



WE NEED A SUBVERSIVE SEQUEL

*Our world is crying out for a subversive sequel, a redemption narrative.
It's time to write a new and better, more just and more inclusive version of our story.
We must plant seeds for the future now, before it's too late.*

Rosh Hashanah I, 5783

One of my sabbatical goals, aside from spending many blissful hours in a studio making what amounted to an abundance of (mediocre) pottery, was to use the time for deep, immersive learning. And oh, there was so much to learn! I wanted to swim in an ocean of historical fiction, to read *New Yorkers* cover to cover. I wanted to hear *shiurim* – Torah classes—from the best teachers in America and Israel. As much as my sister, an urban homesteader (and my sabbatical coach), urged me to let the land lay fallow, I was desperate to maximize my time, so much so that I once caught myself listening to mindfulness podcasts on time and a half. But when I finally slowed down, I discovered a few teachers whose work I found truly gripping.

One of those teachers is Judy Klitsner. She's a senior educator at Pardes in Jerusalem and she teaches what she calls *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, a concept I've been captivated by.

Here's how it works: say a Biblical story is morally problematic or theologically challenging. Think, for example, about the *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac, which we'll read tomorrow. One of the most disturbing elements of this story, is that when God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac up the mountain and offer him as a sacrifice, an appalling and atrocious thing to ask of a parent. But Abraham, our ancestor, a beacon of moral leadership, fully fails to challenge God. Instead, he heads out early the next morning to do the unthinkable. God seems pleased with Abraham's subservience (Genesis 22:12), and we're left to wonder, as many have over the generations: is this the desired religious consciousness? Is the Torah instructing us to stifle our moral intuition and ignore our most human instincts (even to protect a vulnerable child!) to fulfill the demands of an impulsive God? Is that the mark of a religious actor?

In the face of a difficult text like this, people generally either bow their conscience to the presumed authority of the text, or they walk away. The Torah is anachronistic, irrelevant, immoral, they might say.

But Klitsner offers a third approach, in which the text undergoes a radical revision in a subsequent story, with a twist that dramatically alters the moral message of the original. She calls this a *subversive sequel*.

Here's how that works in the case of the *Akeidah*. Klitsner picks up on what she calls "subtle echoes" between this story and a later Biblical narrative about another parent, also a God-

fearing man who also has a somewhat complicated relationship with God—Job. Abraham and Job’s stories are similar, but they also differ in at least one critical way:

Whereas Abraham remained silent and compliant, resigned to his child’s fate, Job –facing a similar landscape of loss—turns to God in rage. *Why do You hide your face? Why turn me into Your enemy?* (Job 13:24). From Job we learn that to be God’s beloved servant requires not passive acquiescence, but *protest* against injustice, even *divine* injustice—which itself can be an act of faith. In the end, both our protagonist and God have evolved from the problematic, simplistic outlook of the earlier narrative.

Call it a subversive sequel or a redemption narrative—it gave me such joy to uncover a radical new take on our beloved old stories.

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As often happens with a great teacher who offers a novel approach, this idea of subversive sequels started to become a new lens through which I encountered the world.

I turned back to some early scholarship from the brilliant [Tikvah Frymer Kensky](#) about ancient Near Eastern mythology called the Epic of Atrahasis.¹ This story predates the Bible by at least 700 years, and it’s an eerie precursor to the Torah’s version of the creation and flood stories in the book of Genesis.

When I was in Seminary, I was convinced that to consider Torah in light of other ancient mythologies somehow degraded the sanctity of our text. Now, I see precisely the opposite. I’ll spare you the details of the comparative analysis for now, but it suddenly became clear to me that *the Torah itself* is a subversive sequel! It was crafted *in response to the prevalent worldview of human exploitation and divine callousness* of the Near Eastern mythologies. Instead, Torah tells a story of undeserved love, covenant, forgiveness and human striving. Meaning: our most sacred text was itself a polemic, a revolution against the norms of the ancient world, a new version of the story, intended to inspire human beings to manifest a different kind of reality.

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Last month, I sat with my friend (and IKAR advisory board member) Ari Wallach just before his book, *Longpath*, came out. Ari told me his driving question was this: “How can we be the ancestors our descendants—1000 years from now—need us to be?”

It was a summer of heat waves and wildfires. The tarmac in London was melting. We were about to hit 112 degrees in Los Angeles. Roe had been overturned and red states were lining up to pass increasingly restrictive laws criminalizing abortion and attacking bodily autonomy. A School Board in Tennessee banned MAUS because Spiegelman’s mother’s mouse breast was

¹ Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for our Understanding of Genesis 1-9*, “Biblical Archaeologist,” p. 149.

exposed in one image, rendering the book unfit for children. (More on that on Yom Kippur.) And a whirlwind of anti-LGBTQ bills were filed in the first half of this year, most specifically targeting the trans community in what is amounting to a coordinated effort to eliminate trans people from public life.²

As we've navigated these cascading, intersecting crises, I've been haunted by Dr. King's ominous warning, delivered in a sermon in April, 1967: "Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: *Too late*."³

Every life eventually ends. Every empire eventually falls. At some point, it will be too late for us too. My greatest fear, these past several years, is that we're rapidly approaching the point of no return.

Our descendants—1000 years from now? I scoffed. Given the devastation to our environment and the ruptures in our democracy and society, you think we'll even be around in 100?

Ah, but that's what progressives always do, Ari says. We're so alarmed by the trends, that we begin to believe that there's no alternative outcome.

But there's almost always an alternative outcome. Ari argues that where we land after times of rupture and disorder depends on the willingness to invest in long term visions and dreams even as we're being tossed around in the storm.

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And isn't that the hallmark of this season? The insistence that as long as the breath of life remains in us, *it's not too late* to write our own subversive sequel... or at least create the conditions for the next generation to do so.

"Human beings," Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert argues, "are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished." On some level, we think it's already over. Real change is no longer possible.⁴ But this is just a failure of personal imagination. We can't imagine a different future, so therefore we assume there can't be one.

And yet I've seen, again and again, a counter-testimony to that dead-end thinking in this community. The estranged father, who—after a lifetime of running from his family—reveals uncharacteristic tenderness before his death, opening pathways to understanding and forgiveness with his children. The sisters who become best friends in adulthood, despite their mother's and grandmother's strained relationships with *their* sister. The child of abuse who grows up to be the very embodiment of maternal love.

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/nearly-240-anti-lgbtq-bills-filed-2022-far-targeting-trans-people-rcna20418>

³ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence, Riverside Church, April 4, 1967.

⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_the_psychology_of_your_future_self?language=en+study

Remember: God's very name is: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה— I will be what I will be... (Ex 3:14). You're like me, God is saying. A work in progress. We're not done yet. It's not too late for our country, and it's not too late for you or for me. That's why Dr. King called us to act with "the fierce urgency of now..." – to try to turn the tide before it really is too late.

Stubbornly trusting in a better future, it turns out, is very Jewish. As Ari reminds us: as the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years, facing plague, war and uncertainty, they were sustained by the vision of a land flowing with milk and honey.⁵

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I caught abundant glimpses of this thinking throughout the IKAR journey through Central Europe this summer.

As our group followed the train tracks into Auschwitz-Birkenau, as we wondered how a person could survive in such dehumanizing conditions, I remembered a passage of Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist and enslaved laborer in that camp. He was marching with fellow prisoners one day to the worksite outside the camp. It was bitter cold, he was hungry and broken, he had already witnessed a lifetime of horrors. But he somehow transported himself, through his thoughts, to another place and time.

"I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room," he later wrote. "In front of me sat an attentive audience in comfortable upholstered seats. I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp! All that oppressed me at that moment became objective, seen and described from the remote viewpoint of science. By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation, above the sufferings of the moment, and I observed them as if they were already of the past."⁶

This act of imagination was a lifeline for Frankl—lifting him from the hellscape of his present into a future that—while almost unimaginable—was ultimately possible.

Astonishingly, miraculously, eleven months after the liberation of the camps, Frankl stood in a well-lit lecture hall in Vienna and delivered those lectures, writing his own subversive sequel.⁷

One needn't have to suffer the indignities of the Shoah to find meaning in the practice of future orienting. "It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future," Frankl wrote. "The [one] who lost faith in the future—his future was doomed."⁸

And Frankl wasn't the only one to hold this awareness.

⁵ Ari Wallach, *The Longpath*, p. 32.

⁶ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 82.

⁷ Those lectures have now been published in Viktor Frankl's *Yes to Life In Spite of Everything*.

⁸ Frankl, *Man's Search*, 81, 82.

In Warsaw, our group spent an afternoon in the Oneg Shabbat Archives of Dr. Emanuel Ringelbaum.

In 1939, Ringelbaum and some colleagues began to document the reality of Jewish life under Nazi occupation. They gathered testimonies from members of the Jewish community: educators, journalists, artists, children-- tens of thousands of written reports, covering everything from grocery inventories to underground newspapers, lists of names and, ultimately, deportation schedules. Through hunger and humiliation, illness and grief, they became singularly focused on archiving details of the extermination effort. And when most of the Warsaw Ghetto was deported to Treblinka in the summer of 1942, they started to bury their work underground.

Understand what this means: at that point, they were no longer writing to stir the conscience of the world to the atrocities that were being committed, so that—God willing—help might come. There was no help coming. Even still, they continued to write and bury, write and bury. Why?

Because at some point, they knew that they would die. But they also trusted that someone, someday, would find their writing, and would reconstruct their lives and honor their deaths. Someone, someday would care about what they had suffered through.

After the war, portions of the archives were dug up, and those documents are considered some of the richest testimony to what our Jewish family endured during those terrible years, and to their steadfast commitment to a future they knew they'd never see.

On our way from Auschwitz to Budapest, we spent two nights in Slovakia. In Kosice, where our dear Zuzana grew up and her family still resides, there was a flourishing Jewish community of 12,000 before the war (one in five residents was Jewish). Nearly all were deported to Auschwitz.

The big synagogue in the heart of Kosice had been used as a center for deportation. Thousands were crammed into the sanctuary for days to await transfer to Auschwitz. For decades after the war, the synagogue sat empty, desolate. But a few years ago, some entered the space to try to clean it up and renovate. They began to pull wooden pews from the walls, and what they found was breathtaking: tucked behind the cover of the pews were pencil scrawlings, written desperately, surreptitiously, by those awaiting deportation: *We are here*, they wrote. *It's 1944. We do not know where they will take us.*

We wept, reading these messages. The agony. It was a time capsule that had remained hidden for 65 years as nearly the entire Jewish community had been murdered. A whole world... *disappeared*. There was nobody left to find the hidden notes.

But then there we were, generations later, a bunch of American Jews looking at a message in a bottle.

And I realized: they wrote these messages and archived these documents... *for us*. Even as their terrible fate was becoming more inescapable, we were the future they dreamt of. They dreamt that one day, somehow, the Jewish people would survive. And maybe some would care enough to come sit in their synagogue and maybe they'd look behind the wooden pews, and they would find those messages. And then their deaths, and their lives, would matter. And maybe it would, somehow, change us too. Maybe confronting this devastating history, reconstructing these stories, would awaken us to the intimations of tyranny in our own time, the signals portending future disaster. The ways that we so readily acclimate to racist, nationalist movements fueled by hatred and fear, even when they threaten our lives and our collective future, until one day *it's too late*.

In 1944, a conductor in a barrack in Auschwitz wrote a symphony with a piece of charcoal on toilet paper! With death all around him... For whom? Surely creating art in that place was a stunning act of resistance and assertion of agency. But it was also *for us*! For you and for me and for anyone else who would care enough to want to see that symphony played by a full orchestra one day (which it was, in Israel, just a few years ago⁹). Because when everything else was taken from them, these people trusted, on some level, in a redemption narrative. They had faith that someone, some day would find the remnants of their stolen lives, and write a sequel that would subvert the tragic trajectory of their story.

Hitler nearly achieved his goal of a *judenrein* continent—a continent cleansed of its Jews. It wasn't only city centers. This hit me hard as we biked and drove through the vast and varied countryside of Europe-- it was every farm and town house in nearly every village across the continent. Want to understand Jewish trauma? The Nazis fevered fixation with hunting down every last Jew was so consuming that until the end, they focused on death marches and destroying evidence, rather than pushing back allied armies advancing on Berlin.

Nearly every one of the Jews of these towns died.

But we, we are alive. Gosia and Zuzana and their families are alive and working every day to rebuild Jewish life in Europe.

...Which means that this story didn't end. It means that we who are still around must continue writing the story now. And that is precisely what we're doing here today.

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After the devastation of the Shoah, the Jewish people needed a sequel that would subvert the narrative not only of the Holocaust, but of generations of exile, persecution, oppression and genocide. We desperately needed a redemption narrative.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTgfGYcQEZO>.

That is a weighty mandate. Could we transform “*in hostile world, Jewish dying*” into “*even in a hostile world, Jewish thriving?*”

Over the last seventy-seven years, the greatest minds and hearts of our people have been devoted to that project. The desperate yearning to affirm Jewish vitality has led to a vibrant, diverse, flourishing American Jewish community, and the mightiest example, maybe in the history of the Jewish people: the miraculous establishment of the state of Israel. The ultimate subversive sequel!

And yet, let us be clear: we sabotage our own story when the vehicle for our redemption manifests in the dispossession of another people, the deprivation of their rights and dignities. That’s why so many in this room work so devotedly to help author a true counter-narrative to the horrors of our past: we know there is no real Jewish thriving until we achieve a just, shared future with all those who dwell among us. I know this to be possible.

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Of course America, too, needs a redemption narrative. We need a subversive sequel—a chance to course correct, to finally lay to rest the part of our collective story that is rooted in the heresy of white supremacy, and manifests in exploitation and human cruelty.

We need a new story and we can write it.

One thing we know: the people and institutions that are invested in *the original* story will resist the sequel with every ounce of strength they have. In some cases, their insistence that the status quo, the original is the only way renders them prepared to destroy the whole franchise, rather than share the credits. So they’ll ban books and fire teachers and spread lies and hate. They’ll threaten violence and even steal voting machines... anything they can to prevent the sequel from coming out. That’s how afraid they are of a redemption narrative that shifts the power dynamic and charts a new course.

And the weight of their resistance to a new story might be so great that we may be tempted to step back and throw up our hands... *It’s too late!* we’ll say. *We’ve already lost!* Some of us said that this past summer, as we helplessly watched a dubiously constituted Supreme Court zealously strip away decades of progress and rights. We’re not wrong to be alarmed.

And I am afraid that one day, over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of *our own* civilization will be written the pathetic words: *too late*.

But it’s not yet too late. As long as we continue to cast our gaze to the milk and to the honey, we can break out of the original script and write a new and better and more just and more inclusive version of this story. We can protect our earth and build a true multiracial democracy rooted in equal justice, one that defends the dignity of every person and strives to embody the great vision of beloved community. I want our descendants—in 100 years or 1000—to look

back at us and see that we did everything we could to create the conditions for a redemption narrative for us all.

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I close with the words of Gela Seksztajn (zag-shtein), written on August 1, 1942, in the midst of the Warsaw Ghetto deportation. She called this her last will and testament; it was found among the Oneg Shabbat documents:

*...I wish to say goodbye to my friends and to my work... I am calm now. I am destined to be killed. I am trying to hide some of my work, [which I hereby] donate **to the Jewish museum to be founded in the future** in order to restore prewar Jewish culture..., and to learn the terrible tragedy of the Jewish community of Poland during the war. I only want my name and the name of my... daughter Margalit Lichtenstein to be remembered... [Margalit] is my pride and joy, gifted, talented and beautiful. Such sorrow and pain. Be well dear friends. Be well my Jewish people. Never allow such destruction to happen again.¹⁰*

I ask us to think about what it means for a Jew who is about to be deported to Treblinka, about to face certain death along with her daughter and her entire community, to entrust her artwork and her daughter's memory—the two things most precious to her—to a nonexistent Jewish museum in an improbable, almost unimaginable Jewish future, but one that she has full faith will be built one day nevertheless.

Two months after I read Gela's words and saw her artwork—in a museum in Warsaw—my daughter, Eva, left for college. She called excitedly in her first week to tell me that she registered for the most wonderful class: *Exploring Yiddishland*. Eva went to Jewish High School, so I'll admit I was a bit disappointed when I first heard this. It's just one class, but I hoped that college would broaden her scope of interest and understanding, and this felt... a little narrow and familiar. But then I read the description: *The course will center on Yiddish art, culture and literature that blossomed in Poland before the Holocaust...*

And I realized that my kid, right now, is fulfilling Gela Seksztajn's final wish, because her beautiful Margalit could not. And that, it was clear to me, is some kind of redemption narrative. Or at the very least, an incredible blessing.

Shanah tovah.

¹⁰https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/ringelblum/index.asp?gclid=CjwKCAjwg5uZBhATEiwAhhRLHnEb5qDKv7vI6UrSbgCQ3AiG8HXNOw3gqk9JvGf5OQHfzjL9kw7xoClqAQAvD_BwE