מיכה
TEMPLE MICAH
Vine
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ADAR I & II 5782

FROM RABBI ZEMEL

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS: PURIM AND RISING ANTISEMITISM

DEAR FRIENDS,

I have never been a big fan of Purim. This may go back to my earliest childhood Purim memory, when I cut my finger on my grogger during services.

After childhood, I was never really a costume person and, even as a young adult, chafed at the Talmudic injunction to drink until you could no longer distinguish Mordecai from Haman (B Talmud Megilla 7b). In later years, Tel Aviv's all-night street revelry on Purim would keep Louise and me shuttered in our rental apartment. Purim is every bit the Jewish Mardi Gras festival, a late-winter opportunity to let it all hang out. I prefer to stay in.

This year, however, Purim has me thinking about evil. Evil is a subject that can be a challenge for the liberal imagination, which can seek to avoid its reality as part of the human condition. Evil is sometimes explained as a form of illness to be cured or overcome with education. This is not my liberalism. I think there is evil in the world. Purim reminds me this is so.

Before we get to Purim and the Scroll of Esther, let us turn to the Torah.

The opening chapters of Genesis set an idyllic scene in the Garden of Eden. There is life. There is God's patterned predictability and order. There is a Tree of Life and a Tree of Knowledge, which may be the same tree. (We cannot be sure, thanks to wonderful literary ambiguity.) There is water and vegetation and plenty.

The opening chapters of Exodus bring us the opposite imagery. There is a Pharaoh in charge who has no knowledge of the past, as he "knows not of Joseph." Exodus is full of threats: "They

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4 ▶

Some Thoughts on Being a Human Being

By Kathryn Ceja

I once knew someone whose mother and father loved her so much that when violence erupted in their country and the police would not protect them, they handed her over to strangers who promised to get her to a foreign country and—with any luck—to safety.

This person was not from one of the families our State Department says is "subject to extreme violence and insecurity at the hands of transnational criminal organizations." She was not one of the 1.6 million immigration cases backlogged on the U.S. docket.

She was a Jewish refugee.

She was my parents' friend when I was growing up in Kansas City. Married to a doctor, she volunteered for good causes and sent her children to private school. Only the trace of a European accent distinguished her from the other mothers in my parents' assimilated Jewish social circle. Nothing about her hinted at earlier trauma. Yet, when she was 10 years old, after Hitler annexed Austria, her parents said goodbye to her forever and sent her away on a Kindertransport train.

> "In a place where there is no humanity, strive to be human."
>
> • *Pirke Avot 2:5* •

The Kindertransport originated in England on the heels of Kristallnacht, the Nazi-endorsed riot that destroyed German-Jewish businesses, homes, and lives on November 8–9, 1938. Days later, a multi-denominational coalition led by British Jews, but that also included Quakers, Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, and others, mounted a lobbying campaign that swayed Parliament to allow an unspecified number of persecuted children into England. Thus, Britain became one of a handful of countries—the United States was not among them—that officially admitted any Jewish refugees.

Generosity had its limits, however. Children were expected to stay in England temporarily and not to burden the state. "Private citizens or organizations had to guarantee payment for each child's care, education, and eventual emigration" with a £50 bond (about $4600 today). Only unaccompanied children under age 17 were allowed to board transports. Parents were not allowed. Older children cared for infants.

The coalition didn't wait for the perfect agreement—one that would have accepted intact families, government funding, or an extended stay. It simply went to work. Activists in Nazi-occupied Europe began pulling strings, forging documents, and arranging transports. The first Kindertransport reached England on December 2, three weeks after Kristallnacht.

The operation spanned less than two years, until May 1939. Yet in that brief timeframe, it relocated approximately 10,000 Jewish children from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland to foster and group homes in England. Nearly six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. But

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4 ▶

"Every person shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree with no one to make him afraid."
MICAH, CHAPTER 4, VERSE 4

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HATING HATE: MY REFLECTION ON PURIM

By Joshua Berman

My most influential professional mentor once told me he couldn't stand Halloween. He described growing up in the 1940s as one of the very few Jews in his upstate New York town: his father owned a small corner grocery store, and each Halloween, antisemites would express their anti-Jewish sentiments by breaking windows and painting nasty graffiti and obscene epithets on the store's outside walls. As a teenager, my mentor would then spend the next two days whitewashing and cleaning the mess. Completely putting aside the historic origins of Halloween (which we can leave for another column), Halloween came to stand for something very unpleasant for him and his family.

So why am I reflecting on Halloween in the Spring? Ever since my parents dragged me to Sunday school for Purim festivities – of course in costume – Halloween and Purim share space in my mind. Growing up, Purim was often billed for me as "the Spring Jewish Halloween." After all, we dressed up, there were colorful traditions, we ate tasty goodies (although I'm still taking a Three Musketeer Bar over a three-cornered hamantaschen), we dressed as "heroes and villains," and we decorated our homes.

Decades later, I still struggle to separate the holidays. Not only do I think about my mentor's story every Halloween, but it also comes back to me each Purim. Even sitting in the sanctuary watching the gifted Machon thespians belt out a mini-Megillah, my mind wanders to that small New York town and the hate he confronted. Yes, Purim is filled with singing, story-telling, bad puns about "the whole megillah," and the celebration of resilience. But Purim also starkly reminds us of the millennia of persecution we have faced as Jews. The story of Esther is just one such Biblical event—antisemitism is still an uncomfortably familiar part of our present. Indeed, we need look no further than the mid-January terror at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas to be reminded of the vitriol we must confront so often.

This Purim, perhaps we should do more than merely tell the story and reflect on it. In our Micah way, let's commit to action. Let's start by looking out for and protecting Jews around the globe and in our own country. Antisemitism continues to take so many forms and we need to remain vigilant. We are all familiar with the obvious: swastikas—the kind of pain my mentor experienced; Twitter hate; social exclusion. But we need to be on the lookout for the more subtle signifiers: code words, stereotypes, slights on the job, and anti-Israel propaganda with a starker undertone. We do not need to characterize ourselves as victims or sufferers; after all, this is not the central, defining feature of our being Jewish. We do need to stand up for ourselves. For some of us, that means engaging with ADL, the Anti-Defamation League. For others, it means taking a hard look and responding to what is happening on college campuses across the country and on social media. We certainly should remain vigilant in protecting our own security as a community. Most important, being part of this dialogue and stepping up to act remains critical.

Yet that does not mean we only look inward. After all, that's not the Micah way. As modern Jews, we have an obligation not only to protect other Jews, but also to jump in for others under siege. As guardians against hate, we should look beyond antisemitism and seek out ways to protect others who also are targets of such animus. Anti-Muslim bias remains a scourge on our local, national and global communities. Stereotypes, bullying, discrimination and violence towards Asians and Asian-Americans is rampant. Our black and brown friends, members of our broader community, continue to battle discrimination at every turn. Daily aggressions (and microaggressions) are real for these and other groups. I'm proud of our Micah efforts to educate ourselves. The Racial Justice Initiative over the past year has been one such inspiring community effort. Our discussions about the great teachings of Ibram X. Kendi and Ta-Nehisi Coates have provided us with launching-off points to engage. Our dedicated steps on behalf of new immigrants and against those who champion xenophobia help make a difference. And we can do more. Hopefully we each in our own individual lives can find a way to take these learnings and turn them into action. Let's be upstanders for others.

Lamenting antisemitism and other forms of discrimination simply isn't the answer. Each of us should be challenged to answer the simple question: "What am I doing to combat hate and discrimination?" Perhaps next time you see a fellow congregant, after catching up about family, life and the pandemic, you can share with each other YOUR answer to that question.

A SHORT HISTORY OF PURIM

By Jean Freedman

Purim is the jolliest and the strangest of all Jewish holidays. It is a time when the ordinary Jewish emphasis on moderation and self-discipline is abandoned, allowing a range of behaviors not normally condoned in traditional Judaism, including theatre. Though rabbis objected to theatre because of its pagan origins and because it was considered a waste of time, Jewish communities have staged Purim plays (*purimshpiln* in Yiddish) since at least the late Renaissance. Originally, Purim plays were performed by itinerant players who went from house to house, asking for a few coins in exchange for their entertainment. Purim plays were also performed in private homes, in houses of study, and finally within the synagogue itself. Scripts were informal and allowed performers to add jokes, topical commentary, music, and other items of popular culture. Since Orthodox Judaism forbids women to perform in public, all the players were men, and the sight of a bearded man disguised as a woman added to the merriment. Usually, the plays were produced by those on the lower rungs of Jewish society, and they took the opportunity to satirize the sacred and insult the powerful.

Many Purim plays dramatize the book of Esther, but other stories have also been performed, generally those that share the Purim theme of victory over the threat of annihilation. Some of these narratives are drawn from the Bible (such as the book of Daniel), others from history (such as tsarist Russia and Nazi Germany), while others are purely the product of fantasy. Virtually all Purim plays tell these stories of near-disaster in a comic fashion. Purimshpiln turn the sacred text of Esther into a profane parody, filled with irreverent jokes, sexual innuendo, and utterly secular popular culture.

Historically, Purim plays varied according to the kind and intensity of local conflict. The *Akhashveyrosshpil*, a Yiddish play from eighteenth-century Germany, used insults, bawdy jokes, and references to bodily functions in order to make all authority figures look ridiculous and, hence, non-threatening. In nineteenth and early twentieth-century Eastern Europe, purimshpiln often focused on clever criminals and incompetent lawmen. For the Jews of Eastern Europe, whose lives were circumscribed by antisemitic laws, praising the scofflaw was an act of resistance.

In seventeenth-century Amsterdam, the Sephardi community presented *Simchat Purim*, a far more middle-class production than the Yiddish Purim plays of central and Eastern Europe. *Simchat Purim* is in Hebrew, and takes its inspiration from midrashim that would have been known only to advanced students of Torah and Talmud. Though humorous, it is neither vulgar nor obscene. This Purim play is the product of an educated, middle-class community at peace with its non-Jewish neighbors.

In Nazi Germany, Purim took on a particularly powerful and terrifying resonance. Jews flocked to the synagogue on Purim, shouting down the name of Haman, cheering wildly at his death. Purim plays even offered a beacon of hope in the concentration camps. A prisoner known as "Chaim the Rabbi" organized a purimshpil in Dachau in 1945. Wearing a paper crown, clad in a blanket decorated with paper stars, he began his call for a purimshpil by shouting, "Haman to the gallows! And when I say, 'Haman to the gallows,' we all know which Haman we're talking about!" By enacting a story of triumph over incredible odds, Chaim the Rabbi infused a moment of hope into a particularly bleak situation.

The Holocaust dealt a mortal blow to the traditional European purimshpil. The world had just watched an annihilation attempt that had almost succeeded; the purimshpil seemed perhaps the tattered remains of a dying culture. But the culture stubbornly refused to die. In the past few decades, there has been a world-wide revival of interest in this culture. Purim plays have been performed in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Sweden, Germany, and former Soviet Asia. They have been performed in synagogues, colleges, community centers, even on Broadway. Many scholars see the purimshpil as the seedbed of Jewish, particularly Yiddish, theatre, and of a particular brand of Jewish comedy that emphasizes social criticism, self-mockery, and the interplay of humor and sadness. Sholem Aleichem, Lenny Bruce, Dorothy Parker, Mort Sahl, Philip Roth, Woody Allen, Jon Stewart, Sarah Silverman – all are children of the purimshpil.

Jean Freedman has been a member of Temple Micah since 2006. She has participated in Temple Micah's Purim spiels as a performer and as a director. Her article "The Masquerade of Ideas: The Purimshpil *as Theatre of Conflict," which appeared in the book* Revisioning Ritual: Jewish Traditions in Transition, *highlighted Temple Micah's Purim spiel of 2007. Jean holds a PhD in folklore and teaches at the George Washington University and Montgomery College. Her writing has appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Journal of American Folklore, and other publications. Her most recent book is a biography of the American folksinger Peggy Seeger, entitled* Peggy Seeger: A Life of Music, Love, and Politics.

Being a Human Being FROM PAGE 1 ▶

because desperate parents said goodbye to their children without knowing with whom they would end up or how they would be treated, children on the Kindertransport survived.

Parents must have known at some level they were unlikely to see their children again. They must have thought, *safety today and we'll worry about what comes later tomorrow*—a leap of faith born of desperation, one that takes courage. Just like the parents risking everything to get their children across our border today.

In his song recounting his grandparents' escape from Nazi Germany to Bolivia—another of the few countries to open its doors to Jews—Jorge Drexler observed that history is a revolving door. It rotated as Jewish parents stood on platforms in Berlin, Vienna, Prague, and Danzig, watching the trains pull away. It turns again as parents at the border make the same wrenching decisions to save their children that we Jews made... and as Jewish and other faith-based and advocacy groups fight on behalf of a diversity of immigrants, keeping the humanity of the 1930s coalition alive.

Lately I've tried to imagine the strength of character required to foster a displaced child. The woman who took in my parents' friend was not so much recruited as drafted. When her parish rector knocked on her door with news that a refugee transport was imminent, she said, I can't afford a child. This isn't your choice, he replied.

Then the child showed up. She spoke only German. She desperately missed her family. England was the last place she wanted to be. But she stayed through the war, braving bombings, sharing rations.

That child died in Kansas City at 89. Her obituary described a close-knit Midwestern family who loved her; an appreciation for art that she learned in Vienna; and her life in England, where she excelled at schoolwork, had boyfriends, and lived through the Blitz.

My parents' friend never saw her parents again. But because they strove to be human in a world bereft of humanity, their daughter made it to safety and grew up to be the comfortable Jewish matron I knew as a child. Because strangers believed in the moral imperative to welcome fellow strangers, she could have what everyone wants—be they Jews, non-Jews, or families at the border—the opportunity to build a good life. ◆

Kathryn Ceja has been a Temple Micah member for more than 20 years. A former speechwriter at the federal Department of Health and Human Services and communications director for a congressional commission, she retired in 2020 to focus on things that matter, including her family, the world beyond the Beltway, and learning to speak Hebrew like an Israeli. (The latter two objectives are taking longer than she thought.)

Rabbi's Message FROM PAGE 1 ▶

will multiply against us." The water of the Nile becomes a place of death: "Throw the newborn Israelite male children into the river."

Pharaoh becomes Torah's symbol of evil and therefore must die, which God accomplishes by drowning him in the sea.

In Purim, Haman joins Pharaoh as a symbol of evil. Why do we need this story? What more does it tell us that we cannot learn from Exodus?

The answers may lie in the fact that the Scroll of Esther is one of two biblical books in which God is absent. (Song of Songs is the other.) As the plot unfolds, so does Haman's plan to murder the Jews of Persia, as he describes to Ahasuerus:

"There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction..." (Esther 3:8-9)

With this formulation, an antisemitic standard repeated throughout our history is unveiled.

With no God present as a character, the Jews of Persia are on their own. The only forces that can oppose the evil of Haman are human beings. God will not cause rivers to turn to blood or hail to fall from the sky. No waters will part on divine command. If evil is to be defeated, humans must do it themselves.

This is exactly what Mordecai comes to realize as he speaks to Esther:

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:12-14)

The people who wrote the Scroll of Esther did not expect miracles from God because they experienced none in their own lives and times. The fictitious work we know as Megillat (Scroll of) Esther, recognized in the Talmud (B Talmud Megilla 7a), makes it clear that only humans can oppose evil. Esther comes forward to save her people. She becomes a Jewish hero. But the story does not stop there. In the parts of the book of Esther infrequently read in public, the Jews set out to defend themselves and, in the process, slaughter 75,000 Persians.

The numbers are, of course, sheer fantasy, along with the rest of the story. But the lesson is clear. Evil is real. Jews do not ignore it. They confront evil with force and take vengeance. It is better to wield power than to be powerless.

Here then, is the real reason I don't like Purim. It forces me think about evil, and to confront images of Jews on a killing rampage.

I have also come to better understand the ancient rabbinic solution for dealing with this situation and with the book's instruction to have a drink, and then another. Turn Purim into a festival for children; put on a costume.

As we live in what feels like an increasingly dangerous world with real forces of evil on the march, I am reading Esther with a renewed interest this year—one need look no farther than the recent assault on Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville. History teaches us that evil and antisemitism are two sides of the same coin. We must make no mistake. Antisemitism is a face of evil and on the rise. We cannot turn away. We must civilly and peacefully, yet vigorously and strenuously, condemn, confront, and oppose antisemitism with every fiber of our being and from every quarter where it surfaces. This is Purim 5782\2022.

Shalom.

Dear Friends,

For this issue of the Vine, I had imagined my contributions to be poetry on Esther, celebrating her courage and bravery. I played with language around the Purim of my memories, of a world flipped upside down by revelry and irreverence. And then on a Saturday morning in Texas, the world turned upside down once again, when a Shabbat service turned into a hostage crisis. And new words emerged, these two poems you see here.

The first one, "Grace World," I wrote on the evening of Saturday, January 15th, before the captives had freed themselves. The second, "We are the people of..." has been a piece that has been living inside of me for awhile, inspired by these words of Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo: "Be who you are, even if it kills you. It will. Over and over again. Even as you live." I wrote this piece as an expression of our defiance. Despite any attempts, historical and contemporary, we will never allow the soul of the Jewish people to be diminished, nor relinquish our commitment to the human project.

Rabbi Crawley

Grace World

On some Sunday mornings
my dad would get up early
put on his uniform
and drive to a local church
To direct traffic

And on some Saturday mornings
my dad would get up early
put on his uniform,
and drive to our synagogue
Not to pray
But to stand guard

Sometimes I'd leave services in the middle
To watch him

I saw how his shoulders would tighten
When a stranger passed
When a new car pulled into the parking lot
And then release when they turned around or drove away

The church was called GraceWorld.
They were so lucky to live in that world -
The good grace of only having to worry about fender benders,
of a clogged path of cars on the way out

None of that Grace for our synagogue
Instead, a world of carefully locked entrances
A Sacred fortress

"It could happen here" thought, but never said
It never did -
not to me, not there
Is that all the Grace I can hope for?

We are the people of...

We are the people of the book
Don't read it all in one sitting,
some of its chapters will break your heart
We will use it to teach you how to live
to break your heart on purpose

We are the people of the tree
Don't cut us down
Don't you know what wisdom we contain
We will teach you how
to reach towards the light

We are the people of the garden
Doesn't matter how far you take us from our home
You will find us flourishing
We will teach you how
to grow in all conditions

We are the people of the air
Don't tear us apart
You will breathe our shared breath
We will teach you how
To fill it up with song

We are the people of the heart
Doesn't matter how hard yours is
Our muscle softens as it opens
We will teach you how
to make joy where there is only pain

We are the people of each other
We are the people of the choosing
To be who we are
Over and over again
Even when it hurts us
Even when it breaks us

We will be who we are, over and over again.

TZEDAKAH

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MAZAL TOV

Pam and Tom Green, on the birth of their grandsons, Wesley Jared Green and Julian Martin Green

Patricia Kent, on the birth of her granddaughter, Zivia Rose Luebke

Debra Knopman, on the birth of her granddaughter, Olivia Minnette

Ruth Simon, on the birth of her granddaughter, Bryn Francis Mooneyham

CONDOLENCES

The Temple Micah community extends its deepest condolences to:

Nancy Elisburg, on the death of her cousin, Rita Karen

Paul Greenberg, on the death of his husband, Rick Billingsley

Sarah Grusin, on the death of her mother, Jane Coates

James Hamos, on the death of his wife, Andrea Hamos

Susan Morgenstein, on the death of her sister, Micah member, Judith Levin

Adam Raviv, on the death of his father, David Raviv

Mary Schwartz, on the death of her brother, Edgar Cahn

Barbara Stephens, on the death of her husband, Bill Stephens

Joanne Zamore, on the death of her father, Hartley Zamore

May their memories be for a blessing.

FACING ANTISEMITISM HEAD-ON

By Rabbi Josh Beraha

My seven-year-old daughter recently asked me: "Daddy, why do people love dead Jews?" Given the book on my bedside table–*People Love Dead Jews*–the inquiry wasn't shocking.

This new collection of essays by the novelist Dara Horn has provoked many questions and conversations over its central observation that people are fascinated by stories about Jewish suffering.

Take the story of Anne Frank. Horn recounts an incident at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam in which a Jewish employee was asked by the museum to remove his kippah while at work. For the sake of "neutrality," it was suggested that he cover his kippah with a baseball hat. Neutrality!

The employee appealed the order and was eventually permitted to remove his baseball cap and reveal his kippah. It took four months to win the appeal–"a rather long time for the Anne Frank House to ponder whether it was a good idea to force a Jew into hiding," Horn writes. And so, her conclusion: the museum was valuing dead Jews, not the ones who are living, and practicing their religion.

People Love Dead Jews has been widely praised. But one striking review by Shmuel Magid, a Distinguished Fellow in Jewish Studies at Dartmouth, was negative. Magid's focus is less about the book itself and more about how he perceives the book will be read, which is, he imagines, as part of an emergent genre he names "anti-antisemitism literature." Magid laments that literature like *People Love Dead Jews* will become further source material and inspiration for American Jews to continue to play the role of victim. Though Horn does not endorse this way of thinking in any way, Magid's point is that Jews themselves savor reading books like this because, like the rest of the world, they love dead Jews too, because it's "the most successful answer to the question, 'why be Jewish?'"

I am the product, and beneficiary, of being raised in a community that did not answer the question "why be Jewish?" with a reactionary, "because we were persecuted," but I have witnessed this attitude and understand Magid's point. I, too, agree that it's time to ditch "the lachrymose approach" to our people's story defined "as just one bloody antisemitic act after another." (It is actually this way of thinking that initially drew me into Temple Micah, an institution that seeks to build a future-oriented Jewish life, full of resilience, joy, and hope. We seek to reject an identity focused on the notion that's deeply rooted in many Jewish holidays, often summarized as "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!")

Horn grew up in the same cultural milieu as I did, one that valued the celebration of life over the story of the Jews as–in the words of the philosopher Simon Rawidowicz– "the ever-dying people." I'm sure Horn would understand Magid's rebuttal of her book as well. But Horn never wanted to write a narrative that inspires people for the wrong reasons. Dwelling on persecution was not the attitude Horn and I knew as kids.

But recent assaults on Jews, especially the attack at a kosher grocery store in Jersey City in 2019, persuaded Horn that she was wrong to assume that "the enormous public interest in past Jewish suffering" was "a sign of respect for living Jews." And so, she decided to "lean directly in" and "articulate the endless unspoken ways in which the popular obsession with dead Jews, even in its most apparently benign and civic-minded forms, is a profound affront to human dignity."

What Magid gets wrong, or willfully ignores, is that more and more American Jews have in recent years come to perceive antisemitism to be on the rise. This phenomenon has been one of the most shocking realizations of my adult Jewish life. Does this concern mean that we should cling to our own victimhood and shape our identity around it? Certainly not.

Like Magid, I, too, yearn for a Judaism that does not dwell on how many times the world tried to destroy us. I want to answer my daughter's question in a way that offers hope, and a positive reason to continue to be Jewish.

But Horn and I are of the next generation. We were never taught to see the world "through tear-streaked glasses" or pounded with stories of all the Jews who suffered at the hands of an evil oppressor. Because of this, maybe, we are less afraid than Magid and his generation to face antisemitism head on, and fully admit that the troubling events, from Pittsburgh to Poway to Colleyville, are possible signs for what's to come. At a minimum, we should not shrug these attacks off, in fear that our Jewish identity will be shaped by them. Instead, we must understand that despite our love affair with America, we cannot ignore the alarming signs of Jew hatred all around us.

Would I recommend you read Horn's book? The answer is a definitive yes. We should take the stories she tells seriously. If "anti-antisemitism literature" has become a new genre, there must be a reason, and it's not just because Jews love dead Jews. But if you read Horn's book, I hope you'll find inspiration in other books as well, ones that celebrate Jewish life today, and the Jews–like you and me–who still live. People might love dead Jews, and we are obligated to remember those who have died, but never should we raise their status higher than those who are still here with us, breathing, dreaming, and hopefully looking forward to all the good that's still to come.