



Inside Jewish Bodies

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Jewish bodies conjure so many images, so many associations. At the intersection of Jewish life, the ways we parse our selfhood and community, sits the body. A physical and emotional sack of bones and blood, soul and psyche; some believe created in God's image. This month *Sh'ma* explores that body. From our Jewish hair (Samson's source of strength), to the cells that make up our genetics, and to how we care for, feed, clothe, medicate, and think about our bodies, all are at least loosely tied to Jewish customs, history, and practice. Judaism provides a vast and intricate ethical and halakhic approach to the physicality of relationships; how we ritualize a baby's entering the covenant by marking the (male) body; how, at death, we ritualize the body's preparation for burial.

The Jewish body has become the object for much debate and dissection in modernity; an object of denigration as well as lust. Jews and their bodies serve as inspiration for much in popular culture — both fetching and hideous — and the following pages offer a view on how novels, film, dance, photography, and painting are rethinking Jewish stories and stereotypes.

Next month we launch a new digital edition of Sh'ma. While we will continue to print and mail the journal to subscribers, we are offering an electronic edition — formatted exactly like the print edition, yet searchable. In May, we offer a free "tryout" of the digital edition, which will include expanded features. Sign up now on shma.com. Details on page 19. —SB

Bodies and Communities in the Image of God

STEPHEN HAZAN ARNOFF

A passage from *Midrash Tanhuma* makes a compelling case for understanding the essence of Jewish community through the lens of one of our tradition's central teachings — that human beings are created in the image of God, *b'tzelem Elokim*:

The tabernacle is equal to the entire world; [and it is] also equal to the creation of a human being which is itself a smaller version of the world. What does this mean? When the Holy One Blessed Be God created His world, God created it just like a woman creates her baby — starting from the belly button and everything grows from here and there on four sides; so too did the Holy One Blessed Be God create the world from the foundation stone of the Temple first, and from this emerged the world. And why is it called the foundation stone? Because from it the Holy One began to create His world.

As described in the Bible, the *mishkan*, or tabernacle, is akin to a theater-in-the-round, exposed on all sides to the community that lives amongst it. Part of the resonance and complexity of the tabernacle that *Tanhuma* teases out is that the root of the Hebrew word for tabernacle, *mishkan*, shares its meaning not only with the word for God's presence — *shekhina* — but also with that of the word for neighbor — *shakhen*. Quite literally, three key semantic elements of the Hebrew root *s-kh-n* enliven the complicated prototype for Jewish community and holiness grounding the Israelites in the desert.

Consider the *mishkan* as the world's first Jewish Community Center, a JCC: Jewish by

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virtue of a covenant expressed in the hovering *shekhina*, God's presence; Community in the tabernacle's being fully exposed and open to every engaged *shakhen*, or neighbor, in the Israelite camp; and Center since the tabernacle serves as a hub — whether the community is stationary or in transit — for all life occurring around it.

If all of the Tanakh's stories were unraveled into individual narrative threads, one of the easiest to follow would be the one describing the journey of humankind from creation in the image of God toward concretization of a divine mission — what the Book of Exodus 19:6 proclaims to be a “nation of priests.” From the individual callings and altars of the great figures of the Book of Genesis to the formalization of the *mishkan* in the desert to the establishment of the Temple — of which the *mishkan* is ground zero — the Bible is a story of how a people who are created with the raw stuff of the Divine understand their priestly mission, a communal expression of who the nation is at its core. Jewish history after the destruction of the Second Temple is in some sense a chain of attempts to embody the priestly calling in the institutions and systems of the nation when the priesthood can no longer play this central role.

Institutions truly reflective of the communities they serve can only meet their fullest potential when all participating, or *not yet* participating, see reflections of their own most intimate selves — body and being — within these institutions. Yet at the same time, in a man-

ner paradoxical as great teachings must be, this reflection takes place in the literal center of the neighborhood, in an intensely public manner. A fully evolved Jewish community, modeled on the tabernacle, grounds itself in a vital circle with ineffable holy work at its center. In community, people see themselves simultaneously as individuals and as part of a whole; most important, each face that has gathered is empowered to be a reflection of the image of God.

A final thought: As the central holy place in what might be called the first Jewish community, the shared model of the human body and the tabernacle, created *b'tzelem Elokim*, ensures that both entities transcend concepts of being and permanence — always built and rebuilt and on the move. The tabernacle, constructed with basic physical materials, traveled with the Israelites modularly during the time in the desert. The raw materials of the human body replace themselves completely every seven years. Circulation of blood and water and the formation of bone and flesh are constant. Yet somehow, until death, the essence of the body as defined by the human name we give it remains the same. The body and the tabernacle are paradigmatic holy entities defined by the tension of being not only fully transient but also fixed and unique. Tradition hints that the ineffable complexity of this common tension reflects a thread of what it means to be created *b'tzelem Elokim*: in one place and all places, formed and formless, communal and individual — and embodying the image of God in every form. 

Stephen Hazan Arnoff is founding director of LABA: The National Laboratory for New Jewish Culture, and executive director of the 14th Street Y in New York, where LABA is housed.

Reciprocal Inscription: The Jewish Body in Story and History

LORI HOPE LEFKOVITZ

Most readers of the Bible will tell you that it was the first woman who fatally led the first man to eat tempting, forbidden fruit, awakening a sudden acute consciousness of their naked bodies. Of course, first an erect — talking, walking — snake tempted Eve, a snake that loses its erection as a punishment for making her false promises, ever after vulnerable to the regretful woman's heel. Had woman not made him think with his snake, that classically disowned and disembodied part, Adam might have enjoyed Eden longer, in serene fellowship with his God. Gender trouble begins in Paradise.

The body and its parts come to life in stories

where meanings and judgments attached to the body and sexuality are ever re-invented. Some ideas that are familiar in academic forums seem counterintuitive in popular contexts, and one such idea is that everything has a history, including our material bodies. The body in which you live is formed as much — if not more so — by culture as by nature. Biblical foundation stories — not so much what they say, but how we have apprehended them over time — have been formative of the Jewish self-image, even as the refashioning of the Jewish body throughout history governs how we interpret Bible stories.

When Jacob puts on animal skins to pretend

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to be his hairy twin Esau, and further pretends that the stew his mama cooked up from a domesticated kid is the wild game that the outdoorsman Esau was actually hunting, Jacob — obedient to his ambitious mother — inherits the patriarchy by passing as a man. Just as Jacob passes as a man, Joseph, Moses, and Esther also “pass” as foreign nobility, initiating a long tradition of anxiety and confusion about Jewish passing.

The Bible also suggests rather paradoxical constructions of women’s bodies, including barren women with children and seductresses without desire. The matriarchs, the prophet Samuel’s mother, Hannah, and Samson’s mother are barren. Each miraculously conceives a son whose privileged destiny entails personal sacrifice from her. Although “barren mother” may be a contradiction in terms, longing and loss are part of this Jewish maternal profile.

Other biblical women achieve political aims by seduction. Tamar fools Judah into impregnating her; Yael lures the enemy general Sisera into her tent, gives him a skin of milk when he asks for water (you can imagine what the Midrash does with that detail), and then instead of being penetrated by him, she penetrates him, driving a tent pin through his temple. Esther touches the royal scepter and saves her people (no wonder some Israeli journalists dubbed Monica Lewinsky “Queen Esther”), and Samson, who can tear a lion with his bare hands and single-handedly defeat an army, becomes metaphorically impotent (losing his eyesight, hair, and strength) when Delilah whines. These lusty women actually seek power, each proving the rule that the bedroom is the battlefield where men always lose.

The intellectual boy with body and virility issues (Woody Allen), the controlling, self-sacrificing Jewish mother, and the acquisitive, sensual but selfish “Jewish American Princess,” all descend from patterns of representation in Jewish sacred stories. Or, perhaps, we find these stereotypes embedded in our sacred stories because we have become so identified with these prejudices. Much in the intervening years helped codify Jewish physical and sexual distinction, where in a world of enforced binaries, Jews often occupied an intermediate place sexually and racially.

In 17th-century Spain, physicians documented that Jewish men menstruated. In 19th-century Germany, the sickly Jew became a familiar type, despite all statistical evidence

that Jews were extraordinarily healthy as a group. Sociology and sexology identified adaptability (passing) as a Jewish trait that accounted for Jewish men being sexually feminine and susceptible to white collar crimes (cheats, like Jacob). The Nazis taught Jewish physiognomy, and in America, Jews had not always been precisely racially white, a shift that correlated with their changed class profile. In the *yishuv* and at the birth of the State of Israel, the muscular Maccabean Jew was deliberately and aggressively substituted for the frail, studious, and victimized *shtetl* Jew. The Israeli body and the Jewish soul persist in a dynamic of shape shifting.

Although perceptions of the Jewish body are illusions, they are situated at the borders of reality and invade with powerful, imperialist armies. The consequences are felt in every generation.

Though the Jewish body is a much studied concept, of course we know that there is no such thing as a Jewish body. In my own extended family, we are big and small; ebony and blond; dark and blue-eyed; loud and meek, of diverse ethnicities and nationalities. Yet, we refer to Jewish body parts: famously, a Jewish nose, and *Lilith* Magazine once devoted a good part of an issue to how Jewish women feel about their “Jewish hair.” It may sound nostalgic to refer to “a Jewish soul” but “a *Yiddishe neshama*,” nevertheless calls forth a soul fed on the chicken soup of *mitzvot*; “a *Yiddishe kopf*,” a “Jewish head,” once imputed a special kind of Jewish business sense: quick, clever, and a little devious.

We may know better, but we buy into Jewish physical and sexual distinctiveness. I sometimes ask an audience to think of what the word “masculinity” conjures up for them. What are our cultural associations with “femininity”? I then ask what happens when we qualify these words with the adjective “Jewish”: “Jewish masculinity”? “Jewish femininity”? For many people, the adjective “Jewish” upends the meanings of masculinity or femininity.

Persistent and often contradictory constructions of the Jewish body have evolved from patterns in our earliest stories. Although these perceptions are illusions, they are situated at the borders of reality and invade with powerful, imperialist armies. The consequences are felt by Jewish bodies in every generation.



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Drawn to Beauty

RUBY NAMDAR

I have always taken human beauty very personally. Some of my strongest childhood memories, often fragments without context, revolve around the visceral sensation caused by my first encounters with extraordinary beauty. Jerusalem of the late 1960s and early 1970s — a dreary, provincial Central European town uncomfortably located in the heart of the Middle East — was hardly the place to encounter beautiful people. Electronic media were not yet ubiquitous and the advertising mechanisms were fashioned after the aesthetic norms of Soviet propaganda rather than those of the American consumer culture. The collective mind was not yet constantly bombarded by dazzlingly beautiful faces and perfect bodies, as it is today. Rare encounters with unusual beauty served as a peephole into the divine, a glimpse into infinity. A beautiful face seemed like an icon of a beautiful mind, of a soul touched by God's grace. An important aspect of this sensation was its innocence, its prepubescent naiveté. My mind was not yet conditioned to confuse beauty with sexual attraction; I still experienced beauty in its pure unadulterated form. This sensation was, and is to the day, one of great elation; there is something in seeing an unusually beautiful human (I confess, usually a woman though I have seen men whose beauty evoked in me the same reaction) that makes me feel, absurdly enough, momentarily immortal.

It is hard to admit, let alone justify, such feelings in today's cultural climate. It seems almost criminal to succumb to this basic instinct in a time of frenzied cultural relativism, politicized body aesthetics, and justified negative reactions to the mass production of synthetic human beauty. While some comfort came from the Greeks — reading Plato has most certainly made my relationship with beauty seem less sinful — the real surprise came from our own ancestral pool of cultural images.

I have never identified Jewish culture with the love of human beauty, let alone with its worship. But rabbinic literature has supplied me with some surprisingly searing romantic metaphors, like the bizarre talmudic story of Rabbi Bana'ah.

When he came to the cave of Adam a voice came forth from heaven saying: "Thou hast beholden the likeness of my

likeness; my likeness itself thou mayest not behold." God, having created Adam in his own image, feels protective of that image and wishes to hide it from the human gaze. Rabbi Bana'ah, how human of him, peeks in anyway. This is what he tells his friends at the study house: "I discerned his [Adam's] two heels, and they were like two orbs of the sun." (BT *Baba Batra* 58a)

This description of Adam's blinding beauty helps us decipher the story's inner logic: Human beauty is divine, the reflection of God's glory. The Talmud, by no means an understated work, goes on immediately to develop this aesthetic mythocosmology: "Compared with Sarah, all other people were like a monkey to a human being, and compared with Eve, Sarah was like a monkey to a human being, and compared with Adam, Eve was like a monkey to a human being, and compared with the *Shechinah* (the holy presence of God), Adam was like a monkey to a human being. The beauty of R. Kahana was a reflection of [the beauty of Rab; the beauty of Rab was a reflection of] the beauty of R. Abbahu; the beauty of R. Abbahu was a reflection of the beauty of our father Jacob, and the beauty of Jacob was a reflection of the beauty of Adam."

The addition of the great rabbis to this chain of divine gorgeousness is not accidental. Their wisdom and good looks are not random attrib-

Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Does "a Jewish body" conjure a dangerous genetic way of looking at Jews?
2. Made in the image of God, *btzelem Elkokim* — what impact does this have on how we care for our bodies?
3. How does body image influence Jewish decisions?

Reuven Namdar, born and raised in Jerusalem, completed his BA (sociology, philosophy, and Iranian studies) and his Master's degree (anthropology) at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His first book, *Haviv*, a collection of short stories, was published in 2000 and that year won The Ministry of Culture's award for the best first publication. Reuven has also published short stories, book reviews, and translations of medieval Persian poetry, in Israeli literary periodicals. He lives in New York, where he teaches Jewish and Israeli literature and is finishing a new novel. He is a member of the LABA faculty.

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utes that happen to coincide with each other but rather indications of the divine spark they carry, a spark from the great explosion of creation in which God's beauty filled the world. This identification of human beauty with divine grace can explain the otherwise disturbing habit of Rabbi Yohanan — an enormous, beardless man whose beauty was compared by the sages to the glow of a silver goblet filled with the seeds of red pomegranate, its brim encircled with a chaplet of red roses, that was set between the sun and the shade — to sit at the gates of the mikvah. "When the daughters of Israel ascend from the bath, let them look upon me, that they may bear sons as beautiful and as learned as I." (BT *Baba*

Mezi'a 84a) This identification accounts for the otherwise counterintuitive demand of the High Priest to exceed his fellow *kohanim* in: "beauty, strength, riches, wisdom, and appearance." (*Talmud Yerushalmi: Yoma*, 1, 29a)

These texts all verbalize the intuitive, implacable, resonate response to beauty: "It's divine!" I find this response very liberating; I delight and marvel in it. It helps me, a contemporary Jew, reconcile my secularized sensibilities with those of my religious ancestors. It is not the basis for or doorway into a new theology, religion, or philosophy — but it's a wonderful stepping-stone to a personal relationship with a divinity that keeps its beautiful face hidden. 🕯

Embracing the Jewish Body?

MITCHELL HART

Let's begin with the obvious and the unremarkable: Jews have bodies, and these bodies are subject to the same ravages of age, disease, and abuse as any others. Jews have bodies; but is there a Jewish body? Are there identifiable physiological traits that mark the Jew from the non-Jew? Do Jews suffer, qua Jews, from particular diseases to a greater extent than others? Are they immune to certain disorders? Is the Jewish body different, and if so, how and why?

Without doubt, there is a long and fascinating history of talking about the Jewish body. Both Jews and Christians, into the 20th century, assumed that Jewishness could in part be defined or identified through particular anatomical characteristics, as well as susceptibility to or relative immunity from certain diseases. But this social construction of the Jewish body — achieved through imagination and language — is one thing; the ontological reality of the Jewish body is quite another.

Few of us today, we might assume, would insist that the Jewish body exists in this sense. However, this is not the case. In his just published work, *The Jewish Body*, for instance, Melvin Konner both interrogates the notion of a Jewish body and embraces it. In his preface he states that his goal is "not only to trace the Jewish body through its radical, almost magical transformations, but to try to understand how Jewish bodies and Jewish thoughts about them have shaped the Jewish mind and the Jewish contribution to civilization. Finally, very tenta-

tively and carefully, we will consider how centuries of relative bodily isolation, inspired for better or worse by ideas about the body, may have shaped Jewish genes." It certainly seems that Konner accepts not only that there exists a historical discourse about the Jewish body, but that such a thing as the Jewish body — including Jewish genes — exists.

Konner's work reflects a much broader interest in the body as an object of academic inquiry and in the Jewish body more particularly. More than a decade ago, Naomi Seidman noted the publication of five recent works on Jews, sexuality, and the body, and asked: "What accounts for this convergence of critical attention on Jewish sex and the Jewish body?" Seidman offered a number of reasons, chief among them were intellectual and cultural trends in academia in general. Over the past four decades or so academia has become increasingly engaged with "body studies"; Jewish Studies was bound to move with this trend. But Seidman noted that the turn toward the Jewish body is also understood within a more circumscribed Jewish intellectual context, as "another blow to whatever remains of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*' agenda . . . of describing Judaism primarily through its intellectual, ethical, or spiritual dimensions." The Jews were not just the people of the book, but also the people of the body, as one well-known collection of essays on the topic announced. If an older scholarship had made the carnal invisible, a new Jewish scholarship would re-embody the Jews and Judaism.

Mitchell B. Hart is associate professor of history at the University of Florida. He is the author of *The Healthy Jew: The Symbiosis of Judaism and Modern Medicine* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford University Press, 2000). He is also the editor of the forthcoming volume *Jewish Blood: Metaphor and Reality in Jewish History, Religion, and Culture* (Routledge, 2009).

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Jews, and not just academics, appear to harbor a greater sympathy and even enthusiasm these days for the notion of a distinct Jewish body. Science, and more particularly the science of genetics, continues to remind us that there are diseases that seem to cluster around certain groups of Jews (though it is important to note that these purported “Jewish diseases” such as Tay-Sachs can also affect non-Jews). In addition, DNA has been employed to “establish” a biohistorical relationship between the

thority of science that is speaking, and that can hold an extraordinary sway. But the notion of the Jewish body is also powerful and attractive because it speaks to the ongoing search to address the ever-elusive question: “what are the Jews?” — a religion, ethnicity, nation, race, some combination of some or all of these? An answer that includes biology no longer appears, at least for many, to be anathema. In Konner’s words, “The Jewish genes, whatever they are, are not just part of the Jewish body, they are its wellspring.” (page 229)

The notion of a Jewish body is powerful because it speaks to the ongoing search to address the ever-elusive question: “what are the Jews?” — a religion, ethnicity, nation, race, some combination of some or all of these? An answer that includes biology no longer appears, at least for many, to be anathema.

ancient *kohanim* and the Levites — the priestly caste of the Temple — and today’s Cohens and Levis. Thus, research that just a few decades ago would still have made almost all Jews very nervous — research that locates Jewish identity at the biological as well as religious or cultural levels — is increasingly embraced. Such nervousness might be expected because the assertion of the reality of a bio-racial “Jewish body” played such a central role in European antisemitism, and especially Nazi Germany’s propaganda about the Jew, and then in the Holocaust. Hence, the desire on the part of some Jews to embrace a biological or naturalized Jewish body is worth noting.

To be sure, when genetics or biology speaks in terms that suggest a Jewish body, it is the au-

Perhaps this is a positive development. Perhaps it points to such a firmly held sense of Jewish collective security and wellbeing, at least in North America, that older fears about voicing such racist images and ideas about the Jewish body have dissipated. But we still ought to query the choice of a biological-racial notion of Jewish identity (even as we grant what genetics has to tell us about “Jewish diseases” and even as geneticists might suggest we really have no choice in how we think about identities). What does it mean to embrace the reality of a “Jewish body” and “Jewish genes,” to say to ourselves and to the world: this is the story we wish to tell about who we are at this time in history? In other words, even if we acknowledge that in some respects a difference exists, why elect to make such difference meaningful?

Centuries ago, Shakespeare had Shylock offer the world one of the most eloquent pleas for the fundamental sameness of Jewish and non-Jewish bodies and minds. His enemies insisted on the Jews’ essential difference. Why would we choose Antonio over Shylock? 



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Body Fluids: Life and Death

ANAT LITWIN

The chemical structure of water, H₂O, and its elements (hydrogen and oxygen) have great importance as life-giving properties that nurture our systems. As babies our body mass includes approximately 75–80 percent water, which decreases to 50 percent as we grow older. This means that at any given moment in our life we are at least half liquid. Beyond the liquids contained in the body's cells, the body also produces liquids that are excreted or secreted such as amniotic fluid surrounding a fetus, breast milk, mucus, pus, saliva, semen, serum, sweat, tears, urine, and blood.

This list of body fluids is often associated with both emotional and symbolic attributes, especially when traced out of the body's territory. Perhaps they mark a transgression that unfolds on two frontiers: that which challenges the borders of the body — internal versus external — and that, on a larger scale, which marks the transgression between vitality and decay, life and death, highlighting the ephemeral state of our being.

Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva refers to visceral repulsion of certain body fluids as “abject”; that is, we react negatively to the threatened breakdown in meaning represented by specific body excrements, caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object or between self and m/other. Our reaction to such abject material recharges what is essentially a pre-lingual response: “A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death...There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, page 3)

Two fundamental ways to purify the abject are through religion/ritual or art. While religion tends to purify the abject by setting clear boundaries between life and death, and provides rituals that define what is pure and impure accordingly, contemporary art does quite the opposite: It reclaims the abject through transgression and the blurring of boundaries.

In Jewish culture, body fluids carry a distinct role of differentiating life from death. Judaism, therefore, offers precise rituals of purification. The priests regarded only certain bodily fluids as defiling: semen, menstrual blood, and discharges from genital disease. Other fluids, such as bleeding from an ordinary flesh

wound, urine, feces, saliva, or mucus, did not defile. Semen and menstrual blood are largely associated with new life and, hence, have enormous power vis-à-vis the sacredness of life. Loss of these liquids indicates a potential for life unfulfilled; they allude to death and require a state of “mourning.” The biblical regulations of the priestly codes specify that a man who has experienced an emission of semen becomes ritually impure until evening falls and the man washes himself in water. While menstruating, a woman is considered impure and intimate relations are forbidden. This forbidden time continues until the bleeding stops. After that, she must wait an additional seven days during which not only are sexual relations forbidden, but also all intimate acts, such as hugging, kissing, and touching. At the conclusion of this period, the woman immerses in the *mikvah*.

Religion and contemporary art share a quest for transcendence as a way to overcome the mental gaps in meaning. In this quest, the body liquids contained in the body vessel gain a significant role by marking a transformation between life and death, dissolving borders of self.

A fundamental aspect of defying death, artistically, uses creation as a mechanism to overcome the ephemeral nature of human existence, leaving a permanent cultural reminder. However beyond this existential quest, contemporary art is specifically concerned with tracing that which is considered defiled, dishonored, discarded and bringing it into view as an act of reclaiming and re-owning — that is, expanding the meaning of being human through challenging the boundaries of life. In this exploration not only does the body become prominent subject matter, but so do the body's residue, discharge, and liquids.

Marcel Duchamp's ready-made “Fountain” is a crucial example of this approach; “Fountain,” a 1917 work, became a foundation for modern and contemporary art discourse because it introduced the notion of the *readymade*. Duchamp used an already existing object — in this case a simple porcelain urinal — and placed it in the gallery as art object. The piece became well known, perhaps, because it focused on the most common

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excretion in a visceral way. "Fountain" reclaimed something both produced by the body and yet dismissed in western culture; the sewage system as a marker of the deterioration of the body. Duchamp takes this metaphor one step further and animates the urinal; rather than seeing it as a passive object, he explores it as a "fountain," an object spewing fluids, and thus transgressing the borders of the body and how the body relates to

the object. In this puzzling artistic statement the ephemeral aspect of the body is captured.

Perhaps religion and contemporary art share a quest for transcendence as a way to overcome these breakdowns, the mental gaps in meaning. In this quest, the body liquids contained in the body vessel gain a significant role by marking a transformation between life and death, dissolving the borders of self.

My Second Life Body

CHAVA WEISSLER

In December of 2008, I received an e-mail invitation to a Hanukkah party. "We will dance to Israeli music in our fanciest clothes and light the first Hanukkah candles on the grid!!!! Don't forget to DRESS UP!!!" A reminder appeared in my in-box two days later, specifying "DRESS UP, come ready to dance to Israeli music in your favorite Formal Clothes (Beachwear works too....)." The event to which I was invited was not a formal dance on a beach in Florida or the Caribbean, but a party in the virtual world Second Life. And I knew I would never be able to attend. My Second Life avatar, Taybe Abramovic, didn't have any formal clothes, let alone beachwear. It seems that the clothes make the person, even in the virtual world.

Despite the Hanukkah invitation, Second Life (SL) is not solely or even primarily a Jewish place. Created by Linden Labs in 2003, SL is usually described by its users (known as "residents") as an alternate or virtual graphical reality, contrasted with "Real Life" (RL). The purpose of participation is to create a second, on-line life, lived by one's "avatar," a visual representation of the self. Jews have created a virtual Jewish community in the Second Life neighborhood known as TMA ("Tragically Misunderstood Artists"), where "Javatars" (Jewish avatars) from around the world regularly gather for Shabbat candle-lighting, Jewish study, Purim parties, and graphical Sukkah-building competitions. I've been a resident of Second Life since September of 2007. I mostly hang out in the synagogue in TMA as part of a study of Jewish life in Second Life. Like most participants in SL, I identify with my avatar, and speak of this virtual representation of myself in the first person.

Virtual worlds, according to the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, provide contexts for "self-fashioning." As Boellstorff notes, "The idea of

an avatar usually implies an embodiment that is intentionally crafted" The way a person chooses to shape his or her avatar is the most important mode of self-presentation in SL, and residents typically spend much time and money working on body details, animations, and wardrobe items. While one might think that this gives the resident great freedom to create any sort of appearance (and indeed, one can be a dragon or a butterfly if one so desires), those who choose to take human form usually conform to "Real Life" standards of beauty. In myriad ways, the SL platform reinforces familiar Euro-American gender norms.

Paradoxically, the creation of a *virtual* self entails *embodiment*: When I first became a resident of SL, I had to choose a body and details of appearance for my avatar. My goal was to make my avatar look as much like my real-life self as possible: a chubby, middle-aged Jewish woman without much of a sense of fashion. This was difficult, because the female templates available in fall 2007 all had the general shape of Barbie dolls, one sexier than the next, except for the two "furry" (animal) alternatives. I chose "girl-next-door" as the least provocative form but when I used the "appearance menu" to try for a fuller body, my avatar was given grotesquely exaggerated buttocks and bosom, so I had to settle for a more slender embodiment. The default clothing had a bare midriff, and it took me weeks to figure out how to cover my belly button. Further, I was in SL for research purposes rather than self-expression, and thus, unlike most residents, I didn't want to invest a lot of time, effort, or money into the form of my avatar.

My choices, it turned out, were radically transgressive. Because appearance is easily altered in SL, it is assumed that lack of attention to beauty and costume reflects lack of experience

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"Taybe Abramovic
at a Wedding"

or cash, and if deliberate, should be nipped in the bud. The fashion police — always other female avatars — can swoop down at any moment. At a Shabbat candle-lighting, one woman (female avatar) offered me a pair of sparkly diamond earrings because "we like women to look good in Second Life." (I took the earrings and put them on.) At a study session about the laws of Rosh Hashanah led by a Hasidic rabbi, another woman, in formal dress, spent the entire time transferring wardrobe items, shoes, and skin and hair textures from her inventory to mine.

Are there any distinctively Jewish dilemmas of embodiment on SL? Probably not for me, but traditional Orthodox Jews have to decide about *tsniut*, and whether they wish to have an obviously Orthodox avatar. One Orthodox woman told me that her avatar allows her to dress in scanty clothes, go dancing with men in SL's many clubs and parties, and hug and kiss her SL boyfriend, all things she could never do in RL. Hasidic men can create avatars wearing full Hasidic garb — black hat, long black coat, *tsit-sit*, and beard and *peot* — or not. One Hasidic man found that his traditional garb caused people to assume, incorrectly, that he was politically conservative and homophobic. So he chose a "furry" avatar (a cute squirrel); now people must speak with him to find out who he is and what he believes, and he is able to converse with and befriend people from much more varied backgrounds than those who inhabit his RL

Orthodox community.

For Hasidic and traditional Orthodox Jews, SL offers a greater range of possible embodiments than they can comfortably inhabit in RL. For the rest of us, especially women, the pressures to conform to well-known standards of appearance seem all too familiar.



"Taybe Abramovic"

Jesse Zaritt
rehearsal photo



Our rabbis have taught: A man should always be gentle as the reed and never unyielding as the cedar. Once Rabbi Eleazar, son of R. Simeon, was coming from the house of his teacher and he was elated because he had studied much Torah. He chanced to meet an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him: "Peace be upon you, sir." He did not return the salutation but said instead, "Raca, [Empty one], good for nothing, how ugly you are! Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you?" The man replied: "I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, 'How ugly is the vessel that you have made...'" Soon after this encounter, R. Eleazar entered the *beit hamidrash* and expounded thus: "A man should always be gentle as the reed and let him never be unyielding as the cedar." And for this reason the reed merited that it should be made a pen for the writing of the law, phylacteries, and *mezuzot*. (BT Ta'anit 20)

"The ugly man" — who remains nameless throughout the story — refers to himself as a vessel, and to God as a "craftsman," placing the encounter in the context of creation, which is the essence of art. The relativity of beauty and ugliness is critical for an artist — even more so when artists express themselves through their own bodies. Three artists-in-residence of LABA — Jesse Zaritt, David Tirosh, and Manju Shandler — share visual glimpses here into their conversations about beauty and ugliness and the body.

—Basmat Hazan Arnoff
(additional comments by the artists appear on shma.com)

work can be seen at ManjuShandler.com. ● David Tirosh, a multimedia artist, performer, and artistic coordinator, was the cofounder of WAX, an inspiring environment for artists in all media. David is director of



Manju Shandler

The Expulsion, Acts 1, 2, & 3

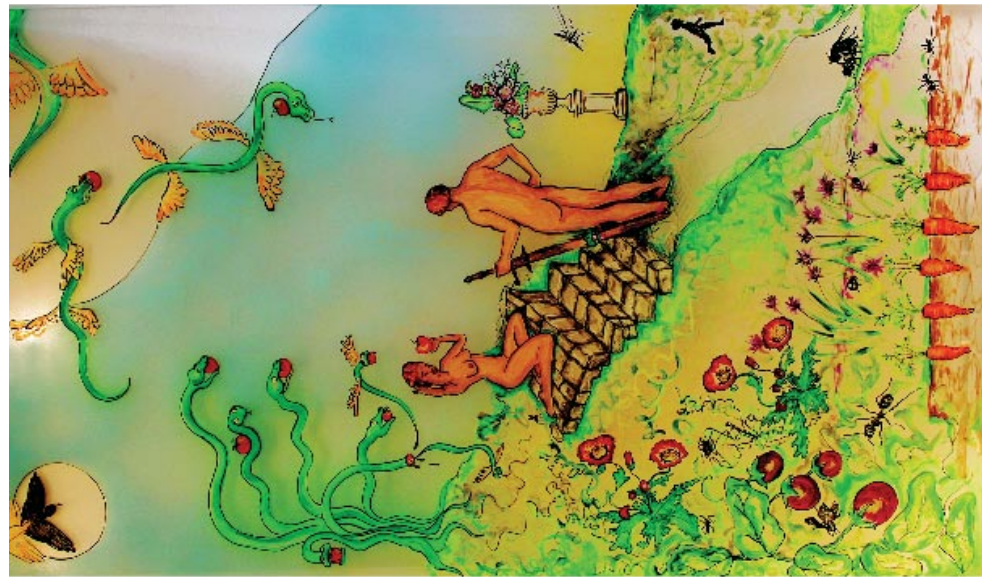
mixed media on plexiglass 82½" x 48"



David Tirosh

Ugliness

A still image from an interactive multimedia installation titled "No-body's business," where the room responds to the audience with live video and audio sensors.



the program year (2008–2009). ● Manju Shandler, a visual storyteller, uses a variety of media to engage viewers in both theatrical and gallery contexts. She is currently designing a showing of "Cinderella and the

Prince Who Slays the Magic Dragon," a puppet/ballet/orchestra performance to be performed at Avery Fisher Hall. Her credits include "The Lion King" on Broadway, an Emmy nomination for the Disney Channel's "The Book of Pooh," and work on Sesame Street. Her

Listening to My Body

RAHEL WASSERFALL

When I was in my forties and dreamed about my aging self, I anticipated my older self as “me” with similar physical abilities — just more experience and a bit less strength. What an illusion! As I hit my fifties, my body began to “act out” (a cancer scare, pains in my hip joint, my shoulder) and I was jolted into wondering how I’d relate to my body as its changes moved beyond my control.

I don’t want to preclude deeply experiencing the unknown, or constrain my experience of the inevitability of aging.

Our cultural message suggests that if only we tried harder — eating and exercising properly — we would be able to face our demise with grace and equanimity. Though that might work well for some of us some of the time, trying harder to avoid the ramifications of aging inevitably fails. Seeing the relationship with our bodies as a fight also robs us of an opportunity to learn to listen to our bodies as they age — a critical challenge to our Western cultural construct. We’ve had the luxury of having some control over our bodies — deciding when to have or not have our babies — but as we approach aging our bodies refuse our dictates.

Now in my fifties, I have always inhabited a body that is strange, changing, and full of secrets; it could never be taken for granted.

Having lost my mother in my early teens, I knew that to understand myself I needed to understand other women — older Jewish women who might offer some learned wisdom. As a cultural anthropologist, I was curious about how women experienced their changing bodies. What did it mean to live in a woman’s body, in a culture where roles and norms circumscribe women to motherhood?

As an anthropologist, I studied Moroccan Jewish women immigrants to Israel. For ten years I listened to their stories, learning that, between women, their bodies were an open book. Among themselves, they would speak about anything connected to the body. They were not shy about disclosing their choices as we sipped tea, ate delicious Moroccan delicacies, shared laughter, sadness, and companionship. From these old women, I learned that while menstruation makes a woman out of a girl, mikvah makes a Jewish woman out of a woman. That was the first time that I, a young secular Ashkenazi woman, encountered the mikvah as anything other than an old rite imposed on brides by the Israeli rabbinate. I learned about how the minutia of the laws of *niddah* and mikvah connected a woman to her body, to her sexuality, to the inevitability of change.

Unfortunately, I never thought to ask my “informants” about menopause — when the rhythm of their bodies changed and their years of fertility, of pregnancy, of menstruation, of al-

Rahel Wasserfall, PhD, is director of evaluation and liaison to schools for Hebrew at the Center. She is editor of *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (UPNE 1999). She has been trained as an Iyengar yoga instructor.



LABA:

The faculty and artists of LABA are delighted to contribute to this special issue of *Sh'ma* exploring Jewish bodies.

Since September 2008 LABA has explored the nexus of traditional Jewish text and contemporary culture along with the community and staff of the 14th Street Y of The Educational Alliance.

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seeks to transform the Jewish cultural landscape by placing artists at the center of communal institutions as leaders, innovators, role models, and sources of inspiration.




ternating between being sexually alive or cloistered, ended. Nor did I ask about how they approached the inevitable point where there are no recipes and we find ourselves in the unknown.

I don't want to preclude deeply experiencing the unknown, or constrain my experience of the inevitability of aging. Still an anthropologist, I am aware of the power of culture on how I perceive my aging body. Luckily, fifteen years ago I started to practice yoga, and now my primary connection with my body is through that practice, which awakens each body part and forces me to listen to my body's subtle (or not) messages. With each repetition I extend my intelligence to all (or most) parts of my body and feel myself in all the places that have been silent for so long. Though pain or pleasure had awakened me to some of these hidden places, now they are alive for what they are, "me" — beyond the cultural interpretation of my feelings. Through practice, I feel my body, my self

in new ways, more at ease in the world. The messages that my aging body sends my way — hot flashes, upsets, anger — are addressed through the craft of listening rather than denial or obfuscation. Careful listening to the intelligence of my body, rather than the dictates of a culture that denies age, allows me to respond without the "cultural fight" and to quiet my body and mind. While I still worry about loss — losing my mind or an ability to connect with people I love — the practice of yoga helps restore the grace and artful flowing with which I hope to confront my aging.

Such active listening might help me enter the unknown stages of aging — hopefully without fear and with the willingness to say, "I am here." The power of our embodied selves as cultural constructs can't supersede the notion that our bodies are more than repositories of contemporary culture. In the meantime I am also reaping the fruits of good health and laughter. ●

A Makeover for Ratner?

TONY MICHELS

"Jewish Guys Get an Image Makeover" was the headline of a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* announcing a new kind of Jewish male character in film and television. Displaying none of the physical and psychological markers associated with established Jewish male stereotypes, these gun-toting, tough Jews are solid and forceful — policemen, FBI detectives, anti-Nazi partisans, Mossad agents.

In fact, the Jewish tough guy is not altogether new to the screen. Viewers have, over the decades, seen many Jewish gangsters, hoods, and no-nonsense, streetwise types. We've seen them in *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), *Casino* (1995), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), *Joshua Then and Now* (1985), *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), *The Godfather* (1972), *The Sopranos* (1999–2006), and many more movies and television shows. True, few past Jewish tough guys actually displayed martial prowess; fewer were physically intimidating, never mind sexy. Still, notable exceptions are easy enough to find. Paul Newman's Ari Ben Canaan — the muscular, handsome, self-controlled yet passionate Hagannah leader — of the blockbuster film *Exodus* (1960) provides the most obvious example. In a different vein, the detective series *Starsky and Hutch* (1975–1979) gave us perhaps the first young,

cool Jewish cop on television. In World War II films of the 1940s, more than one Cohen was given a place in the foxholes, not commanding troops, to be sure, but contributing to the war effort nonetheless. The current Hollywood trend has precedents.

Although the tough Jew has been around for a long time, it has never displaced the predominant stereotype of the skinny, brainy, neurotic Jew. Does the "Jewish male makeover" signal a cultural shift, as the *Los Angeles Times* suggests? If so, what does this makeover mean? While it might reflect a new willingness to depict Jews in more multidimensional ways, which is a good thing, what are we to make of the weak, pale, meek, nervous Jew — the *nebbish* — who the well-built, tough Jew is meant to replace? Is he to be cast aside? And at what cost?

Before the *nebbish* is confined to the historical dustbin, it's worth giving the character a second look. According to the stereotype, the *nebbish* is always physically unimpressive and looks Jewish — a prominent nose and dark curly hair. The *nebbish* is usually depicted as sensitive, kind, brainy, if naïve, and somewhat inept. He (it's usually a "he") is the one who gets his heart broken and then forgives the girl who broke it. That's more or less the stereotype.

Some *nebbishes* are more complicated,

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though, and maybe we should think of them as something else altogether.

Remember Jeff Spicoli in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), one of the best and most popular teen movies of the 1980s? He was the perpetually stoned, blond surfer played by Sean Penn — a caricature, generally hilarious to audiences, but ridiculous in the eyes of actual surfers. A better-drawn character was Mark Ratner, the slight, sensitive sidekick to the fast-talking, cocky Mike Damone, an after-school ticket scalper. Ratner's Jewishness never needs to be mentioned; his surname, hair color, timidity, and physiognomy render him instantly recognizable to anybody familiar with the signs. When Ratner asks Damone for romantic advice, Damone provides the secret to scoring with chicks — indifference. "Whether she comes, stays, lays, or prays, whatever happens your toes are still tappin'." Ratner doesn't quite know what to do with that pearl, but manages to get a date with a pretty girl, Stacey, nonetheless. Of course, Ratner plays it anything but cool on his date. He picks Stacey up in his mother's station wagon, takes her to a Bavarian hofbrau where he sits dwarfed within a large wooden booth, and is forced to beg Damone over the phone to retrieve his wallet. After he takes Stacey home, Ratner flees in a panic, so scared is he by the prospect of kissing her. No second date follows.

Later in the movie, Damone gets Stacey pregnant, and then stands her up when he is supposed to take her to the abortion clinic. Having learned what happened, Ratner, standing in a towel in the locker room, looking anything but threatening, confronts Damone. A gym teacher saves Ratner from a beating.

Ratner is not actually a *nebbish*. He is nice, but not cowardly or hapless. He stands up for himself and Stacey when necessary. In the end, Damone apologizes to Ratner and, better yet, Stacey gives Ratner a second chance. Ratner, in other words, proves to be a *mentsh*, a *mentsh* who wins, and his *mentshlekhkeyt* serves as modest social criticism. One can be nice, even in the formidable social hierarchy of high school, without being pushed around.

But now, it seems, Hollywood wants to give Ratner an "image makeover." After making too much of the *nebbish*, the film industry is responding with the Jewish warrior, and the *mentsh* is likely to suffer, unless Hollywood finds someone who demonstrates both characteristics. Many American Jews, men anyway, seem to welcome this new image, which is to say they want to be seen as less "Jewish" in ways that have cachet — part of an old story of cultural assimilation. But if American Jews genuinely want to feel at home in America, they should be able to feel at ease with Ratner. ●

The Theatrical Body: A Jewish Drama

BASMAT HAZAN ARNOFF

*R*abbi Zusya of Hanipoli uttered right before death, "In the world to come they won't ask me, 'Why weren't you Moses our prophet' but rather, 'Why weren't you Zusya.'"

This short and often quoted Hasidic story describes the opposite to theatrical reality. And, more pointedly, it exemplifies the contradiction between Judaism and theater. This is how scholar and director Michal Govrin describes it:

[N]on-permanence is perhaps the most faithful expression of Jewish sacred theatre. This theatre is not performed before an audience, but before the Divine Spectator, who is always before the Jew. Its goal is not to reconstruct the many acts of mythological drama, not to portray convincingly a character from the past, but to work diligently as individual and group in this very present moment through the rit-

ual, in order to sustain the intimate, real relation between the individual, the community, and the Creator. ("Jewish Sacred Theatre: Its Components and Its Means" *Conservative Judaism* 36:3)

We can talk about an audience (God) and an actor (the Jew), but the very essence of the ritual, the "performed" act, is almost "anti-theater." Theater is not only the art of imitation or mimicry; something real happens in every performance. The actor both "plays a character," and embodies that part with his or her own real body.

As a theater teacher in a Modern Orthodox high school for girls in Jerusalem some years ago, I faced a problem that has branded much of my work as a theater director since. Staging a production was a requirement of the grade twelve studies. As their teacher and as a person who believes deeply in the power of theater, my

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challenge was to find plays that would be both meaningful creatively and appropriate within the norms of the community. We had adapted significant pieces like S. Y. Agnon's *A Simple Story*, Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav's *The Seven Beggars*, and Yair Lipshitz's adaptation of *The Book of Esther*, entitled *Not of the King Alone*. Each one of these works provided the necessary elements for crafting a great script; each also posed a challenge because they included male parts, and the cast consisted only of young women.

Leaning on historic theatrical traditions of single-gender casts, I started to investigate options for dramatic reversal. My favorite form for reversal has always been drag, which offers exaggerated theatricality through charade. The essence of drag is the grotesque depiction of the body. Witnessing this gap between the gender/body of the actor and gender/body of the character creates a breathlessness — something like watching the tightrope walker in the circus: Will the performer make it or not?

One of the seminal plays in the history of Jewish theater (and my personal favorite) is *The Dybbuk*. Completed in 1914 by S. Ansky, it relates the story of a young bride, Leah, who is possessed on the eve of her wedding by a dybbuk — a malicious occupying spirit believed to be the dislocated soul of a dead person. Ansky's story revolves around a pair of ill-fated lovers — penniless Chanan, a devout student of Jewish mysticism, and Leah, the young woman he adores and is destined to marry. When Leah's greedy father breaks the marriage contract to marry off Leah to a richer man, Chanan dies instantly; his soul, however, lives on as a dybbuk in Leah's body. A rabbi, aided by rabbinical judges, finally succeeds in exorcising the dybbuk, using incantations and rituals followed by blasts of a shofar. Meanwhile, Leah must confront a choice between marriage to a man for whom she feels nothing or an unworldly union with her dead lover's spirit.

The stage performance of *The Dybbuk* tells the story of the male and female grafted together into one body, which makes a very complex syntax of physical gestures; it becomes a feminine body being controlled from the inside by the spirit of her male love. The drama becomes not only the external drama of the play but the physical drama of the body.

I'm currently collaborating on *Binding*, a dance theater piece with Jesse Zaritt. One section of the performance confronts the ritual of *sotah*, the testing of an adulteress woman. In this ritual a woman suspected of committing

adultery is brought to the Temple and is made to drink bitter water in which the name of the Divine is dissolved. After she drinks, a grand drama of the body begins: if she is "guilty," she experiences a brutal change of her body. Some say that this leads to death. If she is innocent she conceives seed. What a wild drama of the Jewish body! In *Binding*, a pairing between a woman and the name (or spirit) of God is performed by a male dancer, with a masked face, and naked upper body. An ancient ritual earns a whole new meaning.

Facing the challenge of working in single-gender casts years ago created for me an opportunity to examine and challenge the traditional templates in which I saw male and female and to create alternatives that might, through a narrow reality, create a wider view of the Jewish body. Combinations of male and female in the same entity allow the simple and extreme drama of the body itself to open up the mind in new, surprising, and often conflicting ways. 

Arnold Jacob Wolf z"l

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf died on December 23, 2008, in Chicago, the city of his birth (1924), and area in which he had served as a rabbi for more than four decades. In 1957 Wolf helped found Congregation Solel in Highland Park, Ill, an upscale suburb of Chicago. Lay led, socially active, and politically left-leaning, the congregation (and its rabbi) was a precursor to the turbulent 1960s and havurah movement. Among those who spoke in the congregation were Rev. Martin Luther King and the Chicago Seven. After a stint as the Hillel director and a Jewish chaplain at Yale, Wolf returned to Chicago where he served as the rabbi of KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation in Chicago's Hyde Park and the University of Chicago community. Barack Obama was his neighbor and friend. He was Obama's "rabbi."

Feisty, intense, never reticent to argue or provoke, Wolf brought his courage to *Sh'ma* — from its inception until his death — where he served as a Contributing Editor. His voice will be missed; the Jewish people may be more tranquil but certainly less challenged and less wise in his absence. — Michael Berenbaum

To read a selection of Wolf's *Sh'ma* essays, visit shma.com.

Violent Strokes: Waltz with Bashir, Animation, and Memory

JONATHAN ELAN LANG

Art often takes as its subject matter that which is unspeakable. To draw is the psyche's way of purging what cannot be communicated through language. The horrors of war have long been subject matter rife for graphic expression. To avoid drowning in a reality that is not fully comprehensible, the artist clings to his or her brush as an oar to navigate the seemingly fantastic. Tracing a lineage of the 20th century's most famous graphic depictions of war's atrocity likely begins with Picasso's *Guernica*, a singular hallucinatory response that strives for a purely emotional expression as opposed to an objective reproduction of reality. Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* is the latest entry into an ever-expanding canon of war-tinted memoir seen and experienced through animation.

The animated war-memoir (recently seen in *Persepolis*) might be compared to a child's drawing when recovering from trauma. The psychiatrist goads the patient into reproducing the unutterable, the crayon serving as a pathway to memory. Animation allows for even greater subjectivity — the ability for the patient/filmmaker to express impossible flights from brutal reality.

Waltz With Bashir is about Ari Folman's quest to recover his memory of the horrors of the 1982 Lebanon War. The filmmaker and his Israeli army comrades rise from the sea like unfeeling zombies from the grave and creep toward the beachfront to examine a burnt-out building's ghostly shell. This singular, dream-like image — men emerging naked from the sea — serves, obsessively, to propel his journey.

The film replicates the victim's disassocia-

tion from reality by forcing the viewer to live in an inverted world. And here, the impossible is created through magnificent brushstrokes, haunted blues, and gruesome reds. We are dragged into unpleasant imagination, a reality that is so painful that it must be fantasy; yet we know it is not. There is beauty in this horror and it keeps the viewer transfixed. We must keep our eyes open.

The soldier can tell a body is alive through the slightest movement. The film uses the animated body as the purest expression of life. War is confinement. The soldier untouched by death engages in kinetic freedom. The body pirouettes past bullets, swims beneath searchlights; through this fully animated sensuousness we absorb the horrible contrast of a final stillness.

Memory permits the body to revisit places that reality cannot venture. Violence bestowed upon a constructed (animated) body seems completely false. Humor in cartoons is predicated on bodily harm: Tom hits Jerry with a mallet; Wily E. Coyote blows up. Yet, the characters return to the frame unharmed. Here we are witnessing a cartoon marred with finality; there is no second coming from the deadly hiss of a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG), except through memory.

Reenactment is an imperfect art, and so it goes that "authenticity" is often bestowed with the greatest honors. To surrender one's ability to recreate trauma in a "realistic" manner is to confess one's limitations as a human being. Perhaps such naked vulnerability is the straightest line on the path to healing. *Waltz with Bashir* is not merely a technical triumph but, much like the war it revisits, a film not to be forgotten. 

Jonathan Elan Lang, born in Liege, Belgium, and raised in Florida, is a screenwriter, novelist, and critic. He received an MA in film studies from the University of Amsterdam, and has recently co-created a graphic novel about werewolves, *The Feeding Ground*. He is a charter member in the LABA program.

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Yehudah Mirsky, Fellow at the The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute

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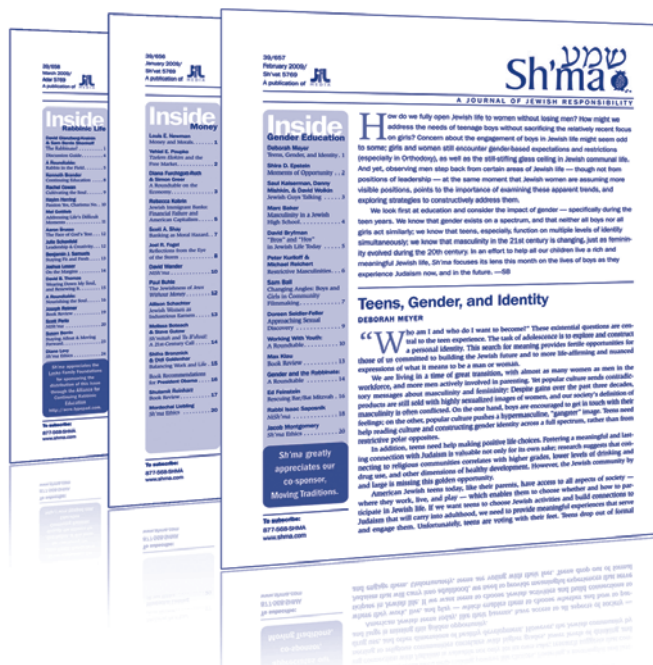
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שמע
Sh'ma

This year our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of homelessness. Each month an esteemed guest columnist wrestles with what Jewish texts and our interpretive tradition teach us about the parameters, and limits, of Jewish responsibility to those without shelter. The column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series of columns with responses, as well as a series of paintings by artist Pat Berger on the homeless of Los Angeles.

Shana Novick, a social worker and an attorney by training, has served as the executive director of the Hebrew Free Loan Society, New York, since September, 1995.

Free Loans and Housing

SHANA NOVICK

The highest degree of *tzedakah*, most famously articulated by Maimonides, is to help someone achieve self-sufficiency by means of a gift, an interest-free loan, or a partnership. Of these, only loans preserve the dignity of the recipient while also offering the possibility of enormous philanthropic leverage. That is why Central and Eastern European Jewish communities organized the so-called *Gemilus Chesed*, or free loan society, which our forebears then transplanted to America.

New York's Hebrew Free Loan Society is a UJA-Federation of New York affiliate agency founded in 1892. Adapting our time-honored tool to the needs of today's economically vulnerable, the Society's programs now include retraining and microenterprise loans for Russian-speaking immigrants and a microenterprise program for the Hasidic community, whose economic options are constrained by limited secular education.

The shortage of decent affordable housing is one of the most pressing needs of low-income families across the country. For two decades, the federal government has dramatically cut key programs designed to produce, maintain, and subsidize housing to serve poor families.

HUD's Section 202 Supportive Housing Program for the Elderly is this nation's principal housing program serving older adults. In the late 1970s Congress provided funding for the development nationwide of over 21,000 Section 202 units annually; Congress' most recent 2008 appropriation for the program will fund 3,400 units. There are an estimated 200,000 older adults on waiting lists for Section 202 housing units in New York alone. The other major federal program used by the low-income elderly is

the Section 8 voucher program. Under the voucher program, individuals with a voucher find a private sector apartment and pay a portion of the rent. Only 25 percent of people nationwide who qualify for Section 8 vouchers actually get them. As with Section 202, waiting lists are enormous and years long.

Elderly immigrants from the Former Soviet Union arriving in the U.S. after retirement are almost uniformly poor. While many of them were professionals — doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers — their only current source of income is SSI (which pays a maximum of \$750 a month) supplemented by food stamps and Medicaid. Thus, accessing Section 202 housing or a Section 8 voucher, both of which limit what beneficiaries pay for housing to about 30 percent of cash income, is their only hope for economic independence.

The Society's Immigrant Basic Needs loans make it possible for modest numbers of elderly immigrants on the Section 8 waiting list who are lucky enough to be offered a voucher to take advantage of the program. To use a Section 8 voucher, recipients invariably must relocate to a new apartment. Our loans of up to \$5,000 pay for moving expenses, a modicum of new furniture, first month's security and other costs related to such a move. Thus, immigrant retirees supported by or living with their adult children can escape the humiliation of financial dependency.

In today's economic crisis, our Immigrant Basic Needs loans also provide critical housing assistance to nonelderly immigrant families who had achieved economic stability. While not a panacea and certainly not a solution for families

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