

Grief Squared: A Story of Three Brothers, Nonobservance and Death

Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Non-Fiction Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Eli Jacobs

015636574

Advisor: Dr. Ilana Blumberg

צער בריבוע: סיפור על שלושה אחים, דתל"שיות ומוות

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

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אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

אלי ג'קובס

015636574

מנחה: ד"ר אילנה בלומברג

Contents

Aims and General Description	3
Conceptual Background & Context	4
Shape of Project	6
Bibliography.....	11

Aims and General Description

My project, a memoir, will deal with the evolution and devolution of my religious identity.

Born into an Orthodox home, my religious identity evolved as I moved from day school to yeshiva high school to a year in Israel and finally to four years in a haredi yeshiva in Baltimore, Maryland. From there I shifted from mildly Haredi to intensely Zionist. I married and moved from New York to a West Bank settlement. For many years, my religious identity was static, perhaps because I was preoccupied, struggling to make a living, raise small children and cope with the Middle East violence that hit close to home.

But as I was building a home, a family and a new identity in Israel a drama was playing out back in New York. My two brothers left religion and later died. Moshe, the oldest, married a non-Jew and later died of cancer. Danny was gay and died of AIDS.

Initially, the loss of my brothers had little impact on me, but later I began to feel pangs of...something. I sensed that they were pangs of *loss* but that was pretty much all I understood. Over time I realized that although I'd never had a strong, direct connection to my them, *the way my family related to my brothers* did have significant impact on my religious identity.

In my forties I removed my kipa and left religion, without really understanding why. Today I am an atheist, without really understanding why.

This project aims to look at the changes in my religious identity over the course of my life and the effect of my family's dynamic around my brothers—their nonobservance, illnesses and deaths—on my changing attitudes to religion.

Conceptual Background & Context

Conceptual areas relevant to my memoir include:

- Nonobservance in the Modern Orthodox context
- The intersection of religious identity and family dynamics

When comparing my story to recent "off-the-derech" (OTD) tales significant differences are apparent. OTD stories typically depict a linear, black and white reality. The protagonist, usually ultra-Orthodox, is raised in a confined, rigid atmosphere, at some point a stimulus—curiosity, the secular world, sexuality—leads them away, and they are left in conflict with their early life and family.

Nonobservance in Modern Orthodoxy versus Ultra-Orthodoxy

In the ultra-Orthodox context the stimulus that tempts a person away from the fold may be as minor as hearing classical music for the first time. This break from accepted norms is enough to crack the framework and send the protagonist sliding down a slippery slope to a new reality.

But Modern Orthodoxy, by its nature, struggles with shades of gray and tolerates much that is unacceptable in ultra-Orthodoxy. Small movements do not instantly burst an environmental bubble. The Modern Orthodox questioner or doubter can explore and test limits, her own and her environment's.

My childhood home possessed a challenging blend of ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox characteristics. My father was a rabbi who held certain views that positioned him as ultra-Orthodox but he was actually liberal and humanitarian at his core.

For many years the shades of gray that I experienced gave me the flexibility to explore without smashing the framework. But they also made that exploration and ultimately my choice of nonobservance more complex and confusing. I wonder if there were times that I wandered beyond the limits and it didn't register because no alarm bells sounded.

In writing my memoir I will attempt to identify a pattern or patterns that shed light on movements in my religious identity that ultimately led me away from observance and belief to atheism and cynicism.

Intersection of Religious Identity and Family Dynamics

In OTD stories that take place in ultra-Orthodox families the move away from religion is usually triggered by something that penetrates into the protagonist's confines—school, community or family— from *outside*. In contrast, in my story, changes in my religious identity were influenced by factors *within* my family as well as outside.

The messages, overt and covert, that I received from my parents in regard to religious observance were influenced by their urgent desire to ensure that I would not go off the path like my brothers. My experience can be compared to that of a child growing up in the shadow of a sibling who has passed away or who suffers a chronic illness. The parents, and even the children, may devote themselves to the memory or the needs of that sibling. This preoccupation becomes a major force for the healthy or surviving child.

The attitudes and sentiments toward religious practice that I experienced as a child were actually a mixture of religious values with my family's emotional needs. And it was upon this hybrid platform that my own socio-religious conscience and identity grew. The question must then be asked: when later I doubted, rebelled, rejected was I reacting to Orthodoxy, to my parents' preoccupation with my brothers or something else, perhaps a by-product of this intersectionality?

Summary

Both the breadth of Modern Orthodoxy and the intersection of religious values and family dynamics make it difficult to plot a clear course from religious to secular. Causes and effects seem to ricochet, bang into each other, and overlap. The loose structure of a creative memoir is an ideal container for such an exploration.

Shape of Project

Overview

My memoir will consist of six parts that plot the trajectory of my religious identity: from the naivete of early childhood, through twists and turns in early adulthood and finally to disillusionment, rejection and atheism in mid-life. The writing will combine vignettes, stories and narration that present events, develop characters and illustrate dynamics. I will reference written material (journals, letters, etc. from my parents and my brothers) and transcriptions of interviews with relatives and family friends.

Each section will deal with a pair of themes that contradict and/or complement each other. For example, my father imparted dogmatic ultra-Orthodox values and at the same time a broad-reaching, liberal outlook on life. Looking back, I see myself struggling with contradictions like this one with varying degrees of success or failure.

Through the writing I have done so far, it has become clear that pivotal events in my life—my brothers' illnesses and deaths—had little *visible* effect on me when they were happening. But years later, these events did emerge from my psyche and influenced the course of my life. Recollections of Moshe and Danny will be interwoven into my story and I will try to tease out their significance in an organic way without heavy-handed analysis.

House of Light, House of Rage

In this section I will portray my childhood home and its religious texture and the key dynamics within my family.

My memories are of loving, warmth and caring alongside my mother's frustration from her severe physical handicap and my brother Moshe's rebellious rage. Even as a small child, I found myself caught in between my mother's vulnerability and the threat posed by Moshe's volatility. This dynamic is essential to understanding later events.

The Edge and the Stoic

In this section I will present two personas of myself and explore the relationship between them.

The Stoic

As a teenager I experienced many deaths. My thirty-two-year-old school principal died a few feet away from me at a Purim party, a classmate died of an illness. My mother told me often that I reacted to these deaths with stoicism. I had to look the word up in the dictionary. But once I understood the idea and with my mother continuing to reinforce this self-image, I adopted this stance: tough, fearless in the face of death.

This also played into the most basic of Jewish moral attitudes I'd learned in school: this world and its pleasures should be negated for the sake of the world to come. Typical adolescent idealism, confusion from my early experiences of death, and an exaggerated need to protect my mother meant that I became a young zealot.

The Edge

Our family was clearly identified as Orthodox but in many ways danced around the edges of the mainstream. We lived in a neighborhood in New York with no synagogue and virtually no other Jews and this was very uncommon for Orthodox families. My father was often critical of popular rabbis, especially those who announced stringent rulings ("the fifth part of Shulchan Aruch"). My father also encouraged me to pursue creative interests, like photography and writing, to which he attributed special value.

My Edge, my creative persona and my Stoic were often in conflict. During holiday breaks, the Stoic should have been sitting at home and learning Torah, but the Edge wanted to go to galleries and concerts in Central Park.

In this section, I will explore the connection between the Edge and the Stoic. Did I contain or in some way resolve this tension? Or did it stay with me as a key internal conflict for many years?

Formative Years: Yeshiva and the Ramones

I went to a yeshiva high-school and studied in yeshiva for five years after that. For most of that time, my choices—to gravitate toward the more religious cliques in high-school, to attend a particular yeshiva in Israel, to go to an ultra-Orthodox yeshiva after my year in Israel—were driven by emotional factors. At first, I was drawn to charismatic role models but during my year in Israel I didn't find anyone to follow. Stories I heard from friends made me anxious that if I went to Yeshiva University, as I had planned, I would end up spending all my time in the pool room. So instead I chose to go the ultra-Orthodox Ner Israel yeshiva in Baltimore.

During my four years in Baltimore, I studied Jewish philosophy independently and intensely—initially the mysticism of the Maharal of Prague and later the teachings of Rabbi Kook. During that time, I also became a devoted fan of punk rock, listening to forbidden tapes in yeshiva and going to clubs and concerts.

During this stormy part of my life, I established my own religious identity for the first time. It was spotty and convoluted, but it was my own.

Gentle Soul, Wild Hippie

This section will focus on my father and my brother Moshe. In the years before his death Moshe was rehabilitated from the fallout of his hippie, party-animal youth that included heavy drug and alcohol abuse. He was trying to live a normative life when cancer was discovered in his spine. The strained relationship between Moshe's non-Jewish wife and my parents made the final years of his life, with his illness and hospitalizations, hellish.

In this section I will also focus on the complexity of my father's personality. His outward persona was that of a gentle, warm, accepting spiritual leader. He embraced secular culture and life and was especially passionate about Franz Kafka and I.B. Singer. But in some areas, my father was judgmental and negating and held rigid, dogmatic views.

While I was studying at Ner Israel, my father appealed to one of my teachers to adopt *The Penitent* by Singer as a text book of Jewish ethics. It baffled me that he didn't understand that the explicit erotic scenes in the book made it off-limits in the yeshiva even for casual reading. This typifies the challenge I faced in trying to understand my father.

And while Dad was distraught over Moshe's life choices, he also had a deep admiration for his first-born's worldliness and street smarts. This section will focus on my father and my brother Moshe and how the gap between them influenced me. I will explore the idea that Moshe represented a way of being that my father longed for but was unable to admit.

Gay Man, Integrative Thinker

This section will focus on my brother Danny, the story of his life as a gay man from an Orthodox family, his addictions, recovery, AIDS and death.

Alongside Danny's story I will discuss research and writing I was involved in around the time of his death. Initially this was a proposal for a PhD thesis combining Jewish philosophy and psychology. I compared the philosophies of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Carl Jung. Central to both was the idea

of *synthesizing*, rather than *negating* opposites. Kook, rather than calling for complete suppression of the secular so that the sacred could reign supreme (as more traditional thinkers would prescribe) saw the sacred and the secular as partners that complement each other. Jung (as opposed to Freud) saw the “shadow” as possessor of critical psychic energy that complemented the ego.

Both Kook and Jung saw redeeming qualities and vitality where other thinkers saw evil. My goal was to synthesize the two thinkers to extract a philosophy of Judaism enriched by Jungian psychology and vice versa. This slightly obsessive undertaking served many purposes. It was an attempt to be like my father with his mixed discipline approach. It was also a desperate effort to help me personally to navigate between the sacred and the profane.

Above all, I was looking for a way to legitimize both the religiosity of my birth family and the nonobservance of my brothers. When Moshe died, I was twenty-five years-old and I was numb and unthinking. But when Danny died, six years later, I was able to lean into the integrative philosophy I had internalized. For many years, this helped me to contain the complexity of the loss.

Since beginning work on this memoir, I have realized, mostly from reading Danny's journals, that the person I am today is very similar to the Danny of the 1990s. Perhaps the writing will enable some kind of integration or synthesis between myself and Danny.

In the Closet and Out

In the years after Danny's death, my life was full and hectic. My fourth and fifth children were born, I switched careers and was working long hours and traveling abroad for a hi-tech company. Religious practice became tedious and burdensome. I felt restless in the synagogue and ashamed for feeling that way. Uninterested, I mumbled prayers so that people around me would not realize that I was disengaged. My marriage became strained and the halachic restrictions on sex between husband and wife angered me.

I was no longer numb to the loss of my brothers or the complexities of their lives. When my wife repeatedly complained because I had stopped praying in the morning I shouted, “Tell the rabbi on me.” When the rabbi called us in for a chat I said, “It's hard, I think a lot about my brothers.”

Trips abroad gave my Edge personality a freer stage on which to act. And then my marriage of seventeen years entered into deep crisis. My inner religious persona was shaken but at no point during this time did I speak about or even think about leaving religious practice.

My mother died unexpectedly at the age of seventy-three and while sitting shiva for her I found myself contemplating life's unexpected turns. I wondered if I would be prepared for my own life to end while I was feeling such discontent.

At that moment I knew that I would change. Within seven months I left my marriage and removed my kipa.

When I look back at my uneasiness with Orthodoxy over many years, I see myself as a closeted secular Jew. In some ways, this memoir is my coming out story.

A Note on the Title: *Grief Squared*

When I first started to look at my family story, I blamed my parents for making Moshe and Danny's final years worse than they had to be. I came up with a theory: being alienated and estranged from your parents is a kind of death. So when you are already dead from parental-rejection and then discover that you're dying of cancer or AIDS, it is like you are facing death for a *second* time.

But death is such a big thing that you can't just say one-death plus one-death equals two deaths. I saw it more like an algorithmic function: one-death plus another-death equals *death-squared*.

I started to think that I had a cautionary tale: don't reject your children, it could be bad, it could be death, it could even be death-squared and then you will face *grief-squared*.

As I write, I will explore and refine my understanding of family dynamics. I imagine that, regardless of any shifts in perspective, I will continue to see interacting layers of alienation, loss and grief.

Bibliography

The bibliography below includes books that inform my writing, due to their subject matter or their stylistic approach to memoir.

Two memoirs that especially inspire me are *All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir* by Shulem Deen and *The Mistress's Daughter: A Memoir* by A.M. Homes.

All Who Go Do Not Return

Deen, Shulem, *All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir* (Graywolf Press, 2015)

In reading Shulem Deen's memoir I was struck by incongruity between the painful injustices the author suffered and the even-keeled tone of his narrative. For example, when writing about a court ruling that forbade Deen from bringing his children into his own home, the narrator maintains a matter of fact voice.

Upon learning that the court-appointed psychologist made her recommendation without meeting with Deen, the father of the children, he confronts her with, "Shouldn't you have met with me first?" And in describing her body language as she replied he wrote, "She appeared lost, both contrite and defensive." Where Deen could have portrayed a monster arbitrarily forcing small children away from their father, he showed us a human being caught in a difficult position.

We learn that the author is aware of this balance when he expresses his distaste for the way he'd been portrayed in a *Village Voice* interview. "I had taken pains to write simply as I experienced my world, subjectively and judgmentally, but also honestly. I had written not with malice but my own truth."

This memoir has earned praise from a broad spectrum of readers. I would guess that the narrator's reliability, authenticity, and lack of malice are key factors in enabling readers to hear Deen's story in an open, non-threatening way.

If Deen's story—which is one of ultra-Orthodox, black and white extremes—benefited from *honesty* and *lack of malice*, surely a more nuanced tale—of modern Orthodoxy's shades of gray and a family's mixed sentiments—will best be served by a similar tone.

I aim to tell my story with simplicity and thoughtfulness and without malice in the hope that this will reveal the truth of my experience.

The Mistress's Daughter

Homes, A.M., *The Mistress's Daughter: A Memoir* (Penguin Books, 2008)

At age thirty, A.M. Homes, a successful novelist was notified that the woman who had put her up for adoption at birth wanted to meet her. The author describes her mixed feelings about meeting her biological mother and later her biological father. Everything about the newly revealed parents—their personalities, the story of the relationship between them, and the way they relate to their daughter—is complex and disturbing. The reader senses something lurking behind their motivations to seek her out.

Whereas this could have led Homes to heavy-handed analysis of the events, the characters and her own feelings, she takes a different approach. This can be illustrated by a brown cashmere sweater in the story. At an early meeting, Ellen (the biological mother) tells Amy (the author) to put on her cashmere sweater so she won't get chilly. The author reflects simply, "I don't have a cashmere sweater." Later we learn that when Norman, the author's father, seduced Ellen when she was fifteen, he gave her a brown cashmere sweater. Finally, Homes, now in her thirties receives a brown cashmere sweater as a Christmas present from Norman.

Homes has placed all the dots needed to form a (creepy) picture onto the page and leaves the reader to consider the emerging image. Is Norman, who seduced Ellen when she was fifteen, now pursuing an affair with Amy, his daughter? The relationship between the three characters grows more complicated and more secrets are hinted at but Homes never fully connects the dots. Rather she provides sufficient clues to allow the reader to observe and speculate, perhaps just as she herself did.

Like Home's, my family history includes its share of dark stories. When told in a straight-forward way, without commentary, the significance of some will be evident while others will yield, at best, muddled narratives. Inspired by A.M. Home's connect-the-dots approach, I aim to sketch out the elements of my story and to allow my reader to observe what emerges.

Books Related to Leaving Religion and Nonobservance

- Conley, Garrard, *Boy Erased: A Memoir of Identity, Faith, and Family* (Riverhead Books, 2017)
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- Vincent, Leah, *Cut Me Loose, Sin and Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* (Penguin Books, 2015)

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