

# VIRKLEKHAYT

*Radical Jewish Speculations*

I woke up before I was supposed to, to the faint glow of starlight falling across the bed. The galaxy we were passing cast a reddish glow across the sheets, illuminating the atomic clock on the wall and Shoshana's face on the pillow beside me. Before the organised chaos of Shift 2 began, her breathing was the only sound in the universe, and I stole a moment of calm together with her.

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The Ark's population suffers from the constant threat of genetic disease. To avoid the inevitable for as long as possible, the Ark's mainframe computer decides all reproductive pairings. It has the full genetic and epigenetic sequence of each crew member, and powerful bioinformatic algorithms that match up genomes so as to avoid the pairing of disease-causing alleles. Participation in the reproduction program by age 25 is compulsory; whilst seeking Eden, we cannot allow ourselves to weaken or die out.

There are options about how you can do it. Those with wombs, whether natural or synthetic, carry; it makes no sense to waste resources on incubators when humans are so adept at growing one another. This was what the Ark determined at the start of the journey, and so it is for its duration. But insemination by your shidduchim (matches) can be natural or artificial, and fraternization beyond the biological process is not required.

I try to forget that this deadline is coming - it is still far off. I can't imagine anything worse than something alive, squirming around inside me, lodged in my body for nine months. I have studied embryology, know full well in what ways a foetus is a parasite, how it can draw so hard upon your resources that you are damaged as a result. I spend my time thinking about other things.

We don't know the length of our journey, or even where our destination is. What we do know is that failure is not an option in finding Eden. Cryopreservation is unfortunately not an avenue available to us to wait out the time - the technology was not perfected by the time the Ark was ready, and no one from the Shtetl was prepared to use the fallible, leaky containers we did have. So we are spending the journey awake, and with this comes the need for a daily occupation, culture, and education.

From a cheerful hologram which arcs and sparkles above their head, the first lesson every child upon the Ark learns is that we live in a utopic travelling home for the Jewish nation. It was designed by our home world Gehinnom's greatest powerhouse of Jewish scientists: biologists, programmers and engineers who were concerned

only with our survival and the practicalities of keeping six million souls alive and well across an indefinite period in deep space. In a stroke of mercy they did not bother programming in social rules, perhaps out of a belief that we could create and adhere to these ourselves, or more likely because they all disagreed on what those societal rules and morals ought to be.

This has allowed the spawning of many different communities, diverging along lines of radicalism, liberalism and conservatism in social structure. When I ask, my digital tutor informs me that these divisions were created long before we boarded the Ark, but I attribute their perpetuation through the generations to an environment where we are all crowded together for the long term. It is essential to maintain the semblance of difference in a sea of faces which will become more and more similar as generations pass, to feel that you are not merely dissolving into a mass of undifferentiated human flesh.

Shoshana and I were part of one particularly small and craggy offshoot – a group who spent our off-duty hours mostly on games, study and promiscuity, but occasionally engaged in organised dissent, more for the sense of engaging in a vaguely meaningful push for change (of any kind) rather than any particular sense of conviction. We learned about ‘protests’ from the Ark internet archives and spent a week protesting the canteen shift from full to low fat cottage cheese. We did our best to hack the Ark to access all its classified data (the Freedom of Information Act, we called it), but it just swatted down our code like a mist of asteroid pebbles, speeding up the timer counting down our leisure time to playfully scold us. We were really just a gang of ineffectual troublemakers, until Shoshana hit upon something that actually mattered to the Ark.

Shoshana decided not to undergo fertilisation treatment. She said that she felt her artificial womb and ovaries were in her body purely to provide the hormones that made her feel like herself, and moreover that she did not want her body to belong to a child. I think that what she really meant was that she did not want her body to belong to the Ark.

Shoshana’s 25th birthday came and went, and she continued to refuse the Ark’s list of shidduchim. The messages would flash up urgent warnings across the ceiling of our bedroom every morning, and she would swipe them away like dust from her eyes. Six months in, we woke up to a message:

**THIS IS YOUR FINAL REMINDER. PLEASE SELECT A SHIDDUCH TODAY.**

She swiped it away as usual, and left our room for her work duties, an almost visible cloud of dread wrapping its tendrils about her curly brown head.

Shoshana was gone for a long time after that.

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At the far end of the ship, beyond the food and fuel synthesising factories, the engines, the vast storage holdings and the seed bank, there is one long, low room of which most remain wilfully ignorant. The wall at its far end is dominated by a window onto the star-spattered blackness out there, a shard of cold light at the end of the dim room. The room is filled with identical chambers each with a volume of exactly two metres cubed, and on their fronts a softly glowing blue panel complete with a name, identification number, vital statistics and a timer counting down. Detained inside of each is a Disobedient.

This is how the Ark's mainframe ensures our cooperation with the few rules that do exist on board. Those who dissent to the mission and the shidduch program are interned here for as long as the mainframe assesses is necessary to render them docile once again. Some probably die here, while others return to society after days or decades have passed and they are at last ready to cooperate.

Shoshana is still here in chamber 614, a year after that final message. I visit sometimes and press my ear against the cool plastic of the chamber door, trying to hear any small sound that will let me know she's still herself in there, but I only ever hear silence.

What I found out on the day Shoshana left is that it isn't the Ark which brings Disobedients here, nor is it the Ark which shunts them screaming into the chambers, activating the lock and setting the timer. It is us, drafted when needed, and choosing to forget what we have done once it is over. The Ark's mission is to deliver a healthy, viable Jewish nation to Eden - is there any other choice but to maintain order and keep our people whole?



The glow of the *eruv*<sup>1</sup> pulsates a dull, murky mauve light in the distant horizon. The sky is a characterless grey. Below lies an ocean populated by *nochrims*<sup>2</sup> who bear no names but numbers. *Aleyn in goles*, alone in exile, they exist in total solitude and are distributed across this ocean many kilometres apart. This ocean is composed of a viscous gel that keeps its inhabitants suspended so that their heads just breach its surface. The opaque, puce colour of this gel functions to conceal whatever bodies the *nochrims* have from the neck downwards. The air smells of yeast.

Nochri 37466 awakes this time to find himself closer to the *eruv* than he was yesterday- the ocean moves only sporadically but it somehow, on a sudden impulse, must have led him this way. Whether this happened with some sort of intention, divine or otherwise, doesn't concern 37466. He'd long ago resigned his fate to a force beyond his control, an omnipotent power that manifested itself with an abject indifference towards the likes of himself. 37466 reaches down towards his amniotic sac and squeezes it gently. A flat lager rushes into his mouth. He spits it out and squints; he'd never before felt the light of the *eruv* glow with such intensity. Closing his eyes, phosphenes of mauve appear and crawl and quiver across his lids.

The *eruv* encloses the island of Eden, from which he and all the other *nochrims* were expelled two years ago by the *tumtum's*<sup>3</sup> decree, following a simple in-out referendum upon which the entire electorate of Eden was invited to vote. The question on the ballot paper was as follows:

'Should the *nochrims* remain as members of Eden or leave Eden?'

Two tick boxes underneath:

Remain as members of Eden

Leave Eden

A very narrow result favoured the *nochrims* to leave. A two-year gestation period followed. The future of the *nochrims* was feverishly debated within the *tumtum*-majority government. They tussled between advocating for the right to remain as naturalized citizens of Eden or certain exile. In the Commons chamber *tumtum* members of the House would jabber and jeer, clap woop and shout. To many *nochrims* looking in on such proceeds, it drew feelings of dismay that quickly

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<sup>1</sup> *eruv* (Heb) a wire boundary

<sup>2</sup> *nochrims* (masc. Heb pl., *nochri* sing.) a male foreigner. Also translates to 'stranger' or 'other'

<sup>3</sup> *tumtum* (Heb) – a person whose sexual characteristics are indeterminate or obscured.

descended into apathy. A trope grew within the popular tumtum press: the nochri a drunken Friday night reveller, stumbling out of the pub in an alcohol-induced stupor, trying in vain to find a way home.

37466 remembers the very last time he stepped foot inside a pub, some Friday evening just under two years ago. Conscious of not wanting to submit towards negative stereotypes of nochrim, he'd usually refrain from drinking more than a pint. Best not confirm what many take as received wisdom to be true. Best to keep composure at all times in this hostile climate, however stultifying and suffocating it felt. But this time he was on to his fifth glass of rich, cloying stout. The soft, sticky foam at its head forming a soft, sticky coating across his upper lip. With a drink in one hand and the other clutching his newly issued ID card, baring his new identification number. 37466.

It was true that alcohol characterised the nochrim in Eden, in their social life, their rituals, their culture. This was always a source of stubborn pride for the nochrim but left them vulnerable to attacks from the tumtum who largely abstained from alcohol and followed a kosher diet. Following the referendum result, the tumtum weaponized alcohol as a means of control and coercion of the nochrim. Pubs became heavily policed. In fact every facet of public space that the nochrim can claim their own became policed. Soon enough much of 37466's daily existence was spent waiting. Queuing in line. Being chaperoned, escorted, removed from the premises, diverted, relegated to the back, to the side, led to the exit.

That day, he had waited two hours to get inside the pub. As he waited, a steady stream of fluids ran beside his feet. The guards forced everybody to empty whatever bottles they had on their person, in case of any clandestine alcohol. He winced a little as scalding hot coffee ebbed its way through the worn soles of his shoes.

Once inside the pub nobody dared leave. Perhaps there were others that 37466 knew here but he dared not look anybody in the eye. Condensation covered the mirrors on the walls so he could neither glimpse his reflection nor that of others.

Just as last orders were called, the door was kicked open and a tumtum guard rushed inside bearing a baton in one hand and a shield in the other. 37466 struggles to recollect the moments that followed thereafter but from time to time his body twitches and tenses as he recalls the pint glass that sliced his head open. The tear of his muscles as punters attempting escape clambered over his body. Bloodied faces reflected in the mirrors as the condensation began to fade away.

Following the repossession of pubs, the purchase of alcohol among nochrims was at first severely restricted then eventually outlawed. But such punitive measures weren't enough; for the baying tumtum masses, it wasn't enough to resolve what came to be known as the 'nochrims question'. As a consequence, the deliberate and systematic deprivation of food among the nochrims became public policy and public practice. Without food the nochrims resistance movement became depleted. Nochrims bodies began to disintegrate, and their surroundings submerged into the ether beyond the eruv.

Suddenly 37466 feels a gentle swelling rising from underneath his body: could that be the roof of his old house, slowly ascending upwards towards him?

As the nochrims' material world disappeared, their bodies began to adapt to form amniotic sacs that fermented beer. This beer was a limp, lifeless substitute for what the nochrims used to drink. It functioned to keep the nochrims hardly alive, just in stasis.

37466 closes his eyes once again, and keeps them closed long enough to keep these mauve apparitions from the eruv in suspension. He takes a warm pleasure in these visions. This prisoner's cinema. Suddenly a flash of green appears. He opens his eyes abruptly. The green disappears. All around him the same landscape of mauve, puce and grey surrounds him. No green. But he recognises that green. Then he recalls the brick red colour that offsets it. The brick red lipstick and sharp green eyes that belonged to his malach, Eva.

Malachs were angels within the tumtum. They played a more benevolent role within the nochrims' disenfranchisement scheme compared to other state actors and willing collaborators. The cruelty of the tumtum administration placed an acute emotional burden on the likes of Eva who had a proclivity to feel things more authentically than other tumtums - to feel empathy for marginalised groups. The malachs were marginalized within the tumtum community due to their nurturing, giving nature - a closer alignment to characteristics deemed feminine ('fem-' being a prefix for 'lesser' in the tumtum's interpretation of scripture). Once the amniotic sacs had fully developed within the general nochrims population the state-sanctioned role of the malachs was to monitor them on a fortnightly basis. The state feared that the alcohol therein had the capacity to modify its molecular compounds to form reproductive properties, thus enabling amniotic sacs to become reproductive organs. The tumtums of Eden had seized the referendum result as their chance to build a sovereign nation, an absolute utopia. There was no space for the nochrims and so there was no choice but for them to be neutered.



In the period prior to the prohibition of alcohol, a subculture of malachs sought solace and escape in nochrin pubs. This was highly dangerous pursuit and malachs as a sub-group became heavily stigmatized. But for Eva, alcohol and nochrin pub culture was a powerful means of resistance and catharsis.

Sometimes Eva would administer her checks on 37466 intoxicated. The uneven pressure applied to his sac would make it contract abruptly then quiver. As the beer rushed up the oesophagus and into his mouth it somehow would taste like a soft and spicy caramel. Under tumtum jurisdiction the malach functioned as the 'facilitator', and the nochri the 'service user'. 37466 didn't owe anything to Eva other than his subservience to her procedural duties. But their relationship became something of warmth and profound value. A value that 37466 couldn't quantify. It was something he wanted to hold and to nurture. Nurture. This instinct to nurture made 37466 recoil in shame. He is a man after all.

Now 37466 feels a strong undercurrent beneath him. He is abruptly pulled backwards as the light of the eruv flashes. The force of the current makes his sac contract. It quivers. Beer rushes up his oesophagus and into his mouth. He tastes soft and spicy caramel.



I.

There's a mischievous confidence in your eyes  
as you hand me the necklace with a swooping line uniting two imposing pillars.  
The valleys of your wrinkles extend a haunted hospitality.

You were our national hero, our philosopher queen  
In your words, enveloping, awakening, womanly  
We prayed for the first time in our native tongue  
Wrote our poetry and proclaimed it as prophecy

II.

In every almost-elegy lies the sharp tongue of the descendant heretic.  
I looked at your soft, sun-spotted hand  
a trophy of your penchant for entanglement  
as you offered me the tree of life

And I reached back, hoping for a shield  
but receiving a mask

III.

Your kitchen was the beit midrash  
On top of twisted twine place mats,  
through the kaleidoscope of the pickled and smoked

The glinting challah whose poppy seeds camped in your gums  
and the boiled chicken that hung heavy in the air

We played with patience, with passion, in the castle of our foremothers  
We built our common language on a scaffold of certainty  
in the cushion of our tradition

IV.

But now as your hearing has left you  
And quick jabs turn into confused repetitions  
most days I go to learn  
and the walls of the beit midrash come tumbling down

Sometimes it's quick  
Boards snap, concrete crashes  
Chalk smashed into powder

More often it's slow  
Portraits of wise woman  
in glistening jewelry droop off center followed by



A creak in the floorboard  
A slow drip from the ceiling

Climbing debris and mounting holy papers  
As I strain to hear voices over the thuds and crashes

V.

I close my eyes and the walls of the beit midrash are closing in around me  
Humid echoes and nails digging and the rabbis have forgotten that they left me  
inside as they wandered out  
and I am left to scream to claw to grasp for revelation

I close my eyes and the beit midrash never existed  
I've been mumbling to myself this whole time  
Hoping that the walls would hide as well as they would support  
As the chain that you handed me transforms into a noose

The next day I always return  
Curious to examine the state of the wreckage  
But the beit midrash still stands



The bus rattles and screeches to a halt. Ari, having not moved in over an hour, eagerly slings their backpack up on to their shoulder and bounds down to the sidewalk. They stretch their legs and their arms and revel in the heat of the sun on their skin. *Hot enough to fry a latke*, they think, as they begin to take in their surroundings.

They are at a bus stop, on a street corner, in front of a barber shop from which Caribbean music plays warmly through its open door. Directly opposite Ari, on the other side of the street corner, stands another bus stop of sorts, but made of stone. Then Ari notices the tramlines running by it. *This must be the shuttle stop*. They walk toward it with a smirk, recalling how Emma had described the free electric transport service that runs through the Jewish area surrounding the temple. Ari had liked the idea, but somehow doubted that such a utopian concept would actually exist. *I should never have questioned it*. At the stop there is a small bench, where an old man sits, and a large button next to a small LED screen that reads ‘push button to call shuttle’ in alternating English, Hebrew and Spanish, with a sign adjacent in braille. When Ari does so, the sign changes to display an estimated arrival time of two minutes. Impressive. It’s only then that Ari considers whether or not they’re on the right side of the street, but wonders if it even matters with a system such as this.

The electric shuttle arrives, slides silently to a stop, and beeps gently as the doors open. There is no driver, but Ari watches as the old man gets on and presses a card against a screen installed where the driver would be. A map appears on the screen and the man selects a location. Ari, who doesn’t have a card, tries to press the screen but is told to ‘present card or insert money’. *Is this service only free for local residents?* Ari thinks, then inserts two dollars into the slot beside the screen and selects the largest image, the big square in the centre of the map. The Temple.

Seeing the block shape of the compound in the heart of the map creates a strange rumbling in Ari’s stomach, a kind of apprehension mixed with excitement. As they take their seat, they glance around at the bodies around them: young children fighting over a bag of Bisli, mothers talking, a businessman on his laptop, Yeshiva boys in black hats and teenagers giggling over a smartphone. Ari directs their gaze out the window to the street, the brownstone houses and apartments, the schools and shops and cafes. They notice the abundance of green spaces, small rows of roadside planters and leaves hanging from rooftop gardens. There are hardly any cars, with pedestrians and cyclists taking up most of the street-space. In some parts, the line between pavement and road is practically non-existent. Suddenly the tram turns a corner and the brownstones open up to reveal an enormous green: a park, lined with trees and riddled with paths and small buildings that lead to a high stone wall surrounding a centre complex, the brilliant bright marble Temple itself.

Ari’s heart beats fast as the tram slides to a stop. They step down and place their first foot on the soft grass of the Temple compound. *How on earth is this grass kept so*

*green when the air is so dry?* They walk toward the centre, weaving around trees, children playing and people hurrying to and from places in the pre-Shabbat rush. Emma had said they would meet by the kitchens on the western side. The smell of challah grows stronger as they walk by the produce garden, so Ari knows they must be close. They spot Emma across the grass and call to her, waving. Passing the open entrance to the kitchen, they almost collide with a Chassidic woman who is on her way inside.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Ruth exclaims. She had been in such a rush to get to the kitchen in time, she had almost collided with the poor girl. She runs inside before she hears any response. The sounds of the extractor fans whirring, the gentle slap and knead of many hands working challah dough to the perfect consistency, and the muffled whispers, giggles and tuneful humming instantly calm Ruth as she enters the large, commercial-size kitchen. She wipes her brow with a dark sleeve and runs a finger under her tightly-wound headscarf, wishing that she could strip off and cook in just her underwear. Instead, she picks an apron off a hook and joins a group of women in the back corner, by the ovens. The women, three of them huddled together in the spacious room, all greet her warmly.

Ava turns to her as she pulls a tray of hot loaves from the oven. “Good afternoon Ruthy, how are you feeling?” she asks. Then, in a hushed tone, “do you have the notes?”

Ruth smiles nervously and pulls from her pocket a small cylindrical bundle of papers, wrapped tightly together like a cigarette.

“Did we agree on a time and a place, then?” one of the women asks.

“Yes, we will do it here at midnight,” Ruth replies.

Hannah nods in approval. “And you have the list of women who want to join? We can’t take any risks and hand out information to the wrong people.”

“Don’t worry, it’s a good list. I mean, there’s less than twenty women on there, but it’s a good start.”

The women proceed to insert them into the creases of the pleats in several of the freshly baked challos, still soft and malleable from the warm oven. These are wrapped in brown paper, to distinguish them from the challos in white bags that will be delivered to the rest of the community. Though they talk and joke as they go about their task, Ruth detects an air of seriousness. This marks the beginning of something that they have been discussing in passing for months: tonight they will have their first real meeting of the Temple Women’s Group for Change.

With a basket full of fresh challos, Ruth makes her way toward the street, where she will catch the shuttle to her allocated delivery area. She has two hours before the children will be home from school and the Shabbat preparations will really begin. The grass is soft beneath her feet as she walks, hurriedly at first, then slowing to a meander across the quad. It is a particularly sunny day, the sky brilliantly blue. She lets her eye drift across the scene: the grass, the children playing on the far side, the trees sitting green against the cool yellow gold of the stone, that itself sits brown against the white marble of the temple itself, as bright as the sun that glows above it. The stairways, gates, doors and tunnels, the mikvahs, libraries and study rooms that she has never been invited to, all housed within interconnecting walls, at once so accessible and so inaccessible. This is really the root of it all, she thinks, the inaccessibility of these spaces. How she longs to be able to spend a day in the great temple library, or for her daughters to grow up to be scholars rather than wives and mothers – or both!

She sighs, and can't help but notice, ahead of her on the grass, a group of young men sitting in an informal circle on the grass. As she approaches, she realises they are all women. Or at least she thinks they are women, but it is hard to tell. They seem to engage with an air of attentive listening that she rarely, if ever, sees in a men's group discussion. Not that she has the opportunity to partake in many of those, but she has witnessed plenty in her own home, through the door from the kitchen.

She passes them close enough to hear one of them speaking. "...and so I can't help but wonder, with the extent of progress, of incredible environmental concern, technological ambition and productivity that I can see here, how it still happens that our communities are so divided? Even the temple, the one space that should bring us all together, still manages to divide us through what places we can and cannot access as members of a particular group, as women, as gender-fluid or genderless or queer or trans people..."

Another one interrupts, and Ruth suddenly recognises her as the girl she almost collided with earlier. "Yes, absolutely, but can't we also see the problem in a greater context? Our community spirit has led to the development of an advanced infrastructure which is exclusive only to this community. These technological advances are being made here, but could they not also be shared with neighbouring communities, which could mean they could also enjoy a quality of life—"

The one who is speaking stops suddenly and looks directly at Ruth, who realises that she has gone from meandering slowly to standing and listening. There are only four of them in the group, but it feels to Ruth like an entire auditorium as they turn to look at her. In their faces Ruth detects hostility, defensiveness, and... empathy? She suddenly sees that their souls are pure empathy, and she is taken aback by this

sudden spiritual judgement from complete strangers. As her cheeks flush red, Ruth looks down and sees the challos in her basket... She pulls a brown paper-wrapped challah from her basket and holds it out to the one who had been speaking. "I wish you all a peaceful and enlightening Shabbat," she says, her heart beating and cheeks still glowing as she speeds off toward the shuttle stop.

Ari looks down at the brown wrapping in their hands, a challah, still warm from the oven, "That was odd, wasn't it?" they say to Emma, sitting next to them, who nods along with Sol and Miriam.

"It was nice of her, though, I think she was really intrigued by what we were saying," Miriam says.

Emma laughs, "Yeah, maybe she's part of a revolutionary Chassidic Wives and Mothers group or something". They all burst into laughter.

Ari places the challah to the side, and the group delves back deep into their analysis. They spend the rest of the afternoon talking, sitting under trees, and walking circles around the complex. Ari would have liked to go in, but Emma had explained that a special card was required. Before long the sunlight begins to dim, and it gets very quiet as people head home to bring in Shabbat with their families.

"Shall we head back to mine for dinner, then?" Emma suggests, and the rest agree. They don't need to get a tram to Emma's apartment as it's only a block away from the temple. Her grandfather is on the housing committee, she explained, which is how she got such a good spot. "I think he'd hoped I'd meet a nice yeshiva boy here," she says, and they all laugh as she reaches across to squeeze Ari's hand.

The apartment is on the top floor of an old brownstone and beautiful decorated; it's spacious, and filled with books, plants and soft furnishings, as well as a great big dining kitchen with a door onto a back fire escape that leads up to a small shared produce garden on the roof.

"I guess we should do this properly then, since we are in the Holy Place." Ari says, and Emma brings down some beautiful bronze candlesticks and a matching Kiddush cup.

"I always do Shabbat now," she explains, "it's a really nice marker for the week, and it gives me an excuse to relax and eat food with my friends."

Miriam lights the candles and all four of them cover their eyes to say the prayer in unison, then Emma pours the wine and hands it to Ari, who says the Kiddush prayer before passing the cup around. Finally, Sol takes a challah from Emma's cupboard,



and Ari pulls the gifted, mysterious challah from its brown wrapping. Sol holds the two together, says the bracha, and with a chorus of ‘Amen’ they slice into the beautiful soft bread and begin to devour it. Wine is passed around, humous and aubergine dip and olives are taken from the fringe and placed on the kitchen table, and Emma puts a glorious looking spatchcock chicken in the preheated oven. Ari is watching her as they reach for the challah to cut another slice. As the knife presses down, they feel a strange crunch in the bread. Pulling out the utensil, they see a small glint of white and reach in to pull out a tiny roll of paper.

“Oh my... what the fuck?” Miriam exclaims, and Sol looks up from his mouthful to see what’s going on.

“Did you just pull that out of the challah?” he says, and now Emma is leaning over Ari’s shoulder.

“What is it? It looks like a note, open it!” Ari unrolls the note slowly, and reads it aloud.

*Women of the Temple: Our Time is Now*  
*Let us meet. The Kitchen at Midnight.*

“What!?! Okay, we absolutely HAVE to go!” Emma cannot control her excitement, “I knew there was something with that woman!”

Ari’s heart beats fast as they agree, “Yes, absolutely, I mean she basically invited us, right? This is wild.”

Miriam and Sol are in agreement too, and so they decide to go. The next hours pass slowly in the countdown to midnight, they eat and drink and discuss the possibility of what could happen tonight. Ari, tired from their long day of travel and excitement, eventually lays down on the soft sofa and closes their eyes.

They are woken by someone shaking their shoulder. Emma stands over them with a coat on. “Come on,” she says, pulling them up, “it’s time to go.”

The four of them, wrapped in coats, head back down to the street. The temperature dropped quickly after the sun set, and now the streets feel almost icy. The Shabbat service has passed, the celebrations, meals, and discussions complete. The only people left awake are those on late night walks, still dancing in sleepless houses, or on their way to secret meetings.

They arrive at the door to the kitchen, tingling with nerves and the chill of the cool night. Despite this, Ari sweats with anticipation, and they lightly hold Emma's hand as they hover by the entrance.

"We have to go in," Emma says, as if to convince herself not to turn around more than anyone else. Miriam takes the first step and pushes the door forward. As it swings open, Ari can see a warm light and smell coffee. The four step forward, Ari at the back, and walk into a kitchen. Sitting at a long table in the centre of the room are seven women, all around the same age and dressed in the black worn by Temple wives and mothers.

These four queers, ambiguous in gender and utterly different in appearance from the women, stand awkwardly at the end of the table. The women look at them, silent. Then one suddenly stands, "This is a private meeting. Please lea—"

She is quickly cut off by the woman who gave them the challah, who leaps toward them. "Hi! Welcome. I'm Ruth. This is the Temple Women's Group for Change."

"Um... th-thank you, thanks for inviting us." Ari stumbles over their words. "I'm Ari, I'm not... a woman, but I want change, too. This is Miriam, and Sol, and Emma."

Sol steps forward. "I'm Sol, I use he/him pronouns, I'm a trans man. I was born and raised in this community and I want to see change, too. I think I can speak for all of us in saying that we are very interested in what you are doing here, and think we could achieve a great deal if we work together."

Miriam follows, "Yes, I think we have a lot in common, although it may not look like it to you, I think there is a lot we could talk about and probably agree on... and also probably a lot we could learn from each other."

The women look stunned, even horrified. They remain silent for a few long moments, before Ruth takes charge of the situation. "Ladies, I mean, gentlemen... I mean... sorry, please sit down, help yourself to coffee."

The four of them do so. Sol and Miriam sit together on one side of the table and Emma and Ari sit on the other. They leave no gap between them and the women, who look at them with some apprehension. Ruth walks along the length of the table and sits down at the top. She looks at her watch, it's 12:15. She coughs. "I think we will start. First of all, thank you for coming—" Suddenly, she is interrupted by the door opening. A young man in a shirt and coat too big for him, tsitsit dangling down and peyot swinging by his ears, steps inside. The room fills with whispers.

"That's Yacob Gershom..."

“...The Rabbi’s son? I heard rumours about him, but...”

One of the women stands up. “You can’t be in here—”

“Hannah, it’s ok,” Ruth hushes her, then turns to Yacob, “please, come in Yacob, take a seat.”

He closes the door and sits at the table, leaving a respectable few seats of distance between himself and Ari.

“Would you like some coffee?” Ari asks.

Yacob nods. “Please, thank you.”

Ari pours him a cup and passes it over. “I’m Ari.”

Yacob looks at them with confusion. “Hi, Ari... I’m Yacob.”

Ari nods and turns back to Ruth. All the women at the table are looking at Yacob.

Hannah speaks up again. “He can’t be here, these people can’t be here... this is supposed to be the Temple Women’s group.”

The person next to her, a slight woman with fierce black eyes, without looking at Hannah, says, “Maybe we should change our name then, Hannah. We need more people, we can help each other.”

Ruth smiles across at her, and continues her welcome, “I was just saying, thank you all for coming. The reason we are here, well, it began with a conversation between myself, Hannah and Yael... many conversations, in fact. We all love our community, our children, our friends, but we have all suffered within this community, whether due to abusive husbands or seeing our friends suffer at the hands of abusive husbands, we have been exposed to the dirty underside of this supposed utopia. This has led us to question many things that we had so far taken for granted. We are devout women and want to be able to study as our male counterparts do, to engage in services, to have access to learning resources. We want our daughters to be able to fulfil their potential, to learn about what they want, to express their opinions, to not be silenced. This is why we wanted to start meeting with others who also see problems within the community and to perhaps work together to figure out how we can change it. Admittedly, we only considered asking women because that is the only oppression we understand, but it has become increasingly apparent that being a gay man...” she looks hesitantly at Yacob, who smiles and nods, “that that can be just as hard in this community, and that there are others within the Temple community who

we had not even considered, those who go completely beyond our understanding of gender and can give us a new perspective. So, perhaps what we can do to start off is go around the table and say something that we would like to change in the community? It can be anything you like. How does that sound?”

Everyone looks hesitant, but curious. No one speaks out in protest, no one stands up to leave. Hannah nods, and others begin to show their approval.

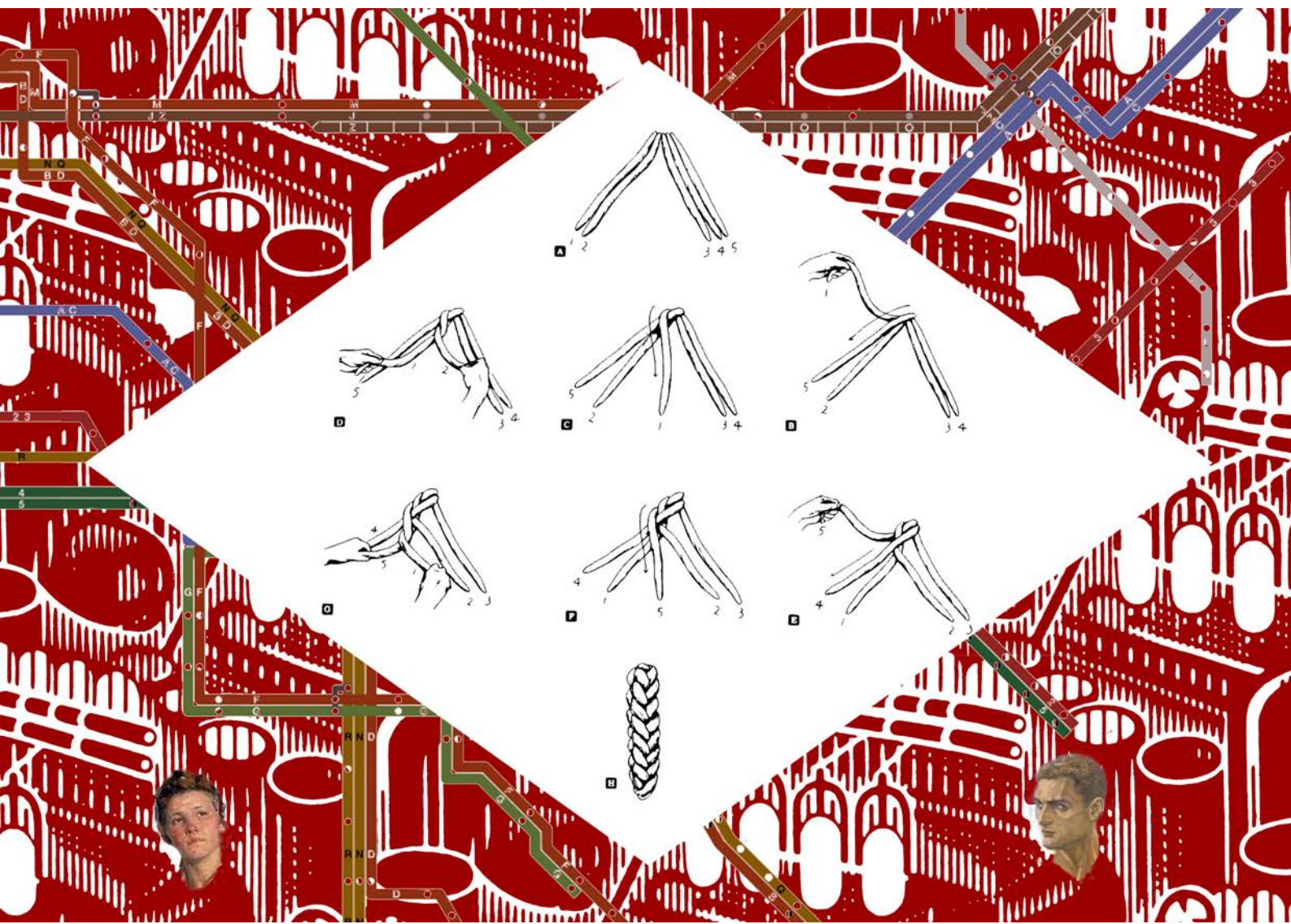
“Yes, that sounds fine...”

“It’s good place to start...”

“Sure...”

“Fine with me...”

Miriam reaches across the table to pour herself some more coffee and offers it around. Equipped with steaming cups in hand, the newly formed Temple Group for Change settles down to face a long night of discussion, the first of many. Their time is now.



## I.

My phone vibrated on my bedside table. It was the alarm calling me to Shacharit. It was by far my least favourite way to possibly wake up. Finding the effort to strap on phylacteries while still half asleep was always made worse by the eternally miserable South London weather. The ritual seemed a bit empty, but how it made you feel wasn't the point, apparently. That was the way that it had always been done and the way it would always be done. As long as you looked presentable and didn't cause a stir then everyone would be happy. Causing a scene was tantamount to treason – imagine the horror of going against the grain! You were told to stick to convention. I never felt that they were tradition; they were actions. Tradition needs to have meaning, it needs to have pride.

I was too tired for this today. I felt my head nod and my lids begin to close.

## II.

I didn't think much of it when it was first discovered. A tatty, ripped scroll buried underneath a synagogue, amongst a collection of bent Kiddush cups and plastic detritus. I'm not going to pretend that some kind of awesome power drew me to it straight away. I left it to sit on the side slowly rotting for a couple of weeks before I turned my attention back to it. In truth, I assumed that I had more important things to do: finish the paper I was ever so slowly working on, watch football and just generally try to do as little as possible while still collecting a cheque.

It was a full couple of weeks later that I remembered the muddy old scroll in pre-reform Hebrew shoved into a corner of the room. It was one of those working days when even shirking off is so mind-numbingly boring you can feel your hair and fingernails grow. Not having anything to do (or more precisely, not having anything I wanted to do), I went over and slid the scroll out from under the pile of papers perched on top of it and took it over to my desk. I unfurled it with just enough care to try and minimise my chances of ripping it further, but probably not enough to actually qualify as carefully.

It was far less exciting than you might think. But you have the gift of hindsight and know the changes that it created. There was no fanfare, no heavens opening up, no Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, no Rebecca or Leah there to congratulate me or welcome me back to the fold. But as I read it day after day and night after night, my eyes opened and my heart filled with stories of our ancestors. Ceremony became story and reason joined hands with ritual. I become one of the present at Mount Sinai, developing my own meaning of what it was to be. My body, now created, had caught up with my soul. Responsibility followed revelation. Tzitzit were no longer just string, they were my connection to Abraham; Mincha let me continue Isaac's conversation. I felt traditional and I felt radical. I felt strong and felt connected, more so than I ever had done under conservative society rule. I felt like I not only finally belonged but like I understood. There was Kavanah in my heart and understanding in my actions, but the question still remained – would anyone else join me?

### III.

We began slowly. We kept our practice and study confined to our minds and our homes. We knew that tales and tradition were radical in our society. It's not that we couldn't tell people; of course we could, *technically*. But many of us couldn't come to terms with the admonishment and public reproaches. We were treated with suspicion. Knowing your heritage was heresy to a status quo that didn't want to be challenged.

We were shouted down and written off, both in public and in private. Editorials slandered us, calling us traitors and anarchists (this may not have been strictly *untrue*, but they painted it as a bad thing). Letters were slipped through our doors, our homes marked in paint and pen. They thought it a great perversion of the story we had told them, we thought it an honour to once more be marked as Israelites.

Still, we continued attending the shops, shuls and services we always had. Our understanding may have changed but we were still the people that they had known and respected before. We hoped we could teach them with words and actions, through upholding our behaviours.

### IV.

Slowly our ideas began to take hold on society. Bit by bit, generation by generation, class by class (Our ideas! How arrogant I still am. The ideas and thoughts of our forebears). The rigid paternalism which had previously defined our society slowly became loving and maternal. We always knew that the conservative, ethnic-based rule imposed upon us would never last, but it was still a great vindication to see it come tumbling down. Cracks had formed by the time we had begun to organise, and our behaviour acted as a wedge. I still think of how fortunate we were that our struggle never had to become violent, and that our words and civil disobedience worked alone. I think we were ultimately successful less on the strength of us and more on the weakness of the society we lived in.

We led by example and we encouraged our friends and family to do the same. It was wonderful to see it spread, shul by shul and town by town. It was a wave of change spreading through our people. Less and less did people stand for the prayer for the Royal family, knowing that we needed neither to respect a monarchy or a nation. People gave up standing for the prayer for our fake Zion too, regardless of the religious ownership they claimed; we didn't need that nation like we didn't need this one. People began to realise that just because it claimed to stand for all of us didn't mean that it did.

People became more open, kinder. Lost Jewish genders were rediscovered, race became no object to thoughtful practise. We lost our borders as we lost our hatred and fear.

We did not always agree of course; people rediscovered Hasidism, the Kabballah, and the Bund. But this did not matter, for we knew that we all sprung from the same source, that the world was ours together.



