

# LEHRHAUS

OVER  
SHABBOS  
VAERA  
5778

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THIS WEEK'S "LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS" IS SPONSORED BY  
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# HOKHMAT NASHIM

AYELET WENGER

There was no Talmud class beyond the beginner's level in my high school.  
Actually, there was one.  
It was not for girls.

I learned with a *havruta* in the high school hallway. One day, my *havruta* was wrong. She did not know that she was wrong. I told her. She objected. I explained. She restated her view. I said, look at Rashi. She said, look at the Mishnah. I insisted. She persisted. It occurred to me that I might be wrong. I did not like this. I raised my voice. She got excited. I rephrased my point and it did not make sense anymore, something clicked, we were so close, understanding glimmered, and then a Rebbe walked out of the nearest classroom.

"Will you girls please keep it down? We're learning in here."  
We looked up, confused, frustrated.  
"We wouldn't disturb you," I said to him, "if we had a room of our own."

A science teacher hurtled out of the laboratory next door, brimming with indignation and the fragrance of formaldehyde-soaked frogs. He announced that he had never heard such contempt in his life, that he never wanted to hear me disrespect a Rebbe like that again, that he was disappointed in me. The Rebbe retreated, closing the classroom door on his rows of gleeful boyish faces, and I did not get the chance to tell anyone that I did not want to be disrespectful.

I just wanted somewhere to learn.

I told my Stern College interviewers that my favorite historical figure was Marshal Joseph Joffre (I liked the moustache), my role model was my big sister no maybe my math teacher no wait my pet beta fish (who just died) (but it wasn't my fault) (mostly), my learning moment was that time I handed my *hanikhim* an entire jar of marshmallow fluff, probably should have thought that one through a bit more ... I told them that I wanted to devote my life to *hinukh*. I wanted to teach Torah.

One interviewer leaned across the table and informed me that Yeshiva University is the Harvard of Torah study. I did not know what that meant but I nodded. One is supposed to nod at one's interviewers. One is not supposed to mention that hour in my principal's office when I asked the Yeshiva University Dean of Admissions the same question in every possible way: *will you teach*

*me like you teach your men?* He had every possible evasion, every possible way of not saying the answer that we both already knew before we walked into the room.

If there is a Harvard of Torah study, it is the college that offers [hours upon hours of \*beit midrash\* study and a dazzling array of Talmud shiurim](#), a college in which the present and future *Rabbanim* and *Poskim* of American Modern Orthodoxy question and argue and learn together, a college to which women need not apply.

My *shanah aleph havruta* graduated from Stern and then there was nothing for her. Once we dreamt up an imaginary school together. A school for driven women, women who would be in the *beit midrash* when the world goes to sleep and when the world wakes up and when the world ends. We would have one of those *Ramim*, the kind our friends have in the Gush, the kind who show up at the women's schools for an hour or two of community service teaching each week before scurrying back to their boys, the kind whose words waft across Shabbat tables and through classrooms back home in America.

We would learn Torah. The intricate, complicated, mind-bending, challenging kind. The kind that our ancestors studied. The kind that God gave us. We smiled at each other, laughing because who would pay for this knight in shining armor and because which great mind would leave rows of brilliant *talmidim* to spend years teaching a handful of women and because how many women could devote so many years to such intense study in exchange for a lifetime of patronization and tokenism and because we did not, after all, want to build a *yeshivah*. We did not want to be revolutionaries and we did not want to be Rabbis and we did not want to be feminists. We wanted to learn Torah.

Our fantasy collapsed, leaving that handful of women huddled on rooftops, waiting for the son of Azariah to open the advanced *yeshivot* to those whose insides do not resemble their outsides, to those born with the passion of Ben Azzai in the body of a woman.

[“But whatever the reason](#), despite forty years of women's Talmud study in the Modern Orthodox community, top-tier Torah mastery has yet to find its way into the circle of women's learning.” I once walked into a *beit midrash*. I loved it there. I loved the intricacy and the incision, the arguments and the ambiguities, the edifices of interpretive possibilities. I loved them so much that it took me a long time to notice.

The walls of the *beit midrash* were closing in.

[“Today, I do not advise young women to follow my path](#). It's too hard. It's too risky. Even now.” Ignore the carob tree, the river, the girl. The walls are closing in. The daughter of a voice protests. No one listens. Someone slinks away from the table because no one taught her how to ask. “When I opened up a *gemara* after all those years of learning from source sheets,” my mother

told me, “it was like seeing television in color after a lifetime of black-and-white.” My sons have defeated me. My sons have defeated me. The Torah is not in Heaven. The Torah was given to men, and they do not share.

This is not my *beit midrash*. I left high school early so I could study in a seminary that emptied out early most nights of the week. I tried a different seminary and still found myself in *gemara seder* for barely half as long as my male peers. I applied for a fellowship to study Torah over winter break from an organization that claims to support Migdal Oz and Gush alumni. They would give me the funding despite my gender, they said, but they would not include me in their published list of fellowship recipients. I shrugged and thanked them, grateful that they would invest in me even if they could not be proud of me.

My friend applied the next year. She is brilliant. The response: “Thank you for your application (*sic*) Whilst we would love to be able to offer scholarships to Migdal Oz alumnae, our current budget will not allow us to do so.”

*They told us we could fly and handed us wings made out of source sheets.*

I once walked into a *beit midrash*. “Sufferings are good for the Jews like a scarlet strap on a white horse,” said the *gemara*. Something glimmered. Something I once heard in a desert far from the *beit midrash*, where a professor who did not know Hebrew taught me things that were not Torah. Ancient Greek authors were very interested in white skin on red blood, she had said. That was a different canon.

But what if it doesn’t matter. What if Torah can be given in a desert. What if there are sacrifices that one can offer outside of Jerusalem. What if, far out in the wilderness, goats leap from a cliff in the name of a strange demon and turn the threads of the sanctuary from scarlet to white. What if I need to leave the *beit midrash* to learn Torah.

The walls fell.

Sometimes I want them back. Sometimes I miss the kind of Torah that I lost. But it was never mine anyway.

When tomorrow your daughter asks you what happened to the *talmidot hakhamim*, tell her that they were here. Tell her how they patched together absurdly complicated learning programs on career routes to nowhere, how they watched less qualified peers plunge into the best *yeshivot* where they could never dream of learning, how they fled to medicine and law and basic education and academia and anywhere that would believe in them. Tell her that they were here and we failed them.

Tell her that, had she been there, she would not have been taught.

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# A RETURN TO JEWISH ROOTS IN NICOLE KRAUSS' FOREST DARK

NA'AMIT STURM NAGEL

In her seminal essay, "Towards a New Yiddish," Cynthia Ozick addresses the divisive question of what makes a work of American literature Jewish. She argues that the hallmark of Jewish writing is connecting to one's covenantal and liturgical past. American Jewish literature must be written in a uniquely Jewish language, which connects to Jewish history, prayer, and aggadah, if it is to endure. Ozick speaks directly to authors who renounce the title of "Jewish author" and she contends, "if we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all" (177)<sup>1</sup>. For Ozick, only by staying connected to immutable Jewish texts can the Jewish writer make his or her mark.

While it has been seven years since Ozick published a work of fiction, Nicole Krauss carries this mantle forward in her recent novel, [Forest Dark](#). She blows through the narrow end of the shofar by employing biblical parallels and Jewish history as foundational elements of her work. Krauss' literary approach is the embodiment of what Ozick termed the "liturgical."

From the first section of *Forest Dark*, titled "Ayekah,"—Where are you?—we feel connected to the wellsprings of Jewish literary traditions and wisdom. Yet *Forest Dark* is not just about any search for identity. This particular word, "Ayekah," is the one word that God says to Adam and Eve when they eat from the Tree of Knowledge in the biblical creation story. By choosing this word as the first heading for her chapter, she subtly urges the reader to recall that primal search for identity.

The novel's protagonists, who later in life both come to a certain kind of dangerous knowledge and need to recreate themselves, are, like all human beings, descendants of Adam and Eve. Krauss' two central characters—an older, successful lawyer named Jules Epstein and an unnamed middle-aged female author—are in the later phases of their lives, but don't know who they are anymore. They have lost that knowledge and escape the monotonous predictable cycles of their everyday life in search for answers. Both of their journeys take them to their modern Garden of Eden: Israel. The book presents Israel not as the literal home of the Jews, but as the spiritual sanctuary. It makes the argument that if you are Jewish and want to find your soul, you book an El Al flight.

The search for knowledge is dangerous and confusing for both Epstein and the female author (a possible surrogate for Krauss in the text), yet their primary aid is drawing on biblical parallels for

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Ozick, "Towards a New Yiddish" (*Art and Ardor*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf inc., 1983) 177.

their predicaments. Only by looking back at their ancient forbearers' problems can they move forward. When both protagonists want to escape their familial and societal "bindings," the original story of the binding of Isaac leads them to the realization that love and dedication come with great pain.

Like the original Jewish road-trip narrative of the Ancient Israelites travelling in the desert, this book emphasizes the journey over the destination. This central motif is perhaps the most Jewish element of the text. Krauss' characters constantly reference packing bags and unpacking bags, commenting on those who pack light in life and others whose excessive baggage weighs them down. There is a general question of which of these travelers is happier. As the female author in the novel explains, her family members overpack because "for them, it's a question of being prepared," to which her interlocutor responds: "Prepared for unhappiness. For happiness one doesn't need to be prepared." Being weighed down by history and personal baggage is clearly not ideal, but being completely weightless comes with a different set of problems—you could float away. The same question is at the heart of Jewish peoplehood—how much should we be defining modern Judaism by the historical baggage we carry as a people, or to what degree should we be letting go of past hardships and trauma to move forward? Whether the characters do or do not find themselves on this journey is irrelevant. The goal is lightening their loads, or redistributing their pekalach along the way.

Krauss also looks to the ancient texts as almost a handbook for how to write, and, by extension, read. At one point, the successful author portrayed in the novel describes her son's writing by saying, "For a long time he'd spelled the words as he thought they might be spelled, without any spaces between them, which, like the Torah's unbroken string of letters, opened his writing to infinite interpretations." Krauss glorifies this esoteric style. Herself master of symbols and metaphor, there are "infinite interpretations" of Krauss' text. At times she is a little heavy handed with the symbolism; the reader never knows when the author is talking about a coat as a coat, or a coat as a symbol. Yet Krauss may place certain images in the novel for the same reason symbols are at the heart of the Passover Haggadah—"so that the children would ask." This style makes readers reflect on the text and deepens the meaning of the book. When Krauss vaguely alludes to an incident of a whale lost in Israeli waters, it becomes a metaphor for the lost Palestinians, or perhaps the lost Jews, or even the lost Jewish intellectuals. In Krauss' world, meaning is up for debate, allowing for multiple possible meanings to pop up and inform one another.

Krauss' writing reaches back to a Jewish biblical heritage, but she also draws on the rich Jewish Yiddish tradition, creating a modern lexicon of 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish archetypes. While the stereotypes of the shlemiel, the yente and the shlemazel populate Yiddish literature, Krauss lovingly recreates her own modern Jewish stereotypes. She brings to life the swarthy long-lost Israeli cousin who keeps showing up, the surly Israeli professor who everyone assumes is an undercover Mossad agent, and the Jewish American tourist who travels to Israel, puts za'atar and Hazorfim Judaica in his bags and then gets back on the plane. As with their Yiddish predecessors,

these stereotypes are painted with broad, mocking brushstrokes, but they feel familiar, enabling the reader to think about these archetypes in new ways.

The book is beautifully written and captures a uniquely Jewish journey, which leads me to wonder why it was so easy to put down. The weakest parts of the book were what I refer to as “the Kafka sections.” A large part of the text makes the case that Kafka may have not died in 1924 and actually secretly fled to Israel (to “find himself,” of course). The possibility that Kafka faked his own death feels a little too much like Anne Frank’s imagined survival in Philip Roth’s *The Ghostwriter*. What about bringing these Jewish figureheads back to life fascinates Jewish authors? Though Kafka represents a perfect metaphor for both protagonists—always wanting to escape and die to be reborn—the sections about him are not the most enjoyable part of the read. Krauss spends so long convincing you that Kafka actually lived that by the time you believe her, you don’t really care.

*Forest Dark* is somewhat of a tedious read because of the philosophical digressions in which it wallows. It feels necessary to put the book down to process all of the ideas that it raises. The novel may be about the journey and not destination, but Krauss can lose you in the circular nature of that journey. Her intention was undoubtedly that the reader truly feels the characters’ struggles by getting lost with them, but if your definition of a good book is one that you cannot put down, *Forest Dark* may not make the cut. If, however, you define a good book by one that makes you think—well that is an entirely different matter.

In its own way, *Forest Dark* steers us towards answering Ozick’s essential question about defining Jewish literature. As the surly professor in the novel says to the Jewish female author, “You think your writing belongs to you?” “Who else?” she responds, and without missing a beat he responds: “To the Jews.” The question of whether or not your writing is Jewish is not up to you, because writing ultimately belongs to the reader. Krauss’ avatar answers Ozick perfectly: “Jewish literature would have to wait, as all Jewish things wait for a perfection that in our hearts we don’t really want to come.” In the end, perhaps all we can do is kvetch and vacillate between different answers to the question of what is Jewish literature—because, of course, the answer was never the point.

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