

Growing Up Jewish: Art *and* Storytelling

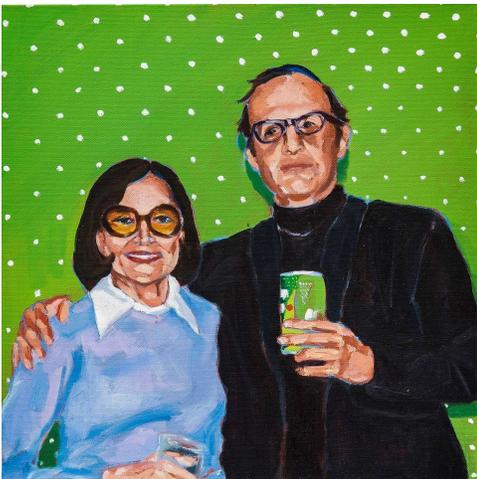
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Artist Statement

I created this series to tell my family's Jewish story and perhaps shine a new light on what Judaic art could look like. In these deeply personal paintings and narratives, I look at who and what shaped my distinctly North American brand of Jewish identity. Inspired by vintage family photos, each oil painting has a Jewish reflection. Some of the stories are joyful recollections of the Judaism of my youth including my experiences at Jewish summer camp, Purim carnivals, or teen tours of Israel. Others speak to my family's history, such as the acculturation process experienced by my grandparents who arrived in Canada after the Holocaust. I looked at my observances – the traditions I've kept, the ones I've altered to better suit my family's current needs, and the ones I wrestle with. Every seemingly simple Jewish moment I painted had a story.



The Conservative Rabbi & His Wife Leona

Oil on Canvas, 18x18, painted 2019
Original photograph taken - 1978

My parents were founding members of Beth Tikvah Synagogue in Toronto. At the heart of that congregation was the charismatic, brilliant, funny but deeply serious Rabbi Herbert Feder. For my parents, joining a Conservative synagogue was the happy medium in the ever-present conflict between "Tradition and Change". At Beth Tikvah we could observe strict adherence to traditional laws of Kashrut (Jewish dietary laws), Shabbat and holiday rituals but the environment felt distinctly modern. To my young eyes all the women there reminded me of Gloria Steinem - accomplished, forward thinking, chic and self-confident. I felt a certain amount of pride that the Rabbi considered my parents among his close circle of friends and would travel with them to Shakespeare festivals in the summer or come to our home for New Year's Eve celebrations.

Conservative Judaism is a movement born in America. It suited my parents because it was not the 'rigid' Orthodoxy of generations past nor was it the unfamiliar Judaism of the Reform movement, which played organ music on the Sabbath. Beth Tikvah Synagogue was never the same after Rabbi Feder moved with his family to Jerusalem in the mid 1980s. While some members stayed on, they did their best to maintain the environment and legacy created by the Feders. Sadly, a number of the founding families, including my own, simply stopped going to Synagogue - except for High Holidays.



Bar Mitzvah Boy

Oil on Canvas, 24x36, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 1974

The first Bar Mitzvah I ever attended was my cousin John's. It was a big milestone because he was the only boy out of ten cousins on my dad's side. The celebration was pretty lavish with a catered banquet and a live band. When I saw my aunt, uncle and five cousins sitting at the head table they looked like 'royalty' to me. In the 70's there used to be this candle lighting ceremony for Bar Mitzvah boys (I have no idea when this ritual fell out of fashion). It was a way to honor 13 guests by inviting them to stand next to an awkward bar mitzvah boy and light a candle on his Torah shaped birthday cake. Every honoree marched across the dance floor to a 'theme song' that the band or DJ played at high volume. The Kott sisters' song was always

(you guessed it!) "We are family – I got all my sisters and me" by Sister Sledge. My cousin John, in his brown velvet tuxedo, did not look amused.



Bubba Sara at Casino Rama

Oil on canvas, 16x20, painted 2018

Original photograph taken - 2010

I never really felt close to my grandparents but I loved them and I knew they loved me. They died when I was quite young and they only spoke Yiddish so it was tough to communicate and establish a real relationship with them beyond the adoring smiles. When I met my husband it was completely strange to me to have that generation alive and well and part of our lives. Lucky for me he had two wonderful grandmothers. Being with them was almost like time-traveling to the shtetls of old and yet both were thoroughly modern women, each with a playful sense of humor. Bubba Sara died in 2017. She lived to be 102. Bubba LOVED the casinos. When she turned 90 we (her grandchildren) took her to Las Vegas because she wanted, as she put it, "to go there one last time before moving to my

apartment in the sky". Even near the end of her life, when she slept a lot, she'd perk up if someone offered to take her to the slot machines. I miss her every day.



Two Queen Esthers

Oil on Canvas, 20x20, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 1972

Purim was the holiday that made me love being Jewish. It had all the elements: costumes, hamentaschen cookies, candy, a good story, a seriously fun carnival and lots of noise. I remember my father always opted out of the megillah reading because he couldn't take the clattering sound of the groggers (noise-makers) cancelling out Haman's name. But this was the one time in the Jewish calendar year when I fully opted in. I even won the best Queen Esther costume in the 'under 3 with a bottle category'. It was great.



The Four Questions on Jeanne Mance Street

Oil on Canvas, 18x24, painted 2019
Original photograph taken - 1968

My mother's family lived in Montreal. Growing up, we didn't take many family vacations, so getting in the car and driving from Toronto to Montreal seemed pretty glamorous to me. We were five sisters stuffed into the back seat of the car - no seat belts and definitely no WiFi. We just had Archie comic books and 8-tracks of Tchaikovsky to entertain us. The greeting we received by my mother's extended family upon our arrival was like walking the red carpet on Oscar Night. My grandparents' home was a duplex and we had to climb two flights of stairs to get to it. I remember them standing at the top of those stairs bursting to see us. Cousins, aunts and uncles were all waiting to greet and hug the Kott Sisters and my seriously attractive parents. As the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors there was something about

our generation. The older relatives regarded us as nothing short of a walking miracle on earth and to see us participate in our Jewish rituals (in the safety of Canada) was a victory for them after everything they'd been through.



Usher had High Hopes

Oil on Canvas, 30x30, painted 2019
Original photograph taken - 1972

Usher was my father's uncle. He never married or had children. Usher arrived in Canada with my grandfather, my dad and my aunt Sylvia in 1949 after they survived the Holocaust. The four of them were sponsored and taken in by their brother Avrum who had moved to Montreal in 1929. Avrum was fortunate because he avoided the danger and uncertainty of life under Nazi rule and became materially successful by opening a dress factory. When the three siblings reunited, it was awkward to say the least. Two brothers suffered greatly during the Holocaust while the other was comfortable enough to buy a new Pontiac. Usher felt personally insulted when my dad, only 16 years old, was handed a broom on his first day in Canada and told to sweep the floors of the dress factory. Actually, Usher was livid and it marked the beginning of a lifetime of 'broyges' (Yiddish for keeping a grudge) with that side of the family. In my

father's memoirs he describes that moment:

'This outburst of indignation at his brother was like an opening scene in a play by Tennessee Williams...Usher must have figured out that there was not going to be manna falling from the sky and sweeping his brother's floors was the proverbial straw that shattered his dream of how it would be. The next day we moved into a nice 2nd story flat on Jeanne Mance Street at the N/W corner of St. Viateur...' One can only imagine the pride Usher must have felt on the day my father graduated from law school. Usher died in 1973. He had terrible scars on his body from the time when the Ukrainian police (under direction of the Nazis) beat him with a bicycle chain.



Usher's Reward

Oil on Canvas 28x30, painted 2017
Original photograph taken: 1968

The defining moment of my great Uncle Usher's life happened when he took the 'hit' for his brother Jankel (my grandfather). It was 1942 and the Nazis were confiscating all the property belonging to the Jews in their small Ukrainian village. My grandfather Jankel could not stand the humiliation any longer and lost his temper. He made the foolish mistake of beating up a young Ukrainian police officer (who was carrying out the orders). Jankel knew that the consequence of beating up a police officer would be deadly for him so he ran away.

Later that day the police came to their house looking for Jankel and instead took Usher to the police station. They wanted to know where Jankel was hiding but Usher would not cooperate. They tried to coerce Usher by beating him with a bicycle chain to force the information out of him. Usher was loyal and would not betray his brother. Eventually the police gave up. Hours after the beating, Usher, along with my grandfather, my dad, my aunt Sylvia and great grandmother fled to the forest outside their village and ended up hiding there for 19 months until the war was over. Out of nine Jewish families, theirs was the only one from that village to survive the Holocaust.

Poor Usher – that beating was the biggest moment of his entire life. He never married or had children. All he had was his brother and his niece and nephew. After immigrating to Canada he had no real success either professionally or personally. His greatest pleasures in life were cigarettes and Jankel's grandchildren. Usher showed up to all of our family gatherings and birthday parties. I was only 3 when he died of lung cancer. In broken English my grandfather used to ask me "do you remember Uncle Usher?" I'd lie and say that I did. I understood that my grandfather needed to know that his brother's life mattered.



Kot Textiles

Oil on Canvas, 24x36, painted 2019
Original photograph taken - 1969

My grandfather was the hero of my dad's family during the Holocaust. In 1949, after ensuring their survival, Zeidi brought his family to Canada at the age of 50 where he quickly grew to understand that his best years were probably behind him and real opportunity was reserved for the next generation. Nevertheless hard work was expected and Zeidi and his brother Usher got into the shmata (fabric) business. They opened Kot Textiles on Queen Street. It never took off. Jewish success stories are often peppered with tales of shmata peddlers who turned their small operations into some of the biggest names in fashion today but this was not in the cards for Zeidi and Usher. I grew up

visiting that store on weekends with my parents and sisters. I remember Zeidi reading the "Yiddish Forverts" (The Forward) and always having a brown paper bag full of chocolate bars from the corner store 'fir de kinderlach'. Zeidi did not speak English well but I do remember the sense of importance I felt when he'd 'test' the quality of the fabric of my clothes by rubbing a swatch between his fingers and then give a nod of approval. The store smelled like Pine-Sol, reams of material and cigarette smoke. I was certain that if he just had some good and colorful signage (which I'd hand draw) sales would go up.



The Second Generation

Oil on Canvas, 24x24, painted 2019
Original photograph taken – 1969

The 'Second Generation' refers to children born to Holocaust survivors. Officially, I fall into that category. We are a unique sub-set of the Jewish community – we were raised by parents who went through one of the darkest chapters in history and that experience had implications for us.

Our homes were different from the homes of our friends whose parents were born in North America. Our parents spoke English with an accent and broke into other languages to talk about things they didn't want us to know. Some of our parents had numbers tattooed on their arms. We are a generation named after relatives who died unspeakable deaths. All of us know that our existence is a miracle – we shouldn't even be alive. Growing up we understood that our parents had been through 'enough' and 'our job' was to make sure that we did not disappoint them. We know a thing or two about resilience. We wonder if

we are as tough as our parents – could we have survived what they went through? We secretly fear that we would not have.

Some Second Generation kids were born as 'replacement' children – their parents were married with families before the war and had lost everyone – their spouses, children, parents and siblings. These Second Generation children felt the impossible burden of trying to make highly traumatized parents feel whole again.

This 1969 image is of my mom's first cousin Mary with her new husband Lou. I remember Mary's parents. They were so gentle and lovely. Aunty Rutka (prisoner number 76322) and Uncle Mishu (prisoner number 68881) were both in the concentration camps and were saved by Oskar Schindler. Now that most survivors are no longer alive, Second Generation children feel a tremendous obligation to tell their parents' stories.



Chaya Lea Tried to Come to America

Oil on Canvas, 30x40, painted 2019
Original photograph taken – 1925

One of the legacies of descending from Holocaust survivors is that you grow up in a house without old family photos - a huge piece of your history is simply 'erased'. By some miracle one precious photo made it through my family's escape from the Nazis. This image is of my great grandmother, Chaya Lea in the 1920's. Her husband had moved to New York and she was set to join him with their 5 children once he had earned enough money to sponsor them and pay for their travel. Chaya Lea had this portrait taken as part of her sponsorship application. A cruel twist of fate happened when her husband died suddenly. Chaya Lea became a widow and her immigration plan was thwarted. She and her five children stayed in Poland.

My mother recalls the day her grandmother was murdered. There was a raid on the Krakow Ghetto. My mother (only 5 years old at the time) was hidden with Righteous Gentiles. When the raid was over my mother was returned to her family and she remembers that everyone was crying and sitting shiva (mourning) for Chaya Lea. Chaya Lea was taken during that raid and was possibly transferred to the Auschwitz concentration camp or shot in the street. Her story was one of the 'unspeakables'. Chaya Lea has no grave. Four of her five children did survive. The little girl beside her, my great Aunt Cecilia, was saved by Oskar Schindler.



Sabra Tours

Oil on Canvas, 28x30, painted 2017
Original photograph taken - 1978

I'll never forget the first time my parents went to Israel. It was monumental because they had never gone on a real vacation before. I remember my mom shopping up a storm to have just the right outfits for the Middle Eastern climate (and vibe). Those were the days when parents didn't think much of leaving their teenaged kids at home alone for a couple of weeks to hold down the fort in their absence. (Of course everything that could go wrong did go wrong! Caroline got the mumps and I had a horse riding accident at camp...).

When they returned I saw that my dad (in particular) was profoundly moved by the whole experience. If I think about the arc of history I am amazed by the shift in mentality that took place for Jews in the space of 25-30 years. My parents were born approximately 15 years before the establishment of the modern State of Israel and my sisters and I were born approximately 15-20 years after it. The Jewish State was a fact that I took for granted for my entire life. But when my parents were children they experienced unthinkable insecurity and danger as Jews living in Europe. If Israel been there when the Nazis came to power they could have escaped there and never would have endured so much pain and loss. That must be difficult for their generation to reconcile.



Hebrew High School Graduation Day

Oil on Canvas, 24x36, painted 2019
Original photograph taken - 1986

If it's possible for a child to be both equally compliant and rebellious in the same moment, that would describe me and my relationship to after-school Hebrew school.

I went to my synagogue's religious school for two and a half hours every Monday, Wednesday and Sunday from the time I was 6 until I turned 17. I hated every second of it but the obedient child in me never argued with my parents about enrolling year after year. The 'rebellious' part of me rejected literally every single ounce of information imparted there. I showed up, I tuned out the teachers and I socialized, I traded stickers and, not surprisingly, I doodled elaborate drawings in my 'machberet' (blue notebook).

Somehow I still received a certificate of completion even though I learned almost NOTHING.

A couple of summers after my graduation I went on a teen tour to Israel. When I got to Jerusalem and saw the Kotel (Western Wall) I had no idea what I was looking at. I was overcome with emotion – most of it disappointment in myself for not paying attention at Hebrew School and for not knowing who I was or where I came from. It was Shabbat in Jerusalem when I came face to face with my Jewish illiteracy and at 19 I made a big decision. I wanted to make up for lost time and try to learn as much as I could about Judaism in college and beyond. And even though having children seemed a million years away, I swore to myself that my future kids would never feel as ignorant and stupid as I felt that day. That explains our decision to enroll them at Solomon Schechter Jewish Day School.



The "Jew-Fro"

Oil on Canvas, 14 x18, painted 2019
Original photograph taken – 1975

Boys like the ones pictured here rumbled onto our driveway in their Camaros and Firebirds to take my four sisters to the movies, sweet sixteens, USY events and proms on a regular basis. My poor father – one can only imagine how protective he must have felt! There's an old Yiddish saying: 'finif techte ist nischte gilechte' which means "five daughters is no laughing matter". There's a lot of wisdom in Yiddish.



Teen Tour at the Dead Sea

Oil on Canvas, 24x30, painted 2019
Original photograph taken – 1988

When I was 19 I travelled to Israel for the first time on a teen tour organized by the AZYF (American Zionist Youth Federation). In those days there were no free 'Birthright' trips to Israel. Rather, I held a part-time job for over a year and saved my money to pay for the experience on my own.

I didn't go to Israel with the intention of 'connecting' to my Jewish self. At that time, the role of Judaism in my life had started to wane in a big way. I no longer kept kosher (but hid that fact from my family); Hebrew school was behind me and I had traded in weekly Shabbat services for sleeping late on Saturday mornings. Honestly, I was motivated to go to Israel because my friends had gone and it looked like a huge party to me. That was my primary attraction.

Presently there are literally thousands of youth groups that travel through Israel, all with the goal of helping the cause of Jewish continuity – 'marketing Judaism' to a generation that appears to have only a peripheral interest in maintaining Jewish identity, religion and culture. I can only imagine the organizers of these programs wondering if their efforts have any impact at all on shaping the Jewish identities of the young people who participate. Thirty plus years later, I can attest to the fact that my youth trip to Israel 'worked'. In the midst of all the fun and freedom, I for one, found myself very introspective during that experience. I returned home with the realization that my Judaism was no longer my mother's responsibility but was *on me* now. I made a promise to myself to take as many Jewish studies classes I could find in college - where I met my husband; made a career decision to work in Jewish communal service and ensure that my children had positive experiences with both Jewish camp and education so that they'd be literate and proud Jews. In the end, the AZYF "Taste of Israel" trip was probably one of the most important Jewish experiences of my life.



Gordon Beach

Oil on Canvas, 16x20, painted 2017
Original photograph taken - 1946

When my husband and I moved to Chicago in 2004 we quickly discovered the pleasure of renting a sweet little cottage every summer in Union Pier MI. Suntanned and rested upon our return, local friends would tell us stories of how their parents and grandparents used to rent or own homes there.

I started researching the history of the region. As early as the 1920's Jews, wishing to escape the heat and cramped conditions of living in downtown Chicago would flock to the sandy beaches of Lake Michigan for fresh air and beautiful sunsets. Eventually the region was dubbed the 'Catskills of the Midwest'. In the 1920's, however, Jews were not welcome at certain beaches and communities in Southwestern Michigan. Fences and armed guards were employed to keep 'Jews and Dogs' out at neighboring Lakeside. When anti-Jewish sentiment on the beaches along Lake Michigan became extremely rabid, Dr. Louis Gordon, a Jewish physician from Chicago, purchased a plot of land in Union Pier and built the Gordon Beach Inn, which became a popular destination for Jewish summer cottagers.

I can honestly say we love our time Union Pier but when I see my children frolicking on those beaches, the same ones that were closed to Jews a few generations ago, I am haunted by the intolerance of the past and wonder about how it must have felt to know that there were places in America where Jews were simply not welcome. This painting is of my friend's grandparents sun-tanning and enjoying a cigarette on Gordon Beach in the 1940's.



Hebrew National

Oil on Canvas, 24x30, painted 2018
Original photograph taken - 2018

One of my dearest friends is Orthodox and she recently made a pithy remark to me that religious Jews never get to go on vacation – 'they just have to keep kosher somewhere else.' That is not something I struggle with but in the summer of 2018 my oldest child had returned home from a 'gap year' spent in Jerusalem. After nine months in Israel, Henry had discovered a newfound interest in becoming a little more religiously observant. He was keeping the Sabbath and following Kashrut (Jewish dietary laws). I was both thrilled and threatened.

I was thrilled because when it comes to Judaism the trend is usually for each successive generation to observe less than their parents' generation. It was so gratifying to know that my son's connection to his Judaism defied the recent Pew Study findings. He was not on track to lose precious connections to our heritage (at least not now). These new observances were like a giant 'Jewish mom victory' for me – the 'torch' was passed to

the next generation!

But I would be dishonest if I didn't acknowledge that I felt threatened by it as well. Was our son on his way to becoming a 'baal tshuva' (a secular Jew who becomes Ultra-Orthodox)? Would he stop eating in my house because it wasn't kosher enough? Was he judging our lax observances? Does he think that we are hypocrites? Are we hypocrites?? Will he go on vacation with us still? Henry was home from Israel for a week and we immediately went to our annual cottage rental in Union Pier, Michigan. We were trying to regain our equilibrium as a family now that kashrut and the Sabbath were part of the equation (at least for him). Thankfully the local supermarket in neighboring New Buffalo had a tiny kosher section and we figured it out.



Visitors Day Camp Massad 1976

Oil on Canvas, 24x36, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 1976

My earliest memory of overnight camp was in the summer of 1976. I was seven years old and my parents had shipped off all four of my sisters to sleep-away camp. I remember sitting quietly in the back seat of my dad's car beside my Zeidi and driving for hours into Ontario's cottage country as we set out for Visitors Day.

As soon as we pulled into the grounds of Camp Massad I was smitten. There was something about that place – the sparkling lake, the sounds of screen doors slamming, cool kids everywhere, Hebrew music over the loudspeaker, Israeli and Canadian flags draped on the walls of the 'chadar ochel' (the mess hall). I wanted to grow up fast so

I would be old enough to go to camp.

What makes Jewish camp special? On Friday nights, the mood shifts to something magical when campers dress up in white for weekly Shabbat dinners; Saturday services by the lake are usually accompanied by Shabbat-only treats such as donuts or chocolate cereals; lazy Sabbath afternoons are spent hanging out with great friends, discussing life's biggest questions while making macramé bracelets in the bunks; Shabbat concludes at sundown with Havdalah (candle lighting) and raucous song sessions with the whole camp community arm-in-arm.

As a child so much of being Jewish during the school year felt limiting ('don't eat this – it's not kosher'; 'you can't go there because you have Hebrew School'). But camp is different. For many kids Jewish spirituality is sparked at camp. Jewish overnight camp is a uniquely American invention and studies have shown that attending Jewish camp is an important predictor of Jewish affiliation into the future. It remains an American Jewish success story and my kids love their Jewish summer camping experience just as much as I did.



The Pines Resort in the Catskill Mountains

Oil on Canvas, 24x24, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 1961

If time travel was possible and I had to make a list of my top ten places to visit I'd have to say I'd choose any one of the Jewish resorts in the heyday of the Catskills. This is an experience that exists only in my imagination from movies like "Dirty Dancing" and more recently from the hit Prime series "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel". After my friend Brad's mom passed away he gave me the privilege of going through their family photos and I came across this gem. He told me that growing up this was how his older siblings and parents spent the better part of the summer. In my research I discovered that within the last five years there was a photographer who travelled to the Catskills to take pictures of the now abandoned and decaying resorts. It was heartbreaking to see the condition of the Pines. I have a feeling someone will revive the concept and when they do, I'll be the first one to sign up for tango lessons!



Greener, Galers & Fairfield Porter

Oil on Canvas, 20x20, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 1950

I am most enamored with the paintings of Fairfield Porter. He was a Kennedy-era American artist who painted my fantasy of 'the good life' – genteel people of a certain lineage enjoying summer moments at his family's historic beach house in Maine. Awash in color, Porter captured images of generations reading together on the screened porch; friends gathered in conversation on sun-washed Adirondack chairs; morning tennis matches in preppy whites. As much as I idealize this world I know that 'my people' did not come from that 'stock' or live like that.

My mother-in-law once explained to me the 'Jewish social hierarchy' as she experienced it. There were 'greeners' and 'galers'. She was a *greener*. I came from *greeners*. *Galer* is Yiddish for yellow and *greener*...well that's obvious. These terms are used as immigration and lineage metaphors. She explained that a

'galer' is like a yellow vegetable that has had time to ripen on the vine while a 'greener', like a green vegetable, is new on the vine. If you're a greener it means you are an immigrant from the old country and you have an accent. A *galer* is someone whose ancestors have been living in the new world for generations. *Galers* have ripened on the vine of America for a long time. Stereotypically, *galers* had time to build their fortunes in this country, become 'genteel' and take their place as part of the leisure class – they might sail or have beach homes; they play tennis.

I love this image of my husband's grandparents. There they are, two 'greeners', as if planted into a Fairfield Porter painting but just on the other side of the fence. It was a moment captured only a few short years after escaping the ravages of war. I love that they figured out how to insert themselves, if not in, then beside the 'leisure class' of the *galers*. They cast off their heavy clothes and the baggage of the past and had their day in the sun.



Shabbat Afternoon with Yehudit & Gail

Oil on Canvas, 30x40, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 1977

We grew up keeping the Sabbath. Every Saturday morning, I remember putting on a dress, gathering my sticker and stationery collections in a bag and walking with my mother to shul. Sometimes the whole family went and sometimes it was just she and I. Those walks felt like an island in time - the whole world was carrying on with life as usual but we were taking break for the busy-ness of everyday and carving out a 25 hour period of rest (no phones or TV, no commerce, no driving). When we completed the 2 mile walk to Beth Tikvah I'd dart away from her, find my friends in the bathroom or sitting on the sofas in the social hall and joyfully trade fold up notecards or smelly stickers. Occasionally I'd wander into the sanctuary to hug my mom but mostly I avoided that because I was worried she'd make me sit through the very long sermon and service, where I'd be obliged to pray (which I never liked). Little did I know that my mom never expected me to sit through the 2-3 hour long service. Her goal was for me to love being Jewish and to have positive associations with our synagogue. I always wanted to go because it was fun and there were so many kids to

play with. After Kiddush my parents' friends made their way over to our pool for the afternoon. I remember generous servings of watermelon, grapes and cheese Danish and lots of cups of coffee before we got dressed again to go back to the synagogue for Havdalah services and the conclusion of Shabbat.



Shoffim (Judges)

Oil on Canvas, 22x28, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 2015

My daughter was the first girl in the history of my family to read Torah at her Bat Mitzvah. When my sisters came of age in the mid 1970's, girls definitely did not celebrate Bat Mitzvahs at our Conservative congregation. When it was my turn in the early 1980's, the synagogue had adopted a more egalitarian approach to this milestone. My mother offered me the chance to have a Bat Mitzvah but I was too shy to read Torah in front of everybody and turned down the opportunity. She didn't fight me. When my daughter came of age in 2015, I was filled with pride. She prepared for her Torah reading (Shoffim) with discipline and a measure of seriousness I did not know she possessed. I have ultra-Orthodox relatives who declined to attend this service because traditional Judaism has never recognized women in this capacity. I wasn't angry that they didn't come to this event. I actually understand the reasons why. When you alter something after centuries

of practicing it a certain way there's bound to be a backlash from the traditionalists who want to preserve the culture and rituals in their original form. There are lasting implications when you change the tradition. My daughter understands this tension too. We did not take offense. But my daughter is more knowledgeable in Judaism than I will ever be and I know she has the tools to continue shaping the American Jewish story. I wonder what it will look like when she is my age.



A Dignified Background

Oil on Canvas, 24x24, 2020

Original photograph taken in 1940

The first time I learned about my great-grandfather Godel Mangel was in middle school. We had to create a family tree and present an heirloom for a special class project. My family tree was sparse. It included all the names of my grandparents but only a couple of names from my great-grandparents' generation and nothing else. My parents were children during the Holocaust and knew very little about our past.

I asked about Godel - one of the few names on the exotic great-grandparent line. My mother told me that he was taken by the Nazis but provided no other details. I then asked if we had any family heirlooms and the answer was "no." Everything we had was acquired after the family immigrated to Canada in 1949 (at that time, our "stuff" was around 30 years old - so nothing passed from generation to generation). For a history lover like me, I felt deflated.

When it was time to present our trees and heirlooms to the class. I worried that my teacher would think that I didn't put in any effort into the assignment. I recall a boy in my class, Teddy, proudly wearing his great grandfather's First Nations headdress. His family had been on the land for thousands of years. I was jealous of Teddy - he had a proud history that he could trace. How ironic. As Teddy spoke I saw how much the Holocaust had robbed my family - our names, our records and our possessions were obliterated.

Fast forward to today: thousands of documents are being uploaded, almost daily, on websites dedicated to preserving precious details about who existed when the Shoah started. I searched "Godel Mangel." Imagine my surprise when a photo (from a Krakow Ghetto identity card) uploaded onto my monitor. My handsome great grandfather, looking humiliated, resigned, terrified, brave and dignified all in the same moment, was staring at me. He was 66 years old. My mom recognized him immediately even though she was 5 years old the last time she saw him alive. She finally shared what happened to Godel. His was one of our family's "unspeakable stories."

Grandfather Godel was taken to one of the camps and was a victim of the Shoah's most sinister of crimes. I heard my mother's words like sound-bites: "they used him for science experiments" and "they injected him with gasoline." It's no wonder she didn't share details about him when I was in middle school. I can barely put words to it now. I suddenly realized that he has no grave and that his story was so close to being relegated to the dustbins of history. I could almost feel his soul lingering in the heavens with no peace. I decided to provide Great-Grandfather Godel with a small monument to honor his life. As best I could, I created this painting out of a photo that was taken in an act of hatred. My studio took on a sacred quality - I was able to reach across time and space and recreate an image of my great grandfather's face, but this time with love. Every brush stroke felt important. A powerful moment happened when the music on my iPhone looped to the Leonard Cohen song "You Want It Darker." Just as I felt I had captured Godel's likeness I heard the haunting words of the chorus singing: "Hinei - Hinei" (which means "here I am"). My eyes filled with tears.

The background pattern is from my dining room wallpaper - the room where Godel's great-great grandchildren come together every week to celebrate Shabbat and continue living our Jewish heritage - the real heirloom that has been passed down from generation to generation.

May you find abundant peace from heaven dear Great Grandfather Godel.



Our Turn to Host Rosh Hashanah

Oil on Canvas, 16x20, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 2010

I have this theory that you are not officially a grown up until it is your turn to start hosting the family for holiday observances. As the youngest in my family, I got away with never having to host a holiday meal until I was well into my adult life. But then the Toronto shul where my husband's parents belonged had shut down and they weren't sure where they would go to services for the High Holidays. Naturally, I invited them to travel to our shul and be our guests. I saw this as a significant moment in my adult life. The torch had been passed to me – it was time to finally grow up and make Rosh Hashanah dinner at my house. I was thrilled that Bubba Sara, at 95, was willing and able to travel to Chicago to be with us. I love this image – four generations together bringing in the Jewish

new year of 5771. The best part was when we cooked the meal. Bubba was in charge of the gefilte fish and the apples and honey, my mother-in-law made the chicken soup and matzo balls. I was reasonably confident that my brisket would be tasty enough to serve to these two women who had hosted countless delicious holiday meals around their dining room tables. It was a priceless experience and we never had the opportunity to do it together like that again. Bubba became too frail to travel after that year.



When Mira Visited the Sukkah

Oil on Canvas, 16x20, painted 2019

Original photograph taken - 1972

Sukkot (The Festival of Booths) was my favorite Jewish holiday as a young child and it remains so today. My friends and their families have grown to count on our annual Sukkah Party where we curl up under blankets, drink wine, eat soup and enjoy the crisp fall air in my back yard sukkah. I connect to my late father every year when I build it because that was 'our thing'. It's a gorgeous holiday.

But oh did I hate it during that short miserable time called middle school! Our house was perched high up on a hill overlooking the ravine where all the neighborhood kids crossed to get to St. Andrew's Junior High School. Our rickety sukkah was on display for all to see and I thought it was so embarrassing. We lived in a leafy suburb of Toronto with a sizeable Jewish population but a sukkah was "too

Jewish" for my too cool teenaged self. It was more than enough that I had to keep kosher and miss sleepovers because of Hebrew school or Friday night dinners. Couldn't we be 'normal Jewish'?

As I matured I came back to the conclusion that it was a fun holiday and I knew I met the right guy for me when my now husband was so excited to have dinner in our family sukkah early in our courtship. When Parkinson's disease took over my father's health we sadly had to stop building it. I am so glad that I have priceless photos of my children as babies sitting on my lap in the expanded and elaborate sukkah that my dad built.

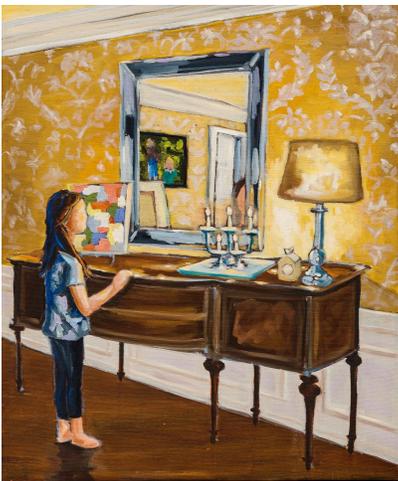


Sophia Had Peace of Mind

Painted: 2019

Original Image Taken: 1974

My grandmother Sophia was an incredible woman. When her husband was drafted to the Polish army during the Holocaust, Sophia was left alone with 3 small children to protect. She made sure they always had food; she identified Righteous Gentiles to hide my mother and her siblings when there were raids on the Krakow ghetto; Sophia was able to secure false Argentinian passports for her family – which saved them from Nazi firing squads on more than a few occasions. Sophia refused to leave Poland (even though the passports could provide safe passage out of Europe) because her sisters were interred in Auschwitz and she arranged to have food smuggled to them on a regular basis. Sophia was fearless and driven. When she immigrated to Canada she continued to lead. Sophia had her own small wholesaling business; she hosted her sisters (who survived) and the whole family for all the holidays; she ensured that her children had every opportunity. She took a job washing dishes at a Jewish overnight camp so that my mom and her siblings could spend the summers like all the other kids in their community. She supported my mother's artistic and educational aspirations. She was extremely proud when her son Ronnie finished McGill medical school and did graduate work at Harvard. She treasured her grandchildren more than anything. My daughter Sophie is named for her - what a legacy.



Modern Shabbat

Oil on Canvas, 20x24, painted 2016

Original photograph taken - 2016

Shabbat dinner on Friday nights is one of the few Jewish rituals that I have consistently kept with my family for as long as I can remember. Just like my mother and grandmothers before me, I light candles, we join together around the dining room table to recite the Sabbath blessings and settle in for a quiet evening at home. When my kids were little it was very easy to mark Friday nights as 'off limits' and guard Shabbat dinner as sacred family time. But there are so many competing demands today. My daughters often have dance rehearsals on Friday nights. I compromise by lighting my candles at sundown in full view of my children so they experience the light and beauty of how Jews mark and sanctify time. The girls then bundle up to go to the studio to practice ballet for their company's performance of the Nutcracker and return to a home that smells like challah and chicken soup and a traditional Shabbat meal. It's not exactly how I want things to be but it works for us.



Baby's First Chanukah

Oil on Canvas 16x20, painted 2019

Original photograph taken – 1999

I remember my oldest child's first Chanukah like it was yesterday. It had been a very busy day and we forgot to light the candles to mark the holiday. Late that night, when we reminded ourselves to do it, all I wanted was to go to sleep. In my delirium I had an internal debate – does it even matter if we light the Chanukah candles for a baby who doesn't know the difference? Can't we just observe these rituals when he's older and understands what is going on around him? In the end, tradition won out and we dragged ourselves over to the living room window to light the Chanukah – Henry was so squirmy in my arms. I've often wondered: are you born Jewish or do you become Jewish after being exposed to it and having it cultivated in you? On reflection I've come to the conclusion that both answers are true. Jewish identity, a feeling of spiritual and emotional connection to Judaism, its history, people and culture, however, involves being 'sparked' and that can happen at any age.



The Matriarch in Miami

Oil on Canvas, 30x40, painted 2019
Original photograph taken - 1965

To my mind no conversation about Jewish identity can take place without acknowledging the power of the Jewish mother in shaping who we are as people and as Jews. The woman in this painting is not my mother. This is Shirley. I love this image of her, soaking up the sun. I can taste the soft rye bread with seeds on the plate next to her. A 'nirvana day' for just about anyone. Shirley passed away in December 2018. The thing that struck me most at her funeral was the sheer force of her will. Shirley's children described her as a woman who existed to raise a close-knit family that fully embraced both the American dream and their Judaism. Women like Shirley got involved in community work, hosting Hadassah meetings, giving time and funds to Federation and building Temple sisterhoods. Shirley, like so many 'matriarchs' made important decisions like joining synagogues, sending kids to Jewish camp and Hebrew school, celebrating memorable Passover seders and inviting children and their mates to weekly Shabbat dinner tables. Shirley encouraged her children to achieve in extra-curricular activities, get part-time jobs and attend the best colleges to become all they could be. She kept her family together by arranging annual cruises and Fourth of July BBQ's. Shirley's price was definitely 'far above rubies'. I can say the same about my own mother and mother-in-law who continue to play this role in my family. Who were the matriarchs in yours?



Shacharit (Morning Prayers) at the Jewish High School

Oil on Canvas, 18x18, painted 2017
Original photograph taken - 2017

Prayer in Judaism is an awkward place for me. I went to synagogue every week as a child so I've always known the tunes and most of the Hebrew words in the prayer service but I actually don't have a clue what most of it means. Prayer services have always felt long and repetitive. I'm never sure when to bow or stand and then sit down again and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to think about when I'm saying the words. I'm that person who counts how many pages are left in the siddur (prayer book) until the service is over. This void in my knowledge base has been a 'private shame' for most of my life. I always felt embarrassed to admit that the shul sanctuary is the place where I feel most out of step with Judaism. I also believed that I was too old to do anything about it. (The year I said Kaddish for my father I finally committed to getting a very rudimentary understanding of the rhythm of the service). When I sent my kids to Jewish Day School parents were always encouraged to sit in during morning prayer services (Shacharit). At first, I thought it was 'too Jewish' when I'd see all the kids in their tallit and tefillin. But I was that parent who listened hard when the prayers were being explained and taught to the kindergarten students. I needed that information to round out my personal Jewish literacy. I'm so grateful that all 3 of my kids can walk into any synagogue service anywhere as informed participants and leaders. I envy them.



A New Chapter for Rivka

Oil on Canvas 30x40, Painted: 2019

Original Image Taken: 1967

Rivka is my mother-in-law and this moment was a turning point for her. She was celebrating her engagement to Harry and things were about to change.

Rivka didn't know it then but within a few years of getting married, she and Harry would embark on the adventure of a lifetime. Harry had a dream of raising his family in Israel and Rivka became a willing player. Together they quit their secure jobs; they sold their comfortable home and moved with their 3 children to an absorption center in Jerusalem. I admire the fact that Rivka was able to shift gears, set aside everything she thought her life would be and go on this journey with an open mind. The Israeli dream only lasted five years but the memories are still a great return on the investment.



My Parents' Chuppah

Oil on Canvas, 16x20, Painted: 2020

Original Image Taken: 1956

I was lucky to grow up in a home with parents who were completely in love with each other. Their romance was the stuff of fairy tales...sort of. Two young survivors of the Holocaust, my parents met in Montreal.

When my father was accepted to law school, the two of them decided to get married and the plan was simple – they'd move to Toronto; my mother would work as a legal secretary and support my father as he completed his education. My mother's side of the family saw this as a hopeful and wonderful new chapter – the Holocaust and all the obstacles of adjusting to a new life in Canada were firmly behind them and they could look forward to a bright future.

My father's side of the family saw this marriage as the 'end of hope'. They were furious – so much so that Zeidi and Usher refused to attend their wedding. Zeidi and Usher put all their hopes on my father's achievements. All the suffering during the Holocaust and the financial troubles they had in Canada would be worth it ONLY if my dad became a 'success' and graduated law school. They were certain my mother would get pregnant immediately and my dad would drop out of school and shatter their dreams for his future. Added to this anger was the audacity of their son getting married before his older sister, my aunt Sylvia. Such was the mindset of my grandfather and his brother. Somewhere in that stubbornness were good intentions.

My father was undeterred. He enlisted one of the seamstresses at the garment factory where he worked to copy a Dior gown for my mom; he rented a tuxedo and my parents had a humble wedding in my great Aunt Cecilia's living room. Five days later they were hunting for apartments in Toronto just as classes were starting at Osgoode Hall Law School. My parents made peace with Zeidi and Usher. Their first priority was to find a husband for Sylvia (which they did – my mom introduced her to a cousin). My mom was able to support my dad throughout his education. He graduated 4 years later without missing a beat. Both Usher and Zeidi loved my mother. She cared for each of them in their final months when they came to live with us before they passed away.