Shared Dreams, Shared Eternity

By

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“It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of this world.” Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (10)

As they walked through the Friday night hush of Jerusalem’s streets on the way home from synagogue, Wendy reminded herself how startled she’d felt at the way the Sabbath overturned the usual bustle of the city’s streets her first Shabbat here. No cars zooming about, or bicycles careening. No kids playing in the streets. It felt like a Sunday morning in the suburbs, silence permeating the streets.

“I’ve interviewed people who decided to stay in Israel, change their lives around completely, after one Shabbat.” Wendy told her friends Orly Markovsky and Dara Glasser. “They just wanted it, to experience Shabbat here in way you can’t anywhere else in the world.” They were coming from the liberal synagogue to the apartment of Dara’s boyfriend Jason where they were joining other Americans in Israel for the year at a Sabbath dinner. It was the end of January, and they had to walk carefully to skirt the puddles from Jerusalem’s rainy season.

Dara said, “I wish I could do that, just let myself be swept away and say, okay, Shabbos is so powerful, I will organize my life around it. “

Orly asked, “Can’t you?”

As they entered the apartment building on Be’erot Yitzhak (*the well of Isaac*) street, Dara said, “I’m too practical. I want to support myself. I hope as a rabbi, I can fuse my passion for Judaism with the practicality of making a living.”

Inside the building, the stairwell was lit by lights that remained bright with a Sabbath timer until later that evening. Conversation stopped as the three walked single file up four flights of stairs to Jason’s apartment. The door was ajar and they heard voices inside.

Dara called out, “Jason, it’s me and some guests,” and a man with an apron ran out to give her a Shabbat Shalom hug and peck on the cheek. “Good shabbes, welcome, can’t shake hands since mine are a bit of a mess.”

“Thanks for having us.”
Jason added, “Make yourself at home. Dara, can you help me finish the salad?”

Orly asked, “Do you want more hands?”

“If there was room for more than a person and a half in our miniscule kitchen,” he laughed. “No need, go, mingle while we wait for the rest of the guests.”

Dara followed Jason into the cubicle sized kitchen while Wendy and Orly continued down the narrow hallway of the apartment.

The hallway ended in a dining room. The whole space was taken by a table anchored by a white cotton tablecloth and surrounded by metal folding chairs. There was nowhere to stand as there was a scant foot between the chairs and the wall. The table had piles of paper plates, cups, napkins and plasticware on top but hadn’t been set. In the center, a large bulge was covered by a tie-dyed cloth. Wendy and Orly heard people talking but couldn’t see them until they carefully stepped into the room, and saw an open doorframe leading into a sitting room. There was a couch big enough for two small-boned individuals and two chairs. Conveniently, all three people in the room were standing anyway. Wendy didn’t know them, but as she walked in, one of them said heartily, “Shabbat Shalom.”

“Hi. I’m Wendy and this is Orly. I went to college with Dara. How did you get here?”

The woman, with curly red hair, masses of it, swept off her face with a headband but tendrils still clinging to her face, laughed. “It’s complicated.” The two men with her laughed as well. “Do you want to know?”

Wendy was used to hearing Americans in Jerusalem with odd meanderings having brought them to a particular spot, usually by the hand of God. She wondered whether this story would be of that ilk or whether it would have a different nuance, coming from someone in a more liberal community. Were the stories the same, just the places people chose to end up different? She wished she had some paper with her to jot that down. Must remember, “narrative arc – how does it vary? Or do they all reframe things so their lives fit a particular narrative pattern?”

“Sure.”

The red head began, “Short version. I was living in Australia, my father died in the States. Now, both my parents were dead, I was in my 30s, and single. When I was little, I used to ask my mother every night as I went to sleep to give me something to dream about. It was our ritual. I wanted another life, to create someone new, to give someone else dreams. As I was
pregnant, I needed others to nourish me and began to get involved in the Jewish community.
Then, I decided to go to rabbinical school and learn how to lead a community like the one I
found. I came here four weeks after I gave birth in August."

“Where is the baby?” Orly asked.
“Right there.” The woman pointed at a baby carrier with a handle that was sitting in the
corner and enveloped a sleeping infant. The baby’s hair was a blond fuzz and the lashes of her
closed eyes were dark against her porcelain skin, each feature etched carefully.

“She’s beautiful. What’s her name?” Orly added.
”Eliana. It means ‘God has answered me’ in Hebrew.”
Wendy wanted to ask the woman some questions about mechanics. *Who was the father?*
*Did it happen the natural way or did she use a turkey baster? How did she manage to be in
school, study and write papers with a baby?*

One of the other men began an introduction, “Hey, I’m James, this is Rich. How about
you – how did you get here?”

“I’m here to write my dissertation,” said Wendy.
“I’m a journalist working on a book about immigration and my family,” Orly added.
“Family. I wish mine would visit, I wanted to show them Israel. They won’t come; we’re
meeting in Europe in February. It’s just another way they are putting down my career choice.
‘Why can’t you just go to law school and then be synagogue president. You won’t have to worry
about how to pay the rent,’ ” James sighed.

“Don’t complain, you’re lucky you still have parents,” Amy the red head mom said,
gently rocking her daughter’s baby carrier.

They heard noise as the door was opened and more guests entered the apartment.
Dara and Jason were saying, “Noah, Bonnie, Shabbat Shalom, come in. I think we’re ready
now.” Wendy tensed as she thought, “’Noah’ it couldn’t be Noah Lazevsky, Jerusalem isn’t that
small. But she listened and it sounded like his voice. Jason must have invited him, not knowing
that Dara invited her and that it would be awkward to have the two of them together. Why would
they do that – or was it on purpose, to get her back together with him?

Jason and Dara came into the living room and Dara said pleasantly, “We’re all here.”
Jason ordered, “Everyone find a seat and we’ll introduce ourselves once we’re seated. Dara and I will sit here,” he indicated the chairs closest to the kitchen, and “everyone else sit wherever.”

“If no one minds, I’m taking this spot so I can hear my baby when she wakes up,” Amy said.

Orly and Wendy moved out of the sitting room to take places at the table. As she walked, she and Noah caught each other’s eyes. Noah looked good, Wendy noticed. He was wearing a knit sweater, with a geometric design, in different shades of blue that set off his blue-gray eyes, and navy dress pants. His hair had gotten longer and looked not unruly, but curly and pliant. She was surprised to find she was happy to see him. He gave her a broad smile. She nodded back. What did he see looking at her? Shoulder length black curly hair, brown eyes, pleasant smile, passably attractive but not a face that would stop traffic on the street. Wendy was wearing a pink turtleneck sweater, long darker pink wool skirt and brown leather boots for the rainy season. Did she want him to notice her? She wished she’d remembered to put on a pair of earrings and some make-up.

Seating assignments complete, Jason began, “Before we start, we should introduce ourselves. Say your name, how you got to this Shabbat table and what you’re doing in Israel this year.” All nodded assent.

“I’m Jason Lessing, and I’m at Wisdom of the Heart yeshiva for a second year. Trying to figure out what’s next. Dara?”

“I’m Dara Glasser, I’m also at Wisdom and I’m going back to finish up at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School in Philly next fall.”

“Noah Lazevsky. I came to Israel to improve my reading of Kabbalistic texts for a degree at NYU. I’m not sure whether I will go back and finish or stay here in yeshiva. I know Jason’s roommate, Yehoshua, from RISE, my yeshiva. Where is he?”

“Where he wants to be,” said Jason. “He never wants to commit to coming back in case he gets a better invite.”

The introductions continued, ”Rich Rosensweig, I’m a first year rabbinic student and Dara and I are in the rabbinic social justice network. My journey to this table started when I was working in New Mexico, for an art dealer who sold Native American pottery. Whenever I met
artists on their reservations, I would get asked what tribe I was from. I decided to learn about my own tribal traditions. Here I am.”

“James Glatstein, also first year Reform rabbinic student, and I know Dara from the same place. I’m from Manhattan originally.”

There was a knock at the door. Jason went to get it and came back with another man bearing a beard that was scruffy and looked newly grown in. When the man removed his black bomber jacket, he was wearing a white shirt with tzitzit (ritual fringes) showing underneath, black pants and nicely styled black shoes. Wendy couldn’t decide whether he was attractive or not, as the beard obscured his features.

“This is Yehoshua, everyone,” said Jason. “He lives here, when he isn’t at RISE or the Kotel.”

“Sorry I’m late. Do I get a chair?” he indicated to Jason.

“I’ll get my desk chair,” Jason said as he went down the hall to fetch it. When he returned, they all reshuffled chairs. The chairs repositioned, Yehoshua was seated at the end of the table where Rich had been, so he was between Noah and Rich, facing Amy at the other end. Dara said, “Shua, introduce yourself. Say what you are doing this year.”

“Yehoshua Hendon, I came here to go to Wisdom, but I switched to RISE a few weeks ago, I’m from Detroit.”

At her turn, Wendy wasn’t sure what to say – I came here to study people like you? I’m not one of you, I have a tape recorder under the table so be careful. But out of respect for her friend she didn’t have a notebook or tape recorder, she was trying to be off duty. “Wendy Goldberg, I’m here to write my dissertation, I’m from New Bay, New York, and knew Dara at Columbia.”

“Orly Markovsky, I’m a journalist, and I know Wendy from Camp Kodimoh and here, and Dara from Wendy.”

“Amy Robbins, from Australia and New Jersey, mother of Eliana Chaya, and student at Hebrew Union College where I met Dara.”

“Bonnie Gardner, I know Dara from home, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. I’m a junior at Bryn Mawr, and at Hebrew University this semester. I just got here a few days ago.”
Wendy felt relieved that Bonnie was a younger friend of Dara’s from home and just got here so probably hadn’t met Noah before tonight. It bothered her that she had thought when they walked in together, that Bonnie and Noah were a couple.

Before Wendy had time to contemplate any further, the singing started. It was a bouncy tune, peppy like some kind of revival. Wendy wondered *why everything was always so cheerful. Wasn’t there any music that was inner directed, more serious?* She looked around the table and saw that all were enjoying the singing, engaged. Dara nudged Jason and nodded at Wendy and Orly. He turned around and found a pile of *benchers,* books with the songs and blessings sung at the Sabbath table, in the corner of the room. He opened the small pocket size book to the proper page and handed it to Wendy and Orly.

Wendy thought, “*Why are books and papers always thrust into one’s hands, read this, believe that. Can’t we just enjoy the experience of the words and music, their beauty, without labels?*” She remembered going to a museum endowed by a wealthy society woman in Boston. The philanthropist had created a carefully constructed building which contained beautiful objects – statues, paintings, handcrafted laces, china, furniture, hand-tooled leather books. Isabella Stewart Gardner did not want labels on any of the items because she wanted visitors to experience her things for their magnificence without getting bogged down in categorizing and classifying. Wendy wished she could go through religious rituals like that, absorbing their beauty and grandeur, not worrying about the minutiae like getting the words right, pronouncing the foreign syllables. When she went to that museum, she remembered sitting in the courtyard, being surrounded by elaborate displays of orchids, mosaic tiles and intricately carved stones, any spot her eyes gazed on yielding an object of beauty. All she had to do as an observer was take it in, hear the fountain, smell the flowers, look at the art. Couldn’t the rituals in Judaism be less elaborate, and confusing, not *stand up sit down, take steps back and forth, bounce on your toes,* but as simple as cultivating the peace and wholeness one experienced with the plash of a fountain?

Obediently, she pointed at the book for her friend Orly, who knew the Hebrew but not the tunes, to the verses about the angels of Sabbath. It was nice imagery, angels coming and greeting, blessing and leaving. The tune had a sort of drum beat to it, *da- da-da da-da,* *da-da-da da da-da* and it repeated each of the four verses three times. By the end, Orly was humming along. Then there was another Hebrew song, proverbs about the woman of valor, and finally
blessings over wine. Jason opened a bottle of wine, and poured it with a flourish into a large wooden cup, which looked like it had been painted in a Russian style with bright purples, oranges and greens. He stood up, then Yehoshua stood up, and then everyone else stood too as he declaimed the blessing over the wine, remembering the creation, quoting from Genesis about God’s completion of creation in six days and resting on the seventh. Jason drank, poured more wine into the large cup and then from the large cup to thimble size plastic cups.

Everyone passed the cups around the table to the person next to them. “Go ahead, drink when it comes to you, don’t wait,” he said heartily. It was white wine, not the highest quality, what students on student budgets could afford. Orly started coughing after she drank because she didn’t like it. Wendy hoped no one noticed the cough, and gave a small cough herself in sympathy, so Orly wouldn’t be as noticeable.


“Anyone who wants to wash their hands, in the kitchen,” said Dara.

“Wahhh. Wah, wah,” came the sudden cry of a baby. Amy jumped out of her chair to soothe her daughter. Everyone else rose and converged toward the hallway to go to the kitchen and wash their hands. Amy went to the living room to pacify her daughter. Partly because she didn’t want to deal with the ritual washing and partly because she was curious about what it was like to have a baby, Wendy walked over and asked, ‘Can I help?’

Amy looked up and said, “Sure, take this,” handing her a diaper filled with thick dark smelly poop, “find out where to put it? I appreciate it,” she added as she returned to wiping Eliana free of the sludgy substance and putting a clean diaper on her. “I just started her on solid food now that she is six months, so the poop is a little smelly.” The baby was still crying, the volume lowering as she realized she was being cared for.

Wendy was disgusted as she took the diaper from Amy. She thought ‘this woman wanted to create the possibility for dreams and all she is getting is poopy diapers. Ugh.’ She went to find Dara or Jason. As Dara came towards her in the hallway, Wendy held up the offending item. Dara saw it and pointed to a door without a word. Wendy went into the bathroom and placed it in the garbage can. ‘This is going to be worse than the airplane. Ten adults and a baby, a tiny bathroom and a stinky diaper...’” she thought as she placed it in the proper
receptacle and washed her hands, with soap, in the sink. She prayed she would not need to use the bathroom before the evening ended.

When she returned to the table, about half the guests were in their places and humming a wordless tune. When everyone was seated, Dara with a flourish swiped the tie-dyed cloth off the mound in the center of the table. Two large hallah breads appeared and Dara grasped them in both hands, looked around the table at each person individually and intoned in Hebrew, “Blessed are you Shechinat Yah, the indwelling Holy feminine who brings forth bread from the earth.” Dara broke the hallah into pieces, dipped it in a small bowl of salt and passed the large chunks around.

As she was doing this, Yehoshua got up, and went into the kitchen. He came back holding two rolls and said loudly in Hebrew, “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” He took a piece of his roll and passed one to Noah next to him. Noah took it and chewed noisily. Dara said, “Yehoshua, not into gender free language?”

He said, “Its Shabbes, we’re all Jews, let’s not argue. God is my king, its all for a reason. Leave it at that.”

“That language doesn’t work for all of us anymore,” Dara retorted.

Noah said “I need some mystery in my concept of God. I like the indwelling nature of the feminine, it’s all over mystical texts, but I want to pray to a king. I want certainty in my God, an indwelling feminine is just too… unstable for me.”

Wendy was coming up empty for a comeback line. She couldn’t’ let such a reductive statement go but was too mad to let her wiser self work on a good line. Orly said, “That makes absolutely no sense Noah. Why is a feminine God more unstable? Women are all hysterical? Come on, haven’t we moved past that?” She said with sarcasm. Wendy, next to her squeezed Orly’s arm in gratitude for her quicker wit.

Dara nudged Jason, “Let’s get the salads.”

The hosts departed for the kitchen. No one broke the ensuing silence until Yehoshua, sitting at the other end of the table from Amy who was holding a cooing Eliana on her lap, said, “Your daughter is adorable. How old is she?”
“Five months. She’s just starting solid food. She can turn over and is really beginning to be playful. I’m so proud,” she said as Eliana yanked at her beaded necklace. She asked Bonnie to hold the baby while she took the necklace off and put it in her pocket.

“Is her dad away for Shabbes? He must miss her,” Yehoshua queried.

“He’s always away,” laughed Amy. “In Australia. It was a donor situation, I wanted to do this on my own.”

Yehoshua blushed and stammered, “Oh.”

“I wasn’t in a committed relationship and this was the best way to have a family. Eliana has brought so much love into my life. People in my congregation were so caring, coming to doctor’s appointments, bringing me food, checking up on me. Having her completely changed the direction of my life.”

“Why didn’t you get married?” Yehoshua said gruffly.

Dara and Jason returned with the salads. They put out hummus, sprinkled with chick peas and pine nuts and spritzed with olive oil, a tomato and cucumber salad, guacamole, tabouli with fresh mint, and a carrot salad with raisins and walnuts. They also brought out a plate of warm \textit{pita} bread.

“Amy isn’t criticizing your life choices so why are you attacking her? Does it threaten you?” said Dara.

“I’m not attacking her, just saying that it would be easier to have a baby with a partner. It’s for sure a \textit{mitzvah} to bring life into the world. Women just aren’t obligated.” Yehoshua gestured, making a silly face and waving at Eliana who cooed as he added, “She’s a cutie.”

“I think Amy is amazing for choosing to bring love into her life by having a baby. I’m jealous – it isn’t quite as easy for men,” Rich said as the others laughed.

People were helping themselves, salads being passed around. No one spoke as plates were filled, and Jason said, “Words of Torah?” He hoped to find a unifying topic before another quarrel broke out. There were generalized nods, and he began.

“This week’s reading ends the book of Genesis with the death of Yosef,” he continued, “Joseph the righteous. It’s odd to end this book which began with the grandeur of the creation of the universe, with the image of bones in a coffin, the bones of Joseph, the last image in Genesis. I want to focus on how these images get us to the next book, the book of Exodus.
This portion contains dreams and memories, moments of certainty and doubt. Don’t we all wish we could have certainty, and tell those who have harmed us, “Am I in the place of God?” as both Jacob and Joseph do at different points in their lives?

How are the dreams of Yosef and Yakov different?

Dreams aren’t tangible. They have no monetary worth, no substance to grasp and acknowledge. Yet, Yosef was able to take the currency of dreams in all its slipperiness and indeterminacy and convert that coin to something actual, something that won him the trust of the cupbearer and the baker, and eventually the Pharoah himself. My hope for all those gathered round the Shabbos table tonight, is that you too can convert your dreams from indeterminate agents, to bearers of something solid, meaningful, material. The cupbearer, was, as his job requires, receptive, able to capture and contain the slippery liquid that is liquor, that bears the possibilities for dreams, for realms different from ordinary life, both for good and ill. The baker was too proud of the solidity of his own creations, they were destroyed as he was. Josef was able to praise God for what God had given him, the ability to decode, to interpret. And the Egyptian name he was given by the Pharoah, “tzafnat paneach” literally means “releaver of hidden things.” Yosef is mysterious because God has given him that ability to decode lives, both his own and others’.

At the very end of this week’s reading, Yosef tells his brothers that he is dying but God will surely visit them. These words. *pakod yifko, ‘he will surely visit’,* recur again in the book of Exodus as a sign that will help the children of Israel decode the hand of God in the future. These words reassure the people that God is behind the salvation. Each individual is now entrusted with that task, to decode our lives and to find that God has given each of us a way to be fertile even in our lands of affliction. We don’t always know why God puts us in narrow places, *Mitzrayim* Egypt literally means narrow, constricting, but even when God puts us into these places, God allows us a way out. Even though Yosef is in this place of immense constriction, a tight place, he is able to say, on naming his son Ephraim, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” That paradoxical fertility is the crux of the human condition. For who can say he is in an ideal setting, a place that is not in some way an affliction? Even we who are privileged to be studying in the land of Israel this year, we are not in a place without afflictions. Sam
Handelman, *zichrono li’vracha*, may his memory be for a blessing, our fellow American
student, was killed for being a Jew on an Israeli bus.

Genesis ends with a coffin, the bones of Yosef being put in a coffin, yet Exodus
begins with births, the swarming and teeming masses of Jews being born – a
multiplication on a vaster scale than the fertility amidst affliction of Yosef. That is
Shabbos too, the ability to sit back, to celebrate the bounty and fertility of the week, to
make time to rejoice in the midst of the misery and affliction of the human condition.
Yosef was able to get to that certainty, that feeling that God was with him, that despite
the bad, God made it good, through his dreams. He is different from his father Yakov,
who had the dream of the ladder of connection with heaven in Bet El, but lived without
prophecy, without divine connection for the many years Yosef was absent from his life.
Yakov’s dream and connection wavered but his son’s never did.

Yet one of the differences between father and son is in a chance Jacob has to retell
his life story, his personal journey. At the beginning of the portion, he blesses all his sons,
and then the sons of Joseph. As he is blessing Joseph’s sons, Jacob does something
peculiar. He switches his hands so that his right is on the head of the younger and his left
on the older. In essence, in this moment, Jacob is re-enacting the primal scene of his life,
his wresting of the birthright from his older twin Esau. Jacob’s blessing of his grandsons
retells the struggle between himself and Esau as a smooth transition with acceptance by
both parties that the younger son of Joseph, Ephraim, should precede the older Manasseh.
In Jacob’s new version of his life, there is no enmity between the brothers. He gives the
blessing to the one he designates, and they both accept the verdict, without hatred or
bloodshed.

The beauty of history is that it can be shaped with hindsight. Shakespeare, in
Henry V, speaks of the ability to “remember with advantages.” In reviewing his life,
Jacob reshapes his primal scene of impersonating Esau to gain his father’s blessing and
removes the violent urges of the shunned older sibling. Jacob is given the ability to re-
envision his life, re-enact it in a new form, much as Joseph is able to tell and retell both
his own life and the lives of others through dream interpretation.
This portion itself is closed – it is the only unit of the Torah that does not contain a space between itself and the previous section. Yet, it encodes another opening. The eighty-five verses in this section are a sign for the word, “peh” mouth, because the numerical value of the letters, “peh” and “heh” is equivalent to eighty five. The mouth, with which this portion speaks, is the possibility of re-envisioning and transforming the past. Perhaps the ability to use advantaged memory of past knowledge can make possible an enhanced future as Jacob suggests in the blessing he bequeaths to his grandsons. We don’t know what that future is, or how to ultimately decode it. But when the future comes, when we are able to decode our dreams, I hope we will say with Yosef, ‘God turned it to good.’ The ability to say, whatever happens, God turned it to good that is my prayer for each person here. Shabbat Shalom.”

When Jason finished talking, there was no sound but the breathing of the Shabbat guests. The illwill of the disagreement over the gender to address God seemed temporarily dispersed in the silence of quiet breathing rather than stunned awkwardness. All the listeners were involved in what Jason had been saying, each with their own thoughts and concerns about what their narrow place, their Egypt, might be and how – or whether - they would get to the point of feeling that what had happened to them in life had not been for bad, but for good.

“Jason, thank you, that was just… Words of Torah are so… sustaining,” said Amy, looking down at Eliana nourishing herself at her breast. Amy had a blanket draped over herself, but Wendy felt awkward seeing a woman nursing her baby even if no anatomical parts were in front of her. The baby was making suckling noises, greedily lapping nourishment from her mother. Something about the process bothered Wendy.

“I love decoding things, thinking about the message in a text, I was an English major in college,” added James. “That concept that Joseph was able to take something insubstantive like a dream and convert it into a useful currency is so… cool. I loved Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat as a kid, but I never thought of that,” he blurted.

“’To be fruitful in the land of affliction,’ I really like that idea,” echoed Wendy. “It is what each of us struggles with, to find ways despite affliction to be productive. The idea that each person has to decode life in a particular way, that’s what I’m writing about. I’m also thinking about what Amy said earlier, that she had a baby to hand down her dreams, to enable them to go beyond her, as her parents gave her things to dream about,” she mused.
Jason responded, “Thanks. I can’t take personal credit for most of the ideas since I’m echoing the ideas of the meforshim, the commentators.”

“The cool thing is,” Rich added, “Jews all over the world are reading the same section of text every week. We are coming from different places, going different places, but still reading the same text, right Yehoshua?” he grinned.

“We do read the same Torah, for sure. But, I believe in it as God’s word, revealed as a code for my life, and you see it as a myth with sacred overtones, but no real influence.”

Removing the baby from her breast, still covering herself with a blanket, and propping Eliana on her shoulder to burp her, Amy added, as she gave the baby gentle pats on the back, “We’ll see what happens. We need to add other words to our cycle of sacred readings. Words of women, of gays and lesbians, of different groups so people feel they can hear their own voice at sacred moments. I’m not saying we have to replace the Torah, but we need to find other words too. That’s going to be our task as liberal rabbis in the future.”

Puzzled, Bonnie responded, while twirling her hair, “But what else is there besides the Torah? It’s sacred text.”

“That’s the question” replied Amy. “We’ll have to see where people find value and sacredness. It may be that there are contemporary poets who make their way into the liturgy, or songs, like the one Rabin was singing when he was killed.”

“Get real,” Yehoshua replied. “You don’t think some singer like Debbie Friedman can replace Torah!”

“Why not?” Amy said defiantly. “It’s the will of the people. We’ve decided women and gay people can be rabbis, we can change our sacred orientation.”

“Then it’s not Judaism any more,” Yehoshua added.

“Judaism is what Jews say it is,” Amy continued.

“Then why study Torah at all? Why not just study the works of Philip Roth and say ‘that’s what Jews read, so that’s our sacred text.” Yehoshua exclaimed.

“More American Jews have read Portnoy’s Complaint than, say the book of Lamentations,” added Noah.

“We could make Philip Roth or Debbie Friedman our sacred text.” Dara interjected. “At least in my branch of Judaism, the past has a vote and not a veto. We have to consider that texts have historical resonance. I think after Jason’s words, we can agree that the Torah is probably
much richer than anything even the most talented author can write.” She gave Jason a broad
smile, which he returned. “*Yasher koach*, Jason. That was a really nice *dvar Torah*.”

“You’re admitting the Torah is a divine product,” Noah said triumphantly.

“Divinely inspired, there’s a difference,” Dara finished.

“Everyone had enough salad?” Jason interjected. “Dara, let’s get the main courses.”

Yehoshua stood up. “I’ll help.”

“You know,” Orly stated, “every Jew at this table has a completely different opinion, but
here we are, eating together, celebrating Shabbat, talking to each other, through the squabbles.
To come back to the Joseph story, we do still have shared dreams, like the dream of creating a
land together.”

“It’s a family dynamic kind of thing,” said James. “We might dislike each other, but we
need to come together. So we do.”

“Yeah,” said Bonnie. “I have lots of great aunts and uncles and even though they are all
in their seventies, they still fight like they’re kids. But they want to have holidays together even
if they fight about who brings what food, whose house it should be at, when…”

“My family too. All these arguments about what, when, where — we still get together
though. I remember hearing a definition of family as a group of people with whom you imagine a
non-existent home. No one is content with the idea of home but it’s imagined collectively,” said
Wendy.

Dara returned bearing a rice, nut and cheese casserole and chimed, “Wendy’s right. That
could be a definition of the modern Israel. An imagined home – no one is satisfied with what it
is, yet we are all making it work.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Noah. “Wouldn’t it be better if we could all agree on what home is
and what values we want in it?”

“Noah, you don’t even know who you want to make that home with, much less the
‘values’ you want there.” Wendy said sarcastically, her face contorted with annoyance. Maybe
she shouldn’t have been so mean so publicly she thought once the words were out of her mouth.
There was no going back now, she realized. She had drawn the battle lines, and put herself and
Noah on opposite sides. Even if the evening had been an attempt to get them back together, it
was not happening.
Jason and Yehoshua came out with platters. There was a baked eggplant dish with cheese and tomatoes, and a sort of stew with potatoes, barley, carrots, zucchini and tomato. The dishes appeared straight out of the Moosewood cookbook, a gift from Jason’s mom who was concerned about his getting proper nutrition as a vegetarian.

Amy continued, “That’s the nice thing about having a baby – I know who I want to make my home with.”

“I’m glad you’ve found the right balance, Amy,” said Noah with sincerity. “I wish we all could. Wendy, maybe you’ll find the right person to make your home with.” She felt sad hearing him say that. She’d thought, for a short time, it could have been him.

“It isn’t the only thing I want. I’m looking to have a career. Family comes second,” Wendy said helping herself to the rice casserole and passing it to Orly on her left.

“You can have both,” Orly chided.

“I want to reach my own dreams first, before I can pass them on to someone else,” Wendy responded.

Bonnie said, “Isn’t having children part of the dream? I wouldn’t mind working for a while but when I have children I want to be with them. Family first.”

“I’m with you, Bonnie,” said Yehoshua. “The traditional way of doing things, getting married and having kids right away is the best. That way you grow and develop with your children, not wait till everything is settled and you are 40. That’s my plan.”

“Plans are great, but dreams don’t always adhere to plans,” said James.

“What do you mean buddy?” Rich queried, looking at James next to him.

“Dreams are so … diffuse. There is this clear image, but then you wake up, poof, it dissipates. Like cotton candy, which looks so solid, until you put your tongue on it, and it just becomes nothing, colored sugar. It used to disappoint me so much as a kid – it looked so good and then it wasn’t there. Or you carry the dream vision for a while, it’s sharp, and suddenly the edges fade, and there is just a feeling – a dream about New York instead of the actual building and apartment where you were. Then it is gone completely. Being in Jerusalem this year is like a dream for me. I …I don’t know if I want to be a rabbi any more. I wanted to do it because I love being Jewish. Now, being here, I see all these other ways to be Jewish, not just as a rabbi. I love not driving on Shabbat, the connectedness to the city I feel walking, not having to worry about
spending money or how I will get to the next place. I don’t know how I would manage here if I weren’t in school. Or if I’d even like it if I just stayed on, outside the HUC framework.”

Amy said, high-pitched, “You can’t leave the program, I’d lose my best sitter, I’m counting on you to see me through.”

James gave her a smile. “As long as I’m in the program, I’ll always be happy to watch Eliana.”

Wendy realized, watching James, what irritated her about Amy was that both of these guys, younger than Amy, were infatuated with her. It may have been their admiration at her boldness at being able to go ahead and do something that she wanted, which they envied, being more insecure 23 or 24 year olds in comparison to her early 30-something age. Amy seemed to revel in their attention without noticing its nature. Did motherhood turn flirtatious signals off?

Dara said, “I agree with you, James. I love Shabbat in Jerusalem, people to share meals with, going for walks, relaxing. I don’t know that I would like it forever, or that it is enough to make me change my dream of being a rabbi. I know what you are talking about – I’m just…Not willing to change so much of myself.”

“Is a good thing or a bad thing?” Jason challenged her.

“I hope it’s a good thing. I don’t want to become a radically different person than I was when I came,” said Dara.

“Isn’t there something wonderful about finding a passion and yielding to it?” Noah queried.

“I think so,” said Amy. “James, if you feel passionately about life here, stay. Leave rabbinic school. I give you permission,” she said smiling and pushing the hair away from her face that Eliana had yanked in front of her mouth.

Jason said, “The Torah warns us about giving in too much to passions in the story of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, who offered strange fire to the Lord and were killed for it. The commentators are perplexed by the story – what did they do that was so wrong? Doesn’t God want us to serve with joy? Some say they tapped into the passion and joy felt by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, the joy at being forgiven, but inappropriately. Not all passion is acceptable.”

Orly said, “Wendy you’re writing about Jewish returnees. Do most follow their path out of passion or for other reasons?”
“Some of them didn’t like their lives before and want something completely different. Some fell in love with Shabbat or Torah study. Some don’t have rational explanations, will say, it just made sense to me. I have to think more about the role of passion,” she answered surprised at her words.

“Maybe we have something to add to Jason’s Dvar Torah,” added Noah. “That just as we hope we can achieve certainty, we hope we can find and pursue our passions appropriately.”

“I’ll second that, “ said James.

“Dessert anyone?” said Jason. He and Yehoshua cleared the uneaten food platters off the table, while Dara went into the kitchen to get a garbage bag. She returned and everyone passed paper plates, cups and silverware into the bag. Then, the three hosts returned to the table bearing the desserts. There were cookies from Marzipan Bakery that Wendy had brought, a bowl of pistachio nuts and a large elaborately decorated cake. Bonnie said, “Ooh, that cake looks good, who brought it?”

“I did,” said Rich. “It’s from the Angel Bakery, best in Jerusalem. Everyone has to have a piece.”

“You won’t find me saying no,” says Yehoshua. “One should enjoy what is permitted. We have to give an accounting in heaven for denying any permissible pleasures.”

Wendy found herself annoyed by his logic, “Doesn’t it take the fun out of everything, if you are only doing it because it is permissible, not because you really want to?”

“Depends on your attitude.”