



Ki Tavo

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Bury Me in the Kingdom of My Grandparents

Alter Yisrael Shimon is a psychotherapist in private practice in Passaic, NJ and is the author of the Yiddish novel "Yankel and Leah"

I visited a cousin recently in Boro Park, Brooklyn, where he lives in a small flat. We share a great-grandfather: the Rebbe of Novominsk, the grand rabbi of Warsaw, who died in 1933 at the age of sixty. The mantle passed from him to his son, then to his grandson, and now rests on my cousin and his twin brother—handsome, slight men in long frocks, their gray beards softened into gentle bristles. When I look at them, I still see the children they once were—the children we once were—in the dimness of their grandfather’s study on 47th Street.

The Rebbe, Reb Alter Yisrael Shimon, welcomed

me simply, warmly.

“We have the same name, don’t we?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Alter Yisrael Shimon”—the Rebbe’s name.

Our namesake was a tiny mystic who carried the secrets of the entire Torah on his lips. Before breakfast he would memorize 21 chapters of the Mishnah—some 20,000 words. My grandfather, both the Rebbe’s son-in-law and his nephew, would *farher* him each morning, testing him informally.

They were dirt poor and oppressed by the people around them, but they had a sustaining story because they were direct descendants and followers of the Baal Shem Tov, the miracle worker who wandered the frozen Ukrainian steppes in the

eighteenth century, lifting up the poor with words, wonders, and the word of God. We, by contrast, grew up in American safety and abundance.

God had chosen the Jewish people for both suffering and love. Exile would be endured with song and hope, through persecution and upheaval. These, the Rebbe taught, were the birth pangs of the Messiah. Even the persecutors—the czars, the Polish landlords, the peasants—were agents of God, sent to push Jews closer to Him through Torah, good deeds, and goodness itself. “The Jews are like a cholent,” the rabbis in Poland said—the Sabbath stew that cooks all night. We are cooking, cooking.

But as the nineteenth century waned and the shtetl modernized, this story began to fray. People stopped waiting for God to make things better. *The Messiah needs our help to come*, they said. Some became militant Zionists, seeking to force redemption; others embraced secular messianisms—Marxism, socialism. Warsaw became a cauldron of radicalism, secularism, Zionism, and the last embers of Hasidism, all smoldering atop a desperate search for a life and a livelihood.

The last living person who had seen my great-grandfather was the noted Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld of Queens, who died in 2020 at the age of 97. He was our rabbi and knew my grandfather from the days of the London Blitz in World War II. “Your great-grandfather was not a man of the twentieth century,” Rabbi Schonfeld told me at my mother’s *shivah* twenty years ago. “He belonged to an

earlier world. It is impossible to understand him.” My father said something similar: “Holy—but for a regular person, impenetrable.”

My grandmother Shifra yearned for a better life than squalid Warsaw and reached London’s East End with my grandfather in 1935. Her sister Sure’le told me that in Warsaw they hid novels under their pillows, out of their father’s sight. Whatever paths the sisters took, they could not shake the sparks of holiness they had absorbed from the rebbes.

I knew the Rebbe of Warsaw’s son—the Novominsker Rebbe of New York, Reb Nochum Mordechai—in the late twentieth century. He once told my father and the others that they were worthless: “You will not reach the level of the *behemos*, the livestock of the Rebbe of Kotzk,” he said in Yiddish to the relatives that had gathered at the *yahrtzeit* meal of his father. I was seven years old. “What did he say?” I asked my father. “The Rebbe said we are worthless.” Worthless, that is, when compared to the *kadmonim*—the previous generations.

My father considered it a great honor to hear this from a *Varshaver*, a man from Warsaw who had been **raised** and braised firsthand by the fires of Kotzk (the Rebbetzin was the Kotzker’s granddaughter). Nor were the remarks directed at him, but all the men around the table. In Kotzk, truth was not sacrificed for warmth, but here with the Rebbe, there was both: truth and warmth. “Knowing one’s worthlessness can be very valuable—if we accept it with love,” my father

seemed to say. Puffed up and cast down—this has been the arc of my life as well.

“I have come for no reason,” I told my cousin, the Rebbe, that recent Sunday afternoon, the light thinning toward winter. We sat in a small room off the kitchen.

“Let me at least bring you something to eat,” he said.

I demurred, but he coaxed out orange juice and cake. He had inherited his father’s genius for kindness, and that Hasidic gift for understanding nothingness—for making room for nothing so that something might emerge.

Novominsk had never been a large Hasidic movement. Even in Warsaw it was a ragtag kingdom without tricks: modest dress, decorous lectures, little taste for the esoteric, and only extravagance for scholarship and a fierce concern for others. No pomp. No theatrics. A house of study with a *benkel*, a *tisch*. A felt fedora. A pocket watch was placed before the Rebbe during services so he would not delay the worshippers.

A modest kingdom— a kingdom of modesty.

My son is named for the Rebbe’s grandfather, Reb Nochum, one of the earlier leaders—a man known for his humility and *hasmodo*—a perseverance in study.

To an outsider in modern America, it might have seemed almost make-believe. But to me, a boy

longing to belong, it was a kingdom where words and thoughts mattered. There was nothing to belong to, really. This was not a grand chassidic court in the way of Chabad, or Satmar. It was blood, but conferred on me no obligation of thought or manner of dress other than an inclination toward Talmudic rigor, and a spiritual softness. For example, the famous thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel was our cousin, a Novominsker as well—a nephew of the Rebbe.

My grandparents were refugees of the twentieth century—the pogroms, the Holocaust—but also refugees of the eighteenth. Part of them had had enough of being God’s “chosen” ones. Maybe, at last, they could enjoy a little success? Maybe a child could become a doctor? Maybe my grandfather could finally earn a living?

When my grandfather arrived in America, he was offered a lucrative newspaper-delivery franchise for *The New York Times*. The obstacle was the five-and-a-half-pound Sunday edition, delivered on the Sabbath. He arranged to subcontract the Saturday route to a non-Jew and keep the rest. Was it allowed?

“It is permissible,” the Rebbe told him, “but it is not for you, Avrohom. There must not be even a whiff of dishonoring the Sabbath.”

So my grandfather refused and took a lesser job instead as a small-time caterer for a while.

Even as they were devout, they carried in their bones the deprivation of exclusion from the wider

world, the cloistered holiness that kept them poor. They hoped their children might find redemption not only through Hasidism but through a profession.

But my father had other plans. He brought me, as a child, to the Rebbe—Reb Nochum, who was the rebbe first in Crown Heights then in Boro Park from 1953–1977.

“Will you come to my bar mitzvah?” I asked. “What would keep me away?” he said.

He had stomach cancer; it was his final year. Yet he climbed a ladder to fetch for me a book he had written about his father’s teachings. I remembered this as I sat before his grandson.

“A kingdom of nothing”—nothing that is related to the material of this world—when you were in their presence you could smell the next world, yet it was something here too.

I held the Rebbe’s frock for a moment—humble man, great man.

“I know I can’t be Novominsk,” I said. “But I want a part in the way things were. In the way things are.”

He listened gently.

“You can’t wear what we wear,” he said, gesturing to his caftan and the hat nearby. You live in Passaic. Just be regular. Learn like a regular

Jew. Study. Then you will be Novominsk.”

It seemed he was saying that the outward extremism of Novominsk—its simplicity, its refusal of spectacle—was itself a hidden path toward being regular. Perhaps all of Hasidism is a way of becoming regular. Who can say what “regular” looks like?

I asked if he remembered my grandfather, Reb Avrohom. Of course he did. My grandfather was his great uncle.

“A big personality,” he said.

“I mistreated him,” I whispered. The shame rose slowly, unexpectedly. This was not a confession but a realization—of who I am. A coarse young man, an Esau, a pretender to goodness. The antithesis of Novominsk. Goodness has always been used to defend against badness for me, as a way of not being accountable for the badness I did. Identification with a holy man is a great way to avoid one’s self. For example, there was tension in the family between the adults and I would (inappropriately) side with my father and ridicule my grandfather and his ways. I was young but it was coarse and sadistic of me. It wasn’t for the first time that I would be ashamed and then bury it in “good” and goodness of an exalted pedigree. I was crap and I knew it.

“I want to make up for it,” I told the Rebbe.

I braced for rebuke. Instead he said:

“Learn Mishnayos. Come back and see me again. We can talk anytime.”

At first, it seemed to me that this was simply another form of avoiding accountability: learn the right teaching, recite the proper incantation, and all would be well. But eventually I understood that a person cannot open himself by an act of will—or even by self-knowledge alone. One must submit, and submit to experience. That, I came to see, was the heart of Novominsk. Do not become self-obsessed, even in contrition. Experience might be bigger than you.

Not long after that visit, I began studying Mishnayos *Peah*, which opens: “These are the things that have no measure... the corner of the field for the poor, acts of kindness, and the study of Torah.”

It teaches what we must give away: what falls from our hands while harvesting belongs to the poor; what we forget in the field belongs not to us...

In my Passaic *beis medrash*, even surrounded by a hundred people, there are moments of profound aloneness—*einzelkeit*. When I was young, I wondered why I had to endure such arduous study alone, without my mother, without my sisters. They were free to read leisurely, to read what they wanted, to follow their interests on a wider path. Why not me?

And beyond that—what if all our striving leads nowhere? We learn and forget. Millions came before us; millions will come after. Does God even *want* our Torah study?

A friend came over to me in the *beis medrash*. He had heard me saying it by heart. “This is your *olam haba mesechta*,” he said—a piece of learning that one knows by heart. It is said that is so close to him that he “owns” it in this world and carries it into the next.

“Let me show you something,” he added, with quiet affection.

He opened a book by a sage of the last century and told an old tale: a man died unknown, yet a woman wept for him. When asked why, she said, “He knew the tractate Chagigah by heart. He repeated it constantly. He was a scholar.”

After the burial they searched for her, the story tells, but she had vanished. They understood then that the tractate itself had come in the form of a woman to speak on his behalf.

A man spends his life with a tractate, and the companion he longs for—the one who truly knows him—is the tractate, the study itself.

Absurd? Perhaps. Yet we study the Torah of a God who seems distant, fantastical, inscrutable—and somehow also deeply near, perhaps even within us.

My grandparents are buried in the Novominsk section of a cemetery in Iselin, New Jersey. My parents are buried in Queens. In my circles, one is buried with one's parents in the family plot, but I have asked my children to bury me with my grandparents—with the people of Novominsk. Would there be a corner of the field left for me? Just as the mishna in Peah describes, the corner, what is left, has no limits—could be everything.

To be placed again inside that small kingdom—
that discipline of diminishment,
that inheritance of almost nothing—
from which, somehow, something will continue.

Le-Dor Va-Dor, and then There's Me

Matt Brandstein is a writer based in Chicago. He is currently working on a collection of short stories.

I am 54 years old. I have never been married. I have no children. My brother, my only sibling, has no children. When we are gone, that particular branch of the tree simply ends, not with drama, but with silence. No heirs. No one to say kaddish. No next generation to carry anything forward.

There is a particular kind of loneliness that grows in the space between a Jewish life genuinely lived and a communal framework that doesn't always know what to do with it. I have been living in that space for a long time. It has no name. It rarely gets spoken about. And I have spent years becoming very good at pretending it doesn't exist.

Pretending is only half of it. The other half is retreat, a pull away from *shul*, the *shiurim*, the rooms full of highly functioning people who keep effortless time with the Jewish rhythm of life, while I hold my place a half-beat behind, out of sync in a way that only stokes my insecurity. With age, the discomfort has hardened into something less negotiable. The possibilities feel smaller, and the fear of being pitied, irrational but no less real for that, leaves the door harder to walk back through.

An unconventional path does not mean a broken connection. Every Jew has a *neshamah* that is always bound to the whole, but it is the practiced consciousness of that connection that sustains us, even when the observance itself might appear obscured.

I am not *frum* from birth. I came to Torah observance later in life, imperfectly, incrementally, with my own particular combination of earnestness and bewilderment. What I wanted was simple to say and hard to live: a closer relationship with Hashem. I did not have the tools for it, so I went looking for the people who did. Chabad became my touchstone, and so did Jews from every walk of life, each of them further along than me, each willing to let me learn by standing near. I am still learning. But somewhere in all of that trying, the decades slipped past me like a train I kept meaning to catch.

Orthodoxy is my baseline. Not a destination I've

fully arrived at, but the standard I hold myself to, the compass I navigate by, even when I'm a somewhat disheveled traveler. I try to keep *Shabbat*, even in the stretches when keeping it means staying home, unplugged, alone, the *parshah* and a cold lunch conspiring against any serious intention to stay awake. I keep kosher. I put on *tefillin* on all permissible days. I *daven*. I learn. I give *tzedakah*, even when I can't afford it. And when I fall, consciously or otherwise, I know about teshuvah.

My conviction as a Jew is not in question. What falters is never the belief. It is the showing up, the standing among others as one of them, the ordinary confidence that the room is mine to enter. Walk in and the old monologue starts, cataloging every way I have fallen short of the life I was supposed to be living by now. So sometimes I stay home, and not just occasionally. There are stretches, long ones, where I stay away entirely and the world outside continues without me.

What matters is that I always find my way back. The pull to return is a divine directive wired into me like an alarm, an insistence to be present among my people. I always hear it. I do not always answer. The pull the other way is just as real, and some days it wins, and the loneliness throbs. This loop between seeking community and retreating from it, never resolved, only tolerated, is the shape *galut* takes in me.

* * *

Jewish communal life is built around milestones and family. The *brit*. The *bar mitzvah*. The wedding. The *Shabbat* table crowded with

children. These are the scaffolding of our calendar, our conversation, our sense of Divine blessing made visible in the world. And underlying all of it is the concept of family as the living vessel of Jewish continuity. It is a beautiful idea. It is also, for those of us whose families gave us love without always giving us the stable ground on which to stand, something that can be quietly complicated to be around.

My beloved mother, who is with us today, B"H, was raised in an American home caught between two worlds, the *shtetl* her parents had left and the country they were still learning to call their own. They had gotten out in time. The ones who stayed in Tykocin did not.

What the family could not hold in person they held across the ocean. For years the letters kept everyone current, both sides woven into a single life conducted in two places. When my mother was born, the *mazal tovs* came from across the sea, from her grandparents, her aunts and uncles, the older cousins she would never meet, all of them rejoicing over a baby they knew only from a photograph. For a while the letters carried their lives too. Then they began to carry something else: fear, and then word of conditions worsening, and then the unthinkable. They stopped. Nothing ever came after them. An entire branch of the family had been closed off in silence.

Her parents moved through American life like people who had learned to occupy the present while remaining, in some essential way, unreachable. They had never been able to mourn,

not their parents, not the nearly twenty siblings between them, not the nieces and nephews beyond counting, not the whole *shtetl* where everyone was *mishpahah*. There were no graves to visit, no dates to mark. What they could not speak taught them to function without feeling, to keep the machinery of a household running while everything that asked for the heart stayed shut. My mother was raised inside that, in a home where the inner life was too dangerous to show. What she handed down to me was not the grief itself but the knowledge of what it does when it has nowhere to go.

The love my mother carried for her two children during our formative years was filtered through an extreme emotional containment, where distant pleasantness was the permanent surface and the unspoken tension beneath it moved in carefully managed currents. We became expert at decoding her highly controlled system of subtle signals, learning to find tenderness in what sometimes read, on the surface, as extreme reserve, and in other moments as something closer to its opposite.

My father, of blessed memory, was a simple man who spent much of his life convincing himself and everyone around him that he was something more. Beneath all of it was the *frum* world of Lawndale he came from, the truest thing he ever was. He inherited something whole and set it aside in search of something he imagined was greater.

He came to my mother already practiced at starting over. Three marriages before hers, each brief, no children from any of them, or so he always said. He did not arrive at my mother so much as land on her, and once he had, he decided the marriage was the one he had finally gotten right, settled rather than examined. That would have meant facing the pattern, and his own place at the center of it, the one role he could never step out of.

He loved my brother and me, of that I have no doubt. His moral compass bent under the weight of ambition and ego in ways that eventually cost him everything, including his freedom during my teenage years. The children were collateral in a story he was telling himself, caught in the crossfire. Our mother was something closer to a casualty.

Shalom bayit, the peace and wholeness of the home, was never something that existed between them. Not in any sustained way, not in any hidden way, not even in the beginning. My mother stayed because she was afraid to leave. My father saw to that, controlling the terms of her life and using whatever force it took to keep her inside the one he had chosen, never seeing the woman he was keeping there. Love between them was never possible. It was not that they failed at it. The conditions for it had never existed.

What they had instead was volatile, conducted under duress, a facade of partnership that masked

the absence of the real thing. The love for their children was genuine. Everything else was held together with effort and appearances.

And yet, despite all of it, my parents helped me honor a Jewish identity that was always mine, passed down through both what was said and what could only be absorbed from the unspoken layers.

My mother was raised in the deliberate assimilation so many of that generation fell into, yet the *mitzvot* survived in her, not as ritual or knowledge but as instinct: kindness, generosity, a love for her fellow Jews, the countless things she had always done without ever knowing *halakhah* asked them of her. It lived in her the way her parents' thick Yiddish accents lived in them, innate and unmistakable.

My father spoke of the *frum* world he came from with a warmth he directed at almost nothing else: the *heder*, the *Shabbat* table, the grandparents who were Lubavitchers, who helped establish the Anshei Lubavitch Shul in Chicago and fundraised to bring the Frierdiker Rebbe to the city, whom he had met in person. He could not give me that world, but he handed me its memory, and the memory had weight.

What my parents could not offer me was the felt sense that stability was not just a performance. They labored to keep the appearance of it intact, even as everything beneath it was always coming

apart, and I never learned to trust calm. The drop back into chaos always hurt more than the chaos itself.

None of that stayed behind when I left the house I grew up in. I know, intellectually, that I am as deserving of belonging as anyone in the room. But knowing a thing and being able to inhabit it are not the same.

When I find myself at a *simhah* surrounded by people who are deeply rooted in one another, in a multigenerational sense of belonging that seems to come as naturally as breathing, something shifts in me that I cannot always manage. The recognition of a security I never learned from the inside can, on the harder evenings, move from wistfulness into something more physical, a tightening, a need to leave, the particular panic of a person who can only hold the warmth of other people's normalcy for so long before the body begins to tell him he doesn't belong there. I always know I do. I don't always feel it. That gap is its own kind of exhausting.

Coming to observant Jewish life later meant climbing a ladder whose rungs assumed a social and familial infrastructure I was building from scratch. For those for whom this life is wired into the circuitry of childhood, it is organic, the water they swim in. For the person who arrives later, it is a language learned in adulthood: the vocabulary comes, the grammar follows, but the native ease of someone who has always lived inside it remains

just out of reach.

The warmth of a *Shabbat* table is something I have learned to receive without fully knowing how to inhabit. I arrive, I am welcomed, I am seated and fed and sung to, and something in me recognizes the beauty of it. And then the conversation turns naturally to children's schedules and a nephew's upcoming *bar mitzvah*, and I smile and nod and grow quiet. Not from bitterness. From the specific ache of a person who is genuinely glad to be there and doesn't entirely feel that he is.

* * *

Ask me how I'm doing. I will tell you I'm fine.

I have become extraordinary at fine. Fine lets you off the hook and lets me off the hook simultaneously, and we can both return to the Torah discussion without navigating the awkward geography of what it actually means to be at this table, at this age, without a wife by my side, without children to wrangle.

The full answer to how I'm doing is a document, not a conversation. It covers the cancer and the PTSD and the OCD and the depression and the particular loneliness of being a Jew without a next generation, and it would take longer to read than most people have time for standing at a *kiddush*. I have learned to carry it quietly. It is heavy, but it is mine.

So: fine. Always fine. Baruch Hashem.

I suspect I am not the only one living this way,

inside the community and at its edge at once. There is a whole cohort of Jewish men and women who have aged out of the young-singles conversation without aging into any other framework, who exist in the uncharted space of a Jewish life that doesn't follow the expected sequence. Not because we gave up. Because life, with its illnesses and losses and wrong turns and late arrivals, wrote a different story than the one we intended.

It is knowing, somewhere you can't quite name, that Hashem loves you, and feeling, in the hushed hollow of a *Shabbat* afternoon alone, completely unseen. Both things are true at once. Living in that contradiction is its own kind of spiritual practice, unrequested and unrelenting.

* * *

I had thought of what my grandparents fled as belonging to their century, not mine, a hatred that had done its worst and receded into memory. October 7th, 2023 made it present. The massacre fell on Simhat Torah, carried out with genocidal intent: the brutality of it, the scale, Jews murdered at a music festival, in their homes, in their communities, tortured, raped, taken hostage, the youngest infants and the oldest survivors of the camps among them.

The scapegoating did not end with the massacre. Much of the world turned its back, the oldest slanders rose again, the blood libels reworded for a new century, the murdered recast as the guilty. The hatred that emptied my grandparents' world was spoken aloud again, in the streets and on the

campuses, made ordinary, made sayable, an old hatred dressed as justice in places where common sense had given way.

The horror did not land all at once. It came in pieces, and each piece took something different: a night of sleep, an ordinary happiness interrupted, a prayer that began as routine and turned, without warning, raw. The grief did not replace what I was already carrying. It settled on top of it, and what was underneath, pressed hard enough, turned to resolve.

What followed was less a feeling than a summons, toward a Yiddishkeit along a dimension it had never shown me before. *Teshuvah* stopped meaning *frumkeit* alone and took on an urgency. This was not the old feeling of being out of sync with Jewish life, the one I had carried before I committed to observance and after. That was my own static. This came from beyond it, and I could not talk myself out of it. It is a process I am still working out, and working out with determination: to take up what my mother was never given and what my father spent his life outrunning, and to make it mine in a way it had never quite been.

None of this feels like an accident. The road has not been a straight one, and I have stopped believing it was a wrong one. Hashem has His reasons, and this was never outside them.

Because what October 7th made undeniable was Klal Yisrael, that we are not a scattering of individuals but a single body. The head has its work and the foot has its own, and no part is so

small that the rest can do without it. I do not know which part I am. But I have come to believe that a *mitzvah* done in my corner reaches places I will never see, that it can mend something in a body I am bound to.

I still don't always make it through the door. But on the days the retreat wins, I reach for the *mitzvot* that ask no audience, and I hold the line there. And on the days I cannot even do that, I trust that the body holds me anyway, that somewhere a Jew I will never meet is keeping the line I dropped.

* * *

Le-dor va-dor. And then there's me. Still showing up, even when no one can see it.

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Please contact us at editors@thelehrhaus.com