LEHRHAUS

OVER SHABBOS TERUMA 5778

Articles:

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A Game by Any Other Name

Todd Berman

Imagine sitting around the house with family and friends. It's game night, and you pull out the latest and greatest game. To promote the wholesomeness of the evening, the game will have to be something with good values. It should not use profanity.It will promote healthy competition. Most importantly, the game will be fun.

In that case, what could be more fitting than one that is both fun but also teaches a lesson? Using charming cartoon-drawn cards, the game is sure to be a crowd pleaser. Without further ado, you present all assembled with *Pharisees: The Party Game. Pharisees* boasts all the excitement of *Settlers of Catan*, the educational value of *Pandemic*, and the antisemitism of *Mein Kampf*. Your family and guests are in for a thrill.

Although, one might wish that this was satire, it is not. *Pharisees: The Party Game* is available for immediate purchase on Amazon.

Pharisees is the brainchild of Kenny and Elle Campbell, a young couple, former ministers, and their company called Stuff You Can Use. Their website and blog posts indicate that the Campbells have produced a wide variety of materials and curricula for Christian youth. They appear wholesome and excited. Unfortunately, it's not clear if they know that what they are producing touches upon classic antisemitic tropes.

While *Pharisees* is based on the popular Apostrophe game, *Mafia*, and its more magical sister game, *Werewolf*, *Pharisees* has a more biblical twist. Created in 1986 by Dmitry Davidoff, Mafia models a battle between members of the mob and the innocent majority of good citizens. Filled with secret assassinations and nighttime plots to take over the world, *Mafia* enables players to take a walk on the Mob's wild side.

Like in *Mafia*, the evil Pharisees, set out to "stone" unsuspecting innocents each and every evening. In conspiracy with the "snake," the Pharisees pick characters such as the Disciples or biblical prophets like Moses or Joseph to "stone" to death. The main character to be stoned is Jesus. Unlike other characters, however, Jesus comes back to life after "being dead" for three rounds of gameplay. The Pharisees slowly try to take over the world by killing off as many innocents as possible. Working with evil doers such as Judas or Pontius Pilate, the Pharisees aim to destroy the ministry of Jesus. Meanwhile, the "good guys", who are most of the population, try to uncover the clandestine plots and excommunicate the evil doers before the Pharisees destroy all that is holy.

The stated aim of the "party game"—beyond just having fun sneaking around as evil Pharisees killing everyone—is to teach the lessons of the Bible. Yet, I'm not sure which Bible they are teaching. One doesn't get the sense from the New Testament that the Pharisees indiscriminately ran around stoning people. In addition, the game smashes together a bizarre mixture of biblical characters from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Figures who lived in different periods are presented as if they lived together: King David, Elisha, Noah, Daniel, Zekhariah, Pharaoh, Paul, Jesus, etc. One gets the feeling that the only educational message the game creators deem important enough to convey is that the Pharisees were murderers.

This perverse version of the bible might not be so scary if people realized the absurdity of what is presented. Yet, as one minister quoted on The Stuff You Can Use website put it, "This is a legit [sic] way to get students (and adults, for that matter) to know more about the Bible and its stories in a super fun way!"

Probably the most dangerous element in this entire travesty of history is it wasn't Pontius Pilate who crucified Jesus, but rather the Pharisees who stoned him to death. In fact, Pilate is actually listed as a member of the good guys in the game since he can pardon as well as put to death. Thus the creators have authored a new and sinister narrative placing the blame of Jesus's death squarely on the shoulders of the Pharisees. This is a serious accusation couched in a beautifully illustrated card game.

Now let's be clear, rabbinic Jews have always seen themselves as inheritors of the Pharisaic tradition. For centuries, the Church viewed the Jews as semi-demonic descendants of the Pharisees represented by the famous Ecclesia and Synagoga sculptures commonly appearing in Medieval Christian art. Of course, despite the Reformation, even parts of Protestantism inherited this anti-Jewish tradition.

The equation made between the various games is clear: Werewolves = Mafiosos = Pharisees = Murderers. The goal of good society is to stop this combination from winning. Of course, the continued equation is a famous one: Pharisees = Rabbis = Jews.

Haven't we gotten beyond the danger of this type of message? Does the material honestly reflects present-day Christian Theology? Even if it does, does it truly reflect the text of the New Testament?

What comes next? A medieval times expansion pack titled *Matzah Baking*? One can almost imagine the gameplay: cards for Jews who sacrifice Christian babies and others for Christians; one card can be for William of Norwich while others for Harold of Gloucester and Robert of Bury and Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln.

I imagine that the Campbells didn't mean to stoke the flames of classical antisemitism. Unfortunately, they did not respond to my attempts to contact them. Even in an age when Neo-Nazis can march in Charlottesville, Virginia, oddly proclaiming "Jews will not replace us," most would not want to be linked to such vile messages and especially not in a kids' game.

Yet, what the authors of *Jewish Annotated New Testament* say about Paul applies here, as well: "This passage has implications for the emergence of anti-Judaism in the Christian tradition. If Paul wrote these words, then he is inextricably associated with the promulgation of anti-Judaism, regardless of his intentions" (p. 374).

The Campbells' game goes along with a narrative which is only one step away from medieval blood libels of Jews sneaking around at night killing innocent Christian children for their own nefarious purposes.

Many may feel that a game is just a game. But consider this: one of the first objects on display at the entrance of Yad Vashem is the 1936 Nazi children's game, *Juden Raus*. It's a simple game, really, with an easy task. The first player to round up all six Jews—represented by pieces with pointed hats and snarling faces—and to send them out of Germany to Palestine wins.

This, too, was just a kids' game. Yet, it was as a brick in the wall of Nazi propaganda which led to Auschwitz. *Juden Raus* represented a concerted effort to impact the youth culture in Nazi Germany and to nurture hatred for the Jews in the minds and hearts of German children. The Germans could easily have taken a page out of the biblical book of Proverbs, "Teach a child according to his way, when he ages the instruction will not leave him" (22:6).

My fear is that the game *Pharisees* will, knowingly or not, have the same effect. Given the toxic political culture in America today, this game, like its Nazi era precursor, could serve the role of instilling and maybe even reinforcing antisemitism. According to the ADL, since the latest presidential election, antisemitic attacks have spiked massively. This is a dangerous trend and one that must be reversed. This "party game" could add fuel to an already dangerous fire of Jew hatred.

Perhaps it is time for the *Pharisees: the Party Game*'s creators and Amazon to rethink selling this particular game?

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Unhappy Families: Elhanan Nir's *Rak Shnenu*

Jeffrey Saks

"Happy families are all alike," Tolstoy tells us. "Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." One such unhappy Religious Zionist Israeli family has found its own way into Elhanan Nir's debut Hebrew novel, *Rak Shnenu*.[1]

Nir is a poet, author of various books of Jewish thought, editor of the literary supplement of the Makor Rishon newspaper, and a Ram at Yeshivat Siach-Yitzhak in Efrat.

Rak Shnenu is a penetrating portrait of the Religious Zionist community in Israel, as told through the prism of the aforementioned extended family. It touches on many different aspects and challenges of the world it portrays, in ways that are more particular to life in Israel but also with serious relevance for American Modern Orthodoxy, and I highly recommend it to anyone who can handle the beautiful Hebrew with which it is authored. (Israeli critics have made comparisons to Agnon, which I believe are overstated, but more on that later.)

The well-known description of the role of anthropology—"to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange"—applies equally to a novelist who sets out to portray through his prose the particularities of any community. Nir's protagonist, Yonatan Lehavi, is the son of Emanuel and Anat, founders of the fictional Be'erot settlement. His wife Alisa is pregnant following an earlier traumatic failed pregnancy. Yonatan is a teacher of literature and *halakhah* at a Jerusalem yeshiva high school. He has lost his fourteen year old brother, Ido, to cancer; his older brother Micah, suffers from what appears to be bipolar disorder. This is a family unhappy in its own way.

Yonatan has given up the promise of a future as a top-drawer Torah scholar, like his father before him, who in the aftermath of the loss of Ido abandoned his post as the rabbi of the settlement, and moved to bourgeois Jerusalem. Emanuel makes his living as an optician; were Nir's portraiture not so skillful, he might have been accused of laying the symbolism on too thick: The optician is "blind" to everything around him. He abandons his family emotionally (though not literally) and drowns his sorrow in his nightly bath. Mother Anat smothers her anguish in heightened religious fervor; her mourning over Ido and her disappointment in her husband are transferred to high hopes and expectations of Yonatan. Neither the novel's characters nor its readers can ever really believe that these expectations can be met, and therein lies the central tension.

[1] Elhanan Nir, *Rak Shnenu* [Just the Two of Us] (Bnei Brak: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad, 2017).

We witness Yonatan, on the eve of the birth of his first child, undergoing an early-onset midlife crisis—one of a particularly spiritual variety. Yonatan strives for a normal relationship with his wife (what model does he have?) but they never really achieve "just the two of us" of the title—some family member is always in the way (whether actual or the "ghost" of the dead brother).

In this way, the title at least is truly Agnonian in its irony. This family portrait is riddled with fractures: between husbands and wives, between siblings, and, perhaps most significantly, between the individual and the religious community.

But the nuclear family, and the community surrounding it, is pocked with death—literal, figurative, and spiritual. Young Ido is dead (we see him only through flashbacks), his father is religiously and emotionally withered (including as a result of his own PTSD from the first Lebanon War), the mother is ready to throw herself into Ido's grave, if not to actually encapsulate the dying boy then in order to re-birth him (112).

Ido was named for his father's fallen comrade-in-arms and *havruta* Ido Be'eri, a relationship which had been fraught with all the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual Eros that two men can share within a *beit midrash*. The very settlement the family lives in, in which Emanuel served as rabbi before fleeing, is Be'erot—named for the same fallen soldier. Brother Micah is "as good as dead" since his mental disabilities mean he cannot serve in the I.D.F. nor is he expected to find a wife—perhaps the two most significant ways a young man serves the religious Zionist settler world he occupies. This results in Yonatan carrying the burden for the whole family. But can he handle it? Can he be "alive" enough for them all? Most significantly, can he be a father to the new life he and Alisa hope to soon bring into the world after an earlier attempt resulted in death?

Early in the novel we hear the thoughts in Yonatan's head: What if he's just one of the masses—the 999 out of the thousand, and not the one distinct exception? Or worse, what if "the Torah does not contain everything?" (10).

Then what? The tragedy here is that we sense Ido, not Yonatan, was the chosen one in a thousand. In a gripping scene the lad undergoes chemotherapy while immersed in the study of *Mishnah Bava Kama* (an artistic choice Nir makes because of the "*nezikin*," damage, the cancer patient suffers). The attending nurse can't understand why the boy doesn't cry and shout, and the reader witnesses how, for Ido at least, the study of Mishnah is an analgesic plaything saving him from perishing afflictions (à la Psalms 119:92). "The nurse tossed a sharp glance at Yonatan and Micah, 'For goodness sake, teach your brother how to scream, how to curse—how to really curse! Don't get all *Ashkenazi* on me suddenly,' she said as she exited the room" (114). But neither tantrums nor Torah save the boy.

Yonatan, we are told, could have been the "Reb Akiva Eiger of his generation." His "rebellion" is not in abandoning faith and ritual, as might be expected in a more one-dimensional portrait of religious life. Yonatan merely leaves the *beit midrash*—and not for business or law, but to become a teacher of Torah in a high school! The challenge becomes: can he maintain passion, not merely commitment, outside the rarefied air of the yeshiva?

But the idea of tossing off his *kipah* is never entertained, instead he wrestles with religious insincerity while beginning to recognize that, for him, it's part of the system—the cost of doing business, which he is still unwilling to pay.

Viewers of the popular Israeli TV program, *Shtisel*, will recognize the trope: In that series, albeit set in the *Haredi* world, the creators resist the cheap plot-line of placing protagonist Akiva on the horns of deciding between faith and apostasy. Inside vs. outside—it's so much more authentic to show the hero struggling to find meaning while remaining inside the fold but still searching for some air to breath. Those familiar with *Shtisel* might be interested to know that series-creator Ori Elon is a brother-in-law to author Elhanan Nir. That's one happy family which may defy Tolstoy.

Rak Shnenu, like its talented author himself, is rooted in the world and language of the *beit midrash*. This has led Israeli critics in the secular press to make what they believe to be the mandatory comparisons with Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon.

This is not always done to praise a Hebrew author, any more than a contemporary English writer would like to hear a reviewer say that his sentence structure is identical to Joyce's Ulysses. Even when an author is inspired by a giant on whose shoulders he or she hopes to stand, this hopefully does not translate into a parroting of style that would put them at a remove from their contemporary readers. Agnon's Hebrew is a richly woven tapestry of allusions and word-plays to rabbinic literature. The intertextuality is almost the very subject of his writing itself.

The critics read Nir's depiction of the inner speech of a community for whom Torah study is part of the warf and woof of daily life and language and presume he is putting on Agnonian airs, unaware that there are people who actually speak like this! Critics paid similar back-handed "compliments" to Haim Sabato's *Te'um Kavvanot* (Adjusting Sights) twenty years ago. When the actual letters of Dov Indig, Sabato's friend and the model for the novel's character of the same name, were posthumously published (in English as Letters to Talia), the world saw that Sabato wasn't aiming for Agnon's exalted Hebrew—that's how *b'nei yeshiva* speak! In fact, Nir's Hebrew is straightforward and simple yet elegant, with as many references to contemporary Israeli pop-culture as to Abaye and Rava.

This confusion on the part of the critics has caused them to overlook much more constructive comparisons to Agnon, novelistic elements which I presume Nir earned through hard labor, and which pay off in the story-telling and aesthetic literary experience.

At its heart *Rak Shnenu* tells the struggle of Yonatan and Alisa to achieve a stable and fulfilling marriage, while on its surface his family keeps getting in the way. In reality it's something deeper and more personal which is blocking their success.

In fact, the author hints at multiple possibilities, and this is a technique picked up from Agnon's greatest novel of family disharmony, A Simple Story, which is no more "simple" than Nir's debut novel. *Rak Shnenu* also draws comparisons with Agnon in its strong female characters, weak, often indecisive men, a strong narratorial voice, and its deliberately ambivalent ending. Agnon was incapable of concluding with "And they lived happily ever after." We can only hope better for the Lehavis.

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Excerpt from Elhanan Nir, *Rak Shnenu*, 163-164 (translated by Jeffrey Saks)

"Let's return to the laws of cooking on Shabbat," Yonatan told the class. "I want to do a quick review. Our topic was the matter of reheating liquids on Shabbat. We saw that the *Ashkenazim* are actually more lenient about this matter than the *Sefardim*…" His student Ben-Tzur interrupted him and said rather angrily, "But, rabbi, what difference does it make—*Ashkenazi* or *Sefardi*? If it's permitted, then it's permitted; if it's forbidden, then it's forbidden! The question is: What did God say? Leave me alone with where my grandmother was born. Who cares?"

Ben-Tzur inhaled, stared at Yonatan, his tone shifting from anger to a scornful laugh. "*Takhles*, all the *halakhot* which vary according to where you come from prove that the whole thing isn't serious," he added. Yonatan tried to explain the importance of each person following the customs of his forefathers, so that the chain of tradition shouldn't be broken, but he knew that his words were not convincing. Why was he telling them things that he himself no longer believed in, things which were just remnants of the passionate and naive days of his first year in yeshiva, but were now like a hangnail—no longer a piece of his body, yet refusing to break off. Why does he fear to share with them the complex and perplexed spiritual world which truly occupies him? Why doesn't he talk to them about the beauty of *halakhah*, and the constant need to enable it to progress, to free it of all its fears which do not allow it to respond to new challenges? On the complexity of modern religious life, in which we are simultaneously citizens of different and contradictory worlds? Why, in place of sincerity, did he choose to fatten them on the old, moldy religious ideas, which he himself had been stuffed with, causing them to grow sick of it all, exactly as he had?

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Do We Really Know What We Think We Know?

The Current State of Social Science Research and the Orthodox Community

Matthew Williams

My grandfather is a statistician. Throughout his decades of work, he encountered tremendous amounts of problematic social science research. In 2002, he even wrote a book about the tales behind the original innovations and ridiculous flaws endemic to social science research.

One if his fondest stories is about the time his local Jewish federation asked him to conduct a communal study. Once he had determined the relative overall size of the Jewish community—easier back then because of the preponderance of affiliation with a limited number of institutions, namely synagogues and temples—he suggested sending out a mere few hundred surveys and following up with respondents. A number of the communal leaders could not believe that such a limited sample would really represent their community. To remedy the problem, one of the federation leaders passed out the survey to all the Jews he knew. My grandfather chuckles every time. In social science research, he understood, a much smaller, random sample with a high or even decent response rate far outpaces the size of a biased survey in its ability to represent—with any degree of accuracy—the community it seeks to study.

The tale seems especially pertinent. Two new surveys have recently emerged on the Modern Orthodox landscape attempting to offer an in-depth look at the religious behaviors and beliefs of a sample that is largely and historically neglected by the broader Jewish social science research community, with a few notable exceptions. This population, too, is subject to some of the costliest interventions (e.g., Jewish day schools) on the contemporary Jewish scene, making the lack of data to gauge philanthropic returns even more strange. They are the "The Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews" (September, 2017) and the Lookstein Center's Zvi Grumet's "Survey of Yeshiva High School Graduates" (January, 2018). One of the key findings of both studies include a seeming fragmentation of modern Orthodoxy as some adherents "slide to the right" while others move "left" or "leave the fold." Both highlight, too, the transformational impact that the younger generation seems to have as roughly one third, on each side, move further away from the "center," in terms of various types of observances and beliefs.

Unfortunately, both studies fall well short of the standards of social science research, generally. In doing so, both end up reinforcing many of the problems endemic to the study of Jews, specifically.

The lens these researchers utilize to investigate and portray their subject—measuring a population against an "accepted" constellation of standards and the words used to describe them—comes with troubling implications. To name just two problems: first, the studies

assume a constellation of "core" values but this does not allow for space or opportunity for participants to offer their own definitions of behaviors and beliefs. As a result, both surveys provide less data about the sampled population. Instead, they offer a rather skewed view of how these participants perceive themselves relative to these asserted standards.

To take one example, the Lookstein study writes that "while 93.9% required rabbinic kashrut certification for products in the home, only 76.4% indicated the same requirement for restaurants, suggesting that communal norms on having a home that others could eat in was more important than the personal observance of the restrictions." Setting aside whether or not those percentages are even accurate, here we find a discussion about observance that takes places entirely in the realm of the researcher's analyses. There's no place in the survey that allows respondents to define a set of standards by which they measure "observance." This question would have provided surer footing for the speculation offered here. Without the respondents own correlative set of definitions, we're left with an implicit frame developed and deployed by the researcher based on what… we don't know.

The second—and perhaps more troubling feature—is that the language used in the surveys themselves (e.g., OTD or "Off the *Derekh*," to refer to those who "leave" Orthodoxy) can alienate potential respondents (e.g., many who leave Orthodoxy prefer the term ex-O). In addition to the political and social repercussions—it is a difficult thing to do to an otherwise already marginalized community—alienating respondents also narrows the population that surveys can potentially draw from to help craft a more comprehensive image.

This last point, namely the alienation of potential respondents, gets us to the crux of the matter. Over the course of conducting and reviewing dozens of studies on faith and ethnic communities, I have come to believe that the threshold for accuracy is very low as long as the rhetorical flavor is right; as long as a studies' findings can offer "provocative" points that continue to prompt discussion around "issue *du jour*," whether it's the place of LGBTQ identifying individuals in the Orthodox community or the potential for women in the rabbinate. Perhaps this is a bit harsh but, the Jewish community, as evidenced by these and many other studies, does not really seem to care about alienating respondents because it does not care about getting it right.

On the one hand, both surveys, to their credit, acknowledge these limitations. The authors of the Nishma research write:

> [T]he social research profession advises treating web-based opt-in surveys with caution. That means, for example, that we should draw conclusions only if the findings are rather pronounced and we have good theoretical reason to believe them. We follow that approach throughout our analysis. We seek findings that have statistical validity and have underlying theoretical rationale.

Similarly, the Lookstein survey notes that "[t]here are limitations to this survey. The method of its distribution does not guarantee a representative sampling, even though it is clear that it did reach multiple segments of the population with equal opportunities for distribution through each respondent." And here, it's author hits on the core of the problem—"Because the survey was distributed through social media and not through individual contacts there is no way to gauge response rates."

On the other hand, both of these surveys treat their samples as if they were representative of their larger populations. This goes for the statistical methods they use and the conclusions they draw. The authors of the Nishma report write that "All survey questions were asked of the Modern Orthodox and the overall responses for the group are accurate within ±1.7% at the standard 95% confidence interval." This is a patently false claim. Any social science researcher or statistician will tell you that plus/minus accuracy and confidence intervals can only be applied to a random sample, otherwise the potential bias of those who care to respond overwhelms any attempt to define the general attitudes of the community studied.

Internet-based opt-in surveys are becoming the norm in market research. After all, they're inexpensive. They're easy to set up. They're easy to distribute. Finally, large numbers of respondents make for a seemingly attractive size, or high N (number) of respondents. Yet, researchers have begun to struggle mightily with the simple question: what, if anything, can we really learn from these surveys? If you do not have a response rate (as Lookstein admits) or if you don't have a sense of the overall size of the population (as both Lookstein and Nishma say) then what is it that we're really doing? Can we learn anything at all? Most social science researchers today are skeptical that we can, especially if we don't know the response rate (the percent of people who viewed or were asked to fill out the survey, but didn't, relative to the percent who did).

Many social scientists in the Jewish community would argue—as Nishma does—that we should take these findings seriously, given a sound theoretical basis or a large discrepancy in a result. Other social science researchers in the Jewish community have argued that if a number of surveys' findings bunch together then their collective weight confirms the validity of their findings despite their individual lack of statistical significance.

All these defenses have been roundly debunked by the majority of social science researchers.

Theories are meant to be tested, not used as a basis for the reliability of surveys. Large discrepancies can be merely an artifact unique to a survey, sample, or theory. It is not necessarily anything reflective of the community you're trying to understand. Finally, researchers simply cannot compare results across samples when even some of those samples come with severe limitations, like not knowing a response-rate or not knowing the size of the overall population.

All of this is to say that *we don't really know what we think we know*. To pretend otherwise, seems to me, like a grave mistake. If we are truly interested in understanding the populations we hope to study then we have to do a much better job designing surveys that not only include less judgmental questions, but also sample with accuracy, both of which allow us to really engage with the Jewish community as it exists.

But, therein might be my mistake, my own naiveté. Claims like "we need to take a study seriously even if it's not representative" or that "we ought to think of uses for such research regardless of its statistical significance" underline a deeper point. The Jewish community

has accepted this level of sociological competency because we either do not know it or do not care about it.

These surveys pass what I've come to think of as the "*Shabbos* table" threshold. They seem plausible enough to the layperson. They are good to debate because they touch on the "issues" of the day. They provide fodder for various communal pundits. They also reinforce many existing conversational touchstones of the community—perhaps most significantly that Jewish practice is in various states of decline. What is more, their designers make for great synagogue speakers.

There is too much on the line, though, for the Jewish community to settle for this threshold.

The first is that philanthropists, foundations, federations, and service agencies take these surveys seriously when thinking about how and where they should invest in the Jewish community. Million-dollar bets that rest upon a house of cards simply do not do. Not only do they lead to significant and, sometimes, severe waste but they also set up unfair expectations for service agencies who end up having to evaluate their programs against such data. But, even more tragic than wasting money, these communal portraits may be woefully misaligned with the realities they ostensibly seek to represent.

Without representative samples or statistically viable research programs, the quantitative data produced by these surveys only captures as marginal view of a vibrant, diverse, and idiosyncratic community of individuals who we really know very little about.

But, by making these surveys part of, if not foundational to "*Shabbos* table" conversation, the Jewish community signals that it doesn't care about those who are left out. They become the voiceless Jews who aren't counted, who aren't considered, and who fall between the cracks opened by the standards of our accepted methodology. That loss—hopefully not just to me—seems plainly unacceptable.

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