attention for hours in the snow or to work outside with bare feet because there were no shoes for him in the [concentration] camp. His toes had become frostbitten, and the doctor on duty picked off the black gangrenous stumps with tweezers, one by one."

What if this twelve-year-old boy were my son? Would the rabbinic tenet that "wrongs will be righted in historical time" give me comfort during my seventy or eighty years on earth?

In Isaiah 51, Isaiah says that if the people harken to God's law, "the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion." I'm sorry to say that exile, not redemption and return, appears to be the psychological emblem of my life. I feel closer to exile, not because I prefer it to glad tidings, or because I intentionally set out in childhood to flout the divine commandments, but because I came of age in a time and place devoid of community and sanctuary. It strikes me as miscreant of God to stack the deck against His people and then blame them for not measuring up to His standards. I'm reminded of the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy castigates the unseen wizard with, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, frightening [Lion] when he came to you for help!" In the end, the main characters in Oz come to see that courage, heart, and intelligence lie within each one of us, and faith in the inherent goodness of life is our only hope for finding an authentic self. We keep coming back to God—to an ideal goodness—because, as my father says, we have no one else to turn to.

Which brings me back full circle to the conversations I have had with my father and mother. First, I can no longer blame my parents for imposing a crude facsimile of Orthodox Judaism on their children. They cannot be held responsible for making an irrational decision in a world of no fathers and mothers, a world that amounted to an ideological scrap of faith they were too uneducated to practice compassionately. ("How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?") The Judaism they passed down to me had no social context; thanks to the Holocaust, the Judaism their parents passed down to them had no social context either. Maybe that's why my parents stayed on the farm for thirty-three years. *There was no familiar Jewish world to move back to.* The miracle is that, in choosing to live, work, and have faith, they have risen above their sufferings, which is the best each one of us can do.

Second, seeking an explanation for the Holocaust, and for the evil in the world, is a no-win proposition. I think this very quest sent me in every scattered direction, toward simplistic renderings of socialism and hedonism, neither of which brought me a moment's peace or illumination. The Holocaust falls under the category of *mysterium iniquitatis*: It is a crime beyond comprehension because it cannot be ascribed to biological, psychological, or sociological causes. Having faith in God, before Auschwitz and after, has little to do with the burdens history forces us to bear in our short lifetimes. Perhaps it is essential, as my father says, to have faith because our forebears did. I have to conclude that any person who has suffered this planet's worst indignities and who still believes in a divine plan is an extraordinary human being, and at the very least deserves our humble respect.

In my trek through rural Judaism, socialism, and hedonism, I have been forced to question who I am, what I believe, and what my purpose is. I have decided that for one person it does pay to cook. Goodness is not always apparent in our lives, but if it didn't exist, life would be unbearable. Loving goodness may be an obvious goal for a lot of people, but its preciousness lay hidden from me for a long time. Without goodness, and without the love that refines it, life *is* a cold barn. And while a cold barn will serve as a temporary refuge, it is no place to live a happy and meaningful life.