

Through a Clouded Lens

Counting the Chevrah, 2019-2020

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For Judith, my teacher, who showed me the lattice, and whose answers always contain questions.

“Returning today to the lattice. Positioned between two worlds, it, like *Yesod*, describes the vanishing point where the temporal glimpses the infinite. As I mentioned yesterday, those glimpses are what made me an artist, they are what made me a Jew, and they are what drew me to the *Chevrah*, suffused as it is with liminality.

In fact, looking backward, I’ve always been drawn to thresholds, so much so that I have often resisted choosing one side or the other, preferring to hover between. This literal ambivalence, often frustrating to others, has been my *Hesed*, the elusive source of my love and my engagement with the world.”

--Day 36, 2019, *Hesed of Yesod*, from “Counting the Chevrah, 2019-2020.”

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Preface

In the Spring of 2019, when the seeds that have become this book were planted, I was new to the *Chevrah Kadisha*(1), but I'd fallen for it hard. Less than a year had passed since my synagogue's Cemetery Committee had sent me to Maryland for the 2018 Kavod v'Nichum conference.(2) Prior to that, I had heard the term "*chevrah kadisha*," and had a general idea of what one was and did, but I had no concept of the *Chevrah*'s true scope and depth.

I didn't know what to expect from the conference, but my intuition told me to go. Since converting to Judaism in 2016, I had been searching for an elusive sense of belonging, the long-familiar role of outsider being a hard one to shake. Finally, stumbling through the open doors of the *Chevrah*, I realized I'd come home. This book is my attempt to evoke some sense of how I got there, and what it means to me that I did.



My route to conversion was not an obvious one. Despite a strong sense of spiritual connection in my childhood, by eighteen I had rejected religion, with no intention of returning. But that initial connection never fully left me, it just went underground, flowing around the roots; bubbling up over time into other passions. While this subterranean stream, silent and unseen, would eventually lead to my conversion in 2016, its circuitous path would take decades to get me there.

In fact, Judaism didn't really come into the picture until I met my wife, Deborah, and her family, in the late 1980's. There were notable friendships prior to that, and a couple of short-lived relationships, but other than attending a few seders, I had had little contact with the religion itself. But as my relationship with Deb progressed (marriage, too, was slow to arrive; a theme of my life), and as I became more comfortable with her parents and brother, I began to notice certain resonances between Judaism and my still sublimated spirituality.

Ultimately, the way in was art. From the time it fully took hold of me, art has felt like a conversation with an elusive other; an unknown presence that was at the same time strangely familiar. As the voice has led me through its landscape, I've planted flags in the places where it has felt most immanent. These "flags" are my artwork, each one a question whose answer is just around the next bend. Over time, I've come to see in Judaism the same question marks, the same relationship with the ineffable. Here is a religion which, unlike that of my childhood, embraces doubt and argument. Even its language has ambiguity built into it.(3) Though I had

never felt any pressure to convert, over time I grew to feel at home within this nation of wrestlers, an affinity I marked in 2016 by taking *Yaakov* as my name.(4)

But it wasn't until 2018 that I found my *Beit El* in the *Chevrah*. Through its open-hearted embrace of a journey full of questions but short on answers, and through its willingness to do so with love, respect and kindness, the *Chevrah*, for me, embodies the true soul of Judaism. It is a threshold where the living and the dead meet to forge a holistic understanding of what it means to be mortal; a place of transition, of perpetual becoming. For me, the *Chevrah* is where Judaism makes the most sense; where I most naturally connect. Without knowing it, the *Chevrah* was the Judaism I converted to.



So, at its heart, this is a book about becoming; about my evolving understanding of the *Chevrah* as I continue to find my place within it. It began in 2019 as forty-nine essays, one for each of the forty-nine days between Passover and Shavuot, as I counted the *Omer*.(5) They were forum posts that grew into a diary that grew into a manifesto of sorts. Now, a year later, as I coax these essays into becoming a book, I will try to trace the “subterranean stream” that led me to them, and to the *Chevrah*. To do so, I will be using some tools that were available to me at the time, and some that were not. For example, while I was immersed, in 2019, in my study of *Kabbalah*, I had yet to encounter Spinoza, who plays a significant role in the pages that follow. But, while the tools may have evolved, their underlying purpose has not: to look at the *Chevrah*, and through that looking, to glimpse the fleeting traces of the Divine.

1. A *chevrah kadisha* is a Jewish society tasked primarily with performing the ritual preparation of the dead for burial (*taharah* and *shmirah*), although the scope of its responsibilities can also include visiting the sick (*bikur cholim*) and comforting mourners (*nichum aveilim*), as well as attending to *shiva*, *shloshim* and beyond (see glossary for unfamiliar terms).

Throughout the text, when I am referring to what I think of as the “greater *Chevrah Kadisha*”, the *Chevrah* that is comprised of all individual *chevrot*, I will capitalize it. When I am referring to a specific *chevrah*, unless it is part of a proper noun, I will use the lower case.

2. Kavod v'Nichum (“Honor and Comfort”) is an international organization that provides information, education, training, and technical assistance for bereavement committees and *chevrah kadisha* groups. Their annual conference, the “North American *Chevrah Kadisha* and Jewish Cemetery Conference,” is the foremost international gathering around Jewish end-of-life issues and practices. This year's (2020) conference will be their eighteenth, and my third.

3. Part of my attraction to Judaism lies in the inherent slipperiness of Hebrew. Built on simple, three letter roots whose meaning shifts with context, and possessing no true vowels (other than the four double agents, ו, ה, ל, א, letters so important that three of them spell the true name of God, and the fourth contains language itself), Hebrew's ambiguity begets poetics, as well as the perpetual argument and counter-argument that Judaism is known for. Later in the book, I will talk of lenses lensing lenses. Similarly, Hebrew's malleability, its ability to perpetually reinvent itself, makes it its own ideal object. No wonder so many pioneering linguists and semioticians were Jewish(6).

4. Yaakov appeals to me on many levels. He was what we would now consider a "modern" protagonist, in that his actions were complex; his motivations mixed. Or perhaps he was the Torah's first trickster figure(7), its Coyote(8) (unless that honor more truly belongs to God). And like Coyote, who made the world, Yaakov, despite his failings, was destined to make a people.

Yaakov's complexity also made him a quintessentially liminal figure; dreams and visions define him even more than actions. His "ladder" (or ramp, as the translator Robert Alter has it) is the bi-directional threshold between heaven and earth. Later, the God wrestling that gave him and his descendants their new name, Israel, takes place at another threshold, the ford of the Yabok river (*Ma'avar Yabok*), the namesake of the Chevrah's great book of thresholds.

For more on Yaakov, see the essay for day 17 of the Omer, as well as the essay "Tinkering with the Tailor" in the Appendix.

5. See footnote 3 to the introductory essay, "Through a Clouded Lens."

6. Among them Roman Jakobson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, Edward Sapir, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, and Noam Chomsky. But the list goes on.

7. Another candidate, the serpent, lacks the complexity of a true trickster. Setting aside revisionist interpretations, its motives were deception and destruction, while a trickster is fundamentally a force of change and creation.

8. A mythological figure, part shaman and part clown, common to many Native American groups, particularly in the West.