

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

Eitan Ginsburg
We Wear a Hat

*“And they shall say unto me, ‘What is his name?’
Then what shall I say unto them?” –Exodus 3:13*

Here’s the cold truth: I have this impulse—like standing at cliff’s edge, a temptation which whispers perpetually, seductively, in my ear, *just jump*—to break a man’s nose in a subway car.

Next stop, 14th Street Union Square, a muffled voice announced.

It was the beginning of my freshman year, NYU, a period defined by my optimism in humanity. I was chattering away with a new friend, an attractive female friend, who, attractive and female, was the focus of my attention while everyone else riding the subway was but a slightly eclectic splash of paint on the city-wide mural.

As I would quickly learn, though, I had a knack for standing out. For on my head, a large brown yarmulke sat, and from my shirt, long blue-white *tzitzit*, ritual tassels, dangled, that is to say, like a circumcised Waldo, I bulged through the non-strictly-Jewish illustration.

14th street Union Square, the conductor announced.

The car stopped. *Whoosh.* The doors opened.

“Hey, you!” an unknown voice yelled.

I turned toward the opening, meeting eyes with an unfamiliar man. He wore a dark beige jacket and washed blue jeans; his skin was a light brown, which, since it was early fall, following a sun-drenched summer, was nearly the same tone as myself.

With a heavy accent, “You don’t belong here,” he said matter-of-factly.

Stand clear of the closing doors, please.

One hand on the door and the other pointing my way, “Go back to Israel,” he ordered before taking a quick step back and out.

Ding dong. Whoosh. The doors shut with a *click*.

Silence suffocated the subway, scattering sorely throughout, through the spectators, through the common peace-of-mind, before against my suppositions, swiftly dissipating as the car sped forward, as the world moved on, leaving behind—but only myself.



I grew up in an in-between, between a lock-and-key community of my great grandparents in the secluded ghettos of Europe and a wide-open American society preaching sex for those who could give it and money for those who could take it. It was a paradoxically open bubble, protecting my Judaism while still providing me glimpses of the world outside. While I watched all the latest movies, played the hottest games, and was an avid sports fan, I was, nevertheless, surrounded exclusively by Jews.

My childhood was defined by this bubble, encapsulating me while still

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allowing me to look out at the world. By the end of high school, I had no idea I was different, that I stood out, an entirely naive perspective which allowed me to enter university so purely optimistic.

I can unapologetically express myself with the utmost truth, I had believed. The way I act, hold myself, and dress, this is me.

But freshman year, Saturday morning, October 27th, an armed terrorist opened fire in the Tree of Life Congregation in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, murdering eleven innocent Jews. Suddenly, my yarmulke weighed heavy on my head; my *tzitzit* pulled me to the floor. And the numerous debates of carrying pepper spray, learning self-defense, and the age-old solution of concealing one's Jewish identity, chipped away at my once optimistic soul.

For the first time in my life, I was experiencing, no other way to say it, but genuine fear.

Though, soon enough, fear morphed into something new. Later that same year, around wintertime, a series of anti-Semitic attacks took place across New York City. I recall a particular video of a Jewish student from Stoney Brook College, looking not too different from myself, running off the subway as a man twice his size chased after him, all those around watching without a word. And I recall too, how that period lit a flame in me, igniting something buried deep down my dark lineage, rage.

When alone in my room, I began to shadowbox until I was drenched with sweat, red in the face, ready for a fight.

My daydreams shifted from playing in the NBA and finding love to being approached—dark night, empty street corner—by someone looking to cause trouble, and then proceeding to lay them out with a furious barrage of punches. I began to ride the subway back and forth, my yarmulke sitting on my head, my *tzitzit* falling blatantly by my sides, waiting for a dirty look. All I wanted was my chance, my chance to draw blood, real blood.

"Why don't you get pepper spray," my mother suggested while preparing dinner.

"Ma, I'm not getting pepper spray," I responded.

"And? Why? Not?"

"Cause the hell do I need pepper spray for?"

She gestured to all of me. "You're a skinny Jew."

It was one AM. I was meandering the desolate, dark, midtown Manhattan streets with my girlfriend. She, a dainty 5'2, dressed in her usual modest black skirt reaching intentionally below her knees, and me, in my usual attire, appeared as we were: one very Jewish couple, a fact that seemed suddenly relevant as two hooded figures lurked behind us.

With their every step, my yarmulke seemed increasingly more like a target.

"Let's cross the street," I whispered.

She ignored my request.

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"Let's go," I pressed.

She looked up at me, her eyebrows drawn together. "Go where?"

It was too late; I felt the hooded figures mirror our movement. Instinctively, I drew my shoulders back, clenched my fists, and turned around. "Fellas, we got a problem?"

The attacks continued. On the last night of Hanukkah, by the flickering flames of the Menorah sitting steadily on a windowsill in Monsey, New York, a mask-wearing intruder broke into a Jewish home wielding a machete. Five men were wounded, one died.

Thus, it was on the festival of lights, that I felt my own light dwindling. Perhaps it was in that darkness that I heard the age-old voice calling my name, inviting me to abandon that which made me different, inviting me to take part in American freedom.

I found freedom in a hat.

It was a plain black hat. Adidas. Who the hell wears Adidas? Yet, it was perfect, for it was perfect anonymity.

Hat on, I was new: no longer afraid, no longer angry, no longer a Jew. And it didn't take long, only a few months really, before, after years of having worn my identity on my sleeves, I found myself addicted to this 'modern' look.

To be clear, it wasn't the passing I was addicted to, but rather, the power I possessed.

From a lanky Jewish boy, an easy target— — a man forged to be feared was born, a 6'2, dark, thick-bearded, shadowed man. Women avoided me on subways; pedestrians crossed from me on sidewalks; clerks followed me through stores. I wandered dangerous streets late at night, lurking in the darkness, music blasting from my headphones, utterly unaware of my surroundings, having, for once, not a care in the world. *For a guy opens the door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No! I am the one who knocks!*

I was unafraid. I was danger. I was Goliath.

Knock-----Knock-----Knock



But there are consequences in lying to oneself. For one, you begin to lose sight of who you are. Your identity slowly melts away like wax before quickly washing away with the rain. One day you awaken to find you haven't prayed in a month, that the Sabbath seems slightly strained, that a particularly unholy woman emits temptation.

I am fear. I am darkness. I am all that I had wanted to be. I am my hat.

Yet, I look in the mirror to see who I am is a far cry from who I was, so much has been lost, so little has been gained.

But I remember the generations of familial fear, how I have changed the tide, how I have saved my soul, how I am unafraid. So while I stand on that same subway, my back is now straight, my eyes are now closed, my heart now beats slowly—steadily—boom—boom—

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—Next stop, 14th Street Union Square, a muffled voice announces—

—I open my eyes to see a noticeably Jewish man sitting across from me. Surprisingly, almost paradoxically, I can't help but envy him, him in all his fear. I have an unexpected urge to call out to him, to pull off my hat, to show him my large brown yarmulke, and say to him, *I am one of you. I am Jewish too.*

But before I can, the car pulls to a stop. The doors open wide. He leaves me behind.

—Ding dong. Whoosh. The doors shut with a click—

—By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered—

—My heart splits like the Nile. On one side, I stand unafraid in my well-worn black cap, but on the other—

—I know the truth which resides in me. The truth is, I hope I lose my hat; I hope I find fear and fight it as David once had, slingshot, stone, pride; I hope I die a saint.

Because when my tale ends, my hat won't join me in the tomb, rather, alone, I will rise naked as Adam to the clouds of glory, golden light shining upon me, where once there I will stand in awe before the iron gates. Before I may enter, though, in a chorus of resounding voices they will ask of me but a single question: *WHAT IS YOUR NAME?*

"My name?" I echo. "What is *my* name?"

A breeze flows through the train. A tree rustles in the night. A people cry to the heavens.

So it will be, with warm-blooded rage running from my heart, fear rushing through my veins, large brown yarmulke on my head and long blue-white *tzitzit* by my sides, I will respond to them then in a lion's roar of all those who had come before me, "*Hineni.*"

—Here I am—