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Leifer, Joshua. *Tablets Shattered: The End of An American Jewish Century and the Future of Jewish Life*. NYC, NY: Penguin Putnam (Dutton), 2024.

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We are immediately moved by Joshua Leifer's extraordinary new book, "Tablets Shattered: The End of An American Jewish Century and the Future of Jewish Life," which chronicles his search for a place in the Jewish world where he can feel welcome. It proves to be no easy task for this precocious young man who astounds you with his both his heart and mind.

Leifer was raised in a traditional Jewish community in New Jersey's northwest Bergen County where his father is a physician. He describes his parents cryptically as conservatively minded people who are averse to any sort of ruckus. But Leifer seems to have been born with a fiery temperament. He attended a Jewish day school and recalls how his classmates all felt "Israel was the spiritual and geographical center of the universe." Judaism and Zionism were synonymous and "We needed Israel because only a Jewish state could protect the Jews after the Holocaust." Leifer breathed it all in; he was always an earnest and serious kid.

But he soon saw gaping holes in his traditional Jewish school's accepted dogma. He didn't like the bellicose groupthink of the school which seemed to see themselves only as "bound together by the trauma of the Holocaust, having only understood themselves as history's ultimate victims, could not recognize that they now possessed power, who could neither acknowledge the means by which they had attained such power nor contemplate the ethical responsibilities its possession required." But Leifer already was troubled by their obtuseness, and when his parents switched him to a public school in 6th grade, his alienation from his early religious life grew larger.

In public school, Leifer was one of usually two or three Jewish kids in the class. He was mocked, bullied, and called "Jew, Jewboy, Josh Jew" by his new classmates when they weren't drawing swastikas on his desk. He no longer wore a kippah to school. He finally made a friend and recalls being mortified when his father called his new buddy's house to speak with the parents making sure any guns were safely stored away. This only caused more teasing by both his friend

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and his parents. He never really felt close to any of them and found most students to be "patriotic in a belligerent way." But Leifer was becoming accustomed to feeling out of place, and this precipitated his political consciousness.

Leifer never says so directly, but one senses he found his family home difficult because he wasn't comfortable speaking with either parent about matters of great importance to him. We sense he feels they just wouldn't understand. He describes the family's Judaism for us: "Ours was a kishkes Zionism. Blunt, passionate, reactionary: a religious nationalism but with history in in place of providence. Two states, negotiations, compromise-these were not part of our lexicon, let alone words like 'occupation,' 'siege,' or 'military rule.' I can hardly recall hearing the word 'Palestinian' unaccompanied by the word 'terrorist."

By his teenage years, Leifer came to believe Israel was an apartheid state and was enraged by the occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza. And ironically, at the same time, he found himself roaming the streets of Jerusalem looking for a charismatic rebbe who might "teach me how to reconcile commitment to justice for the oppressed with the texts of the tradition, only to run up against the hard walls of Jewish parochialism." He spent time with Palestinian farmers and shepherds in the West Bank and took part in demonstrations against the Israeli government and the IDF in Nabi Saleh, a village that was the epicenter of the unarmed resistance movement in the late 2000s. Leifer recalls feeling disgusted with the "moral bankruptcy of contemporary Zionism." Leifer's political views were swinging leftward, and he considered himself a feminist, anti-racist, and an advocate for helping the poor. He never abandoned his Jewishness but had stopped praying daily or observing the Sabbath. He admitted that "God, for me has always been much more an awful absence, a commanding void than the source of all things, of good, of life." He found himself disgusted with America's involvement in Iraq and became more alienated everywhere. He never reveals what his parents say about his many episodes of rebelliousness, but one senses they were worried about him.

Leifer lands at Princeton in 2013, after spending a year in Israel studying religious texts as his political views continued to veer leftward. We wonder how he can reconcile his political philosophies with religious teachings, but something keeps drawing him back to the wellspring of

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his religion. He writes “the ethical task of Jewish life is now to make the modern experiment in Jewish sovereignty a just one. Neither the Jewish establishment nor the radical left offers paths to meeting this challenge. The establishment’s willful blindness to Israel’s deeds is a form of moral abdication. Likewise, the pursuit of exculpation and clean hands through renunciation is to shirk our collective responsibility.” But Leifer refused to be silenced and began writing probing journalistic essays for *Dissent* and *Jewish Currents* magazine about his displeasure, as well as the plight of the Palestinians.

Something unexpected happens and Leifer’s world gets turned upside down. He falls in love with an ultra-Orthodox girl and marries her. He becomes entrenched in the loving embrace of her family with whom he prays. He starts laying tefillin again and observing the Sabbath and engages with a study partner in poring over the Talmud and other religious texts, hoping he and his study partner can reach new heights of Jewish understanding. He speaks candidly to his wife and her family about his progressive views, and they try to understand his point of view. He feels like he has possibly found a home and we rejoice in his newfound happiness.

But I must admit I felt worried for him too. I didn’t want him to be disappointed again and yet I saw storms that lay ahead. Having worked in such a community as a secular teacher, I was familiar with the anxiousness that accompanies even the slightest differences, and worried he would soon be pressured to relinquish his more worldly views. Like Leifer, I have always had trouble finding a home in Judaism, having been brought up without traditional teaching or belief, and yet, like Leifer, my Jewish identity somehow always felt primary. I have spent decades reading about all sorts of confused Jews hoping to find solace in one realm or another, and I knew the disappointment, rejection, anger, and exile that might await him. I couldn’t see how he was going to square his feminism, anti-racism, advocacy for Palestinian rights, and support for the world’s poor amidst ultra-Orthodox Jews who insist upon a rigid adherence to their belief systems. And who might see someone like him as a threat to the status quo.

Leifer seems to be straddling both worlds for now. The attack on October 7th saddened him greatly, as did the reaction of America’s left, and the enormous surge of antisemitism that seemed to emerge in the most unlikely of places. But it hasn’t changed his perspective that Israel is guilty

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of long-term mistreatment of the Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank, and his belief that both sides must work towards a long-term agreement that will ensure safety and peace for both peoples.

By chance, I found an article Joshua Leifer wrote in 2021 for the *Tel Aviv Review of Books*. It was about an IDF soldier named Mikhael Manekin who joined Breaking the Silence, a progressive organization that advocates Palestinian rights, after he left army service. Mikhael Manekin is the grandson of a Holocaust survivor who came to Israel and was immediately put off by the intolerance of some who found his diasporic Jewry unsettling. Manekin, always an unwavering religious Jew wondered, “What would it be like to live and act politically in Israel with a conscious commitment to Jewish ethics?” Manekin still prays with Religious Zionists who do not agree with his thinking about the Palestinians and other issues, but he makes it known that he insists he be respected within their group.

A year or so later, Leifer came to an almost identical realization. He asked, “What if all of us who are distanced from religious life because of our opposition to the occupation were to insist, simply by virtue of our presence in traditional spaces, on the compatibility of anti-occupation politics with halakhic observance-despite, or rather because of, the discomfort this would entail.” Leifer decided he could do likewise.

It’s impossible to finish this heartbreaking book about a young Jewish soul in search of himself without reflecting on one’s youth. I remain a lost Jew and never found clarity anywhere. Being Jewish for me is a state of perpetual bewilderment and yearning, but also a joyous identification, despite my lack of belief or religious training. I’m not in search for a group to belong to; I feel comfortable as an uncomfortable Jew. Jewish history has served for me as a substitute resource, as have memories of my blessed Jewish parents who seemed to embody a secular Jewish consciousness that is now my own. It is filled with passion and hunger for learning, and fear for our collective Jewish future around the world. It emphasizes the importance of goodness to others. But it makes no other demands on me. Leifer would find my way of being Jewish not imbued with sufficient meaning, but it suits me just fine. I hope he continues to find what he is looking for in his new life, and that his exquisitely written new book receives a wide audience.

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