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Lynne Abraham and the Power of Persistence

SOPHIE PANZER | JE STAFF

Lynne Abraham during her 2015 mayoral campaign

Courtesy of Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia

Lynne Abraham doesn't quit.

In the midst of a global pandemic, the 79-year-old former Philadelphia District Attorney has commandeered her dining room table so that she can work from home. Social distancing has limited interviews to phone calls and email, but she paints a picture with her words.

"My dining room table is a dog's breakfast — the same as any desk I've ever sat behind," she noted.

Abraham is a partner at the law firm Archer & Greiner, P.C. This might come as a surprise to the firms who refused to hire women in 1965, the year she graduated from Temple Law School as one of two women in her class and had difficulty finding work. Even more surprising might be her four terms as the city's DA and her 2015 mayoral campaign.

She knew the odds were against her in many of her professional endeavors. It never stopped her from trying.

"I ran for something that I wanted, but was aware that it was highly unlikely I would be successful," she said of her campaign. "But I'm a risk taker. Whether it's Mozart or a scientist or Elon Musk, you don't advance by being comfortable. You take a risk."

Her risk-taking approach played a big role in her decision to launch an investigation into sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in 2000. That, and her love of newspapers.

"I was and am an inveterate newspaper reader. I do not get my news from the television," she explained. Her go-to sources include The New York Times and The Washington Post, and occasionally the Miami Herald and San Francisco Chronicle.

"Since I read a lot of newspapers, I happened to see quite often, at the bottom of the page, no more than an inch, two inches at most, a Catholic priest being relieved from his duties due to sexual abuse of a minor, a child," she said.

She started reading about more widely publicized cases of sexual abuse in Louisiana and Boston.

"I thought, it can't just be it happened in these places, it must be happening here too. We ought to look into this."

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>
> LYNNE ABRAHAM

At the same time Abraham was learning of these cases, the Inquirer published an article in which Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua claimed there were only 36 priests credibly accused of sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

"They put the story out and I said, 'That didn't sound right,'" Abraham said. "So I spoke to the men and women in my office and I put together a team of investigative attorneys and support staff and I announced that I would submit the investigation to the grand jury."

The reaction was explosive.

"You would have thought I'd dropped a bomb on the city of Philadelphia," she recalled. "The church has always exerted a very strong force, and I believe Roman Catholicism is still the leading religious affiliation that people subscribe to. Many public officials were Catholic, and they called me up and chewed me out. Called me a Jew, told me that my career was over."

Nevertheless, she persisted.

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Abraham

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In 2005, Abraham and her investigative team held an open press conference to release their findings.

"Not only was the figure that Bevilacqua submitted a total lie, we found that over 130 priests had committed sexual abuse of minor children," Abraham said.

The church wrote a rebuttal to the report and denounced the investigation, but that only spread the findings further. Even Abraham's most severe critics were shocked.

"Everyone who threatened me turned around and said, 'Holy smokes! Is that going on?'" she said.

She found that the report made victims feel liberated after years of church leaders covering up abuse.

"They didn't want money, they didn't want fame, they didn't want to be famous, they just wanted to be believed."

Contrary to her critics' predictions, the investigation had virtually no impact on her career. In fact, she believes telling the truth helped her win reelection to a fourth term as DA.

Although she has transitioned from criminal law to civil law, Abraham continues to lend her expertise to fighting child abuse.

She advises and supports Marci Hamilton, the CEO and academic director of Child USA, the national think

"I love any holiday which celebrates the will of us to survive against all odds and obstacles, and demonstrates our extraordinary resilience, resolve and strength to live, without ever losing our love of learning, creativity and humor"

LYNNE ABRAHAM

▲ **Lynne Abraham records a podcast for Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.** Courtesy of Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia

tank for child protection. Hamilton worked on her investigative team as an expert on clergy sexual abuse.

"I testified some years ago to try to get New York to try to pass a civil window to allow sexual abuse victims to bring forward testimony after the statute of limitations had passed. I support her with donations and any kind of help I can offer to give victims a method or means to be compensated for the injury and harm they have suffered," Abraham said.

Abraham has approached our current challenging times with the same resolve that defined her legal career. Being confined to her house didn't stop her from celebrating Passover.

"No seder plate or Haggadah. Just lots of yummy gefilte fish, chicken matzah ball soup, chicken and fresh veggies," she said.

Her favorite Passover dish? "A Matzah Charlotte made by my bubbe, Clara, with apples, raisins, eggs and matzah, of course. Too divine for words and never eaten since her death." For the uninitiated, a Matzah Charlotte is a baked dessert similar to a kugel or bread pudding.

Abraham views Passover and other Jewish holidays as an opportunity to celebrate endurance.

"I love any holiday which celebrates the will of us to survive against all odds and obstacles, and demonstrates our extraordinary resilience, resolve and strength to live, without ever losing our love of learning, creativity and humor," she said. •

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Not All Who Wander Israel for Art are Lost

MATT SILVER | JE STAFF

▲ **Robert Weisman sold, donated or loaned 25 pieces by Nathan Hilu that became part of the Temple Judea Museum's exhibition "Hilu through the Eyes of a Collector."**
Photos courtesy of Rita Poley

"Oh my God," Judith Weisman said, partly with mild irritation but mostly good-humored resignation. "There is no more room in this house for any more art."

She knows her husband of 50 years well enough to know that any moratorium on art acquisitions won't last long. And as an amateur artist herself — specializing in mosaics — she doesn't really mind. But in quarantine, one tends to notice the walls getting closer.

"She'd be fine if I were to sell some ... and not overwhelm the house," said Robert Weisman, a former Macy's executive who hasn't hung any paintings on the ceiling ... yet. "I literally have paintings in closets right now."

Weisman has experience selling valuable inventory in bulk.

"At one point, I was in charge of (Macy's) fur division — you know, the one the animal rights people don't like," he joked. "When (the division) filed for bankruptcy, I was in charge of taking it out of business and selling off the entire fur inventory."

Though he loved the 25 years he spent working for Macy's, those furs were just merchandise. There is much more meaning to be derived from his collection of Jewish art, which comprises some 60-or-so paintings by Jewish artists both well-known and not and several hundred *objets d'art*, including a vast collection of Judaica paperweights that Weisman suspects to be among the largest anywhere.

Not conventionally observant, Weisman doesn't *daven* often; over the past 50 years, he's been to Israel on art-hunting expeditions more regularly than he's been to his neighborhood shul — though both his daughters became b'not mitzvah at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, and one was confirmed there.

"The last time I walked into the synagogue, our friend, the assistant rabbi, was standing there," Weisman said of the rabbi at KI who'd officiated his daughters' baby namings and bat mitzvahs. "He was so shocked to see me there, he looked around and said 'the pillars are going to come crumbling down.'"

Weisman's connection to Judaism manifests itself differently; it's a connection he feels most acutely when he's wandering. In Israel. By himself.

"I always go myself," he said; his wife's joined him just once in 50 years. "I love to wander, and I've wandered in and out of art

▲ **Robert Weisman's come to love Chris Riggs' "Ahava" (love) so much he's given it prime real estate above his mantle.** Courtesy of Robert Weisman

galleries all my life over there."

He's visited around two dozen times since volunteering as a teenager to work on a kibbutz shortly after the Six-Day War. Weisman's sister Helen has lived in Israel for the past 40 years, so he'll routinely spend a couple days with her, too.

But Weisman's version of Shabbat — where he rejuvenates and communes with something greater — is spent (mostly) alone, connecting and reconnecting to Israel. He particularly likes desultory strolls through Mea Shearim, the old haredi neighborhood in Jerusalem, or simply observing religious pilgrims, both Jewish and not, in Jerusalem's Old City, looking for the stories he wants his collection to reflect.

"I'm fascinated, for instance, with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. To me, that's one of the nicest places I've ever seen," he said. "I'll sit there and watch for hours the people coming in who kiss the slab of granite where supposedly Jesus was taken down off the cross. I'm fascinated by it. And then I'll wander the Old City looking for artwork."

Weisman's been buying Jewish art in Israel for so long, many of the gallery owners have come to know who he is and what he likes.

"They tip me off when something they think I'll like is coming up," said Weisman, who's built relationships with art dealers both in Israel and in the United States. "They've come to understand my tastes. I like brightness, pieces that tell stories."

He also likes pieces that hit on more than one note but don't play out of key. He's excited by Jewish artists who subvert the expectation that Jewish art must be solemn and earnest all the time. And he's attracted to the experimental and avant-garde insofar as it's tethered to the traditions that make Jewish art Jewish — a nod to the biblical, a reverence for the sanctity of Jewish ritual.

"As a collector, his taste is very eclectic," said Rita Poley, director and curator of the Temple Judea Museum at KI. "It runs the gamut from the formalism of (Israeli artist) Menashe Kadishman to the outsider art of the late Nathan Hilu, and from

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fine art to craft and kitsch."

Temple Judea's most recent exhibition — it ran through the beginning of March — was dedicated to the work of Hilu, but it couldn't have come off if not for Weisman, who sold, donated or loaned 25 pieces by Hilu that became part of that exhibition. Many, Poley said, have become part of the museum's permanent collection, so it was only appropriate that the exhibition would be named, in part, for Weisman: "Hilu Through the Eyes of a Collector."

Largely self-taught, a so-called outsider to the art establishment, Hilu's cartoonish and whimsical depictions of Jewish ritual life on New York's Lower East Side have drawn the attention of collectors in recent years. And his sketches of notorious Nazi war criminals like Rudolf Hess and Hermann Goering, made while serving as an Army guard at the Nuremberg trials, reside in repose at the Library of Congress.

"You can't always get his stuff because some people are actually grabbing it up right now," Weisman said, acknowledging that over the last few years, and after his death, Hilu's work has risen in value.

Meanwhile, Weisman's proud to have patronized Hilu early, while he was still alive, and he's similarly proud to have played such a prominent role in the first museum-caliber exhibition of his work.

"I was thrilled to get exposure for Mr. Hilu," Weisman told the Exponent earlier this year, adding that he hoped the exhibition would show people that a robust world of Judaica exists beyond the big-name artists.

Weisman doesn't swim with the big fish of the collecting world. There's a thrill, he concedes, in appraising lesser-known talent correctly, but mostly he just likes what he likes, notwithstanding the signature in the bottom corner of the frame. You could say he has inexpensive taste, or you could say he's got an eye for value.

His track record suggests it's more of the latter.

Weisman said he paid about $500 for a painting by Ben Avram, a Jewish artist from India, whose work was relatively unknown when Weisman first encountered it in Israel.

"I found this guy before he really busted out; then he moved to Israel and

his stuff really took off," he said. "That was one of the first large purchases I ever made. I bought it at a gallery right next door to the King David Hotel (in Jerusalem)."

Weisman estimated the Avram piece is worth close to $3,000 now.

"I don't go in for the paintings that are up in the stratosphere. I let my work go up in value. Once, I overpaid by a mile for something I really wanted, and I should've listened to my conscience, which told me, 'Wait a while.'"

Not many know Weisman collects to this extent — or is even a collector at all. It's not something he's kept secret; people just don't seem to catch the vibe of a Jewish art collector coming off a man who rarely attends shul and was so devoted to his professional life.

"They always tell me I'm the last person in the world they thought would be collecting art — it's not me, they say. But, then, they come over here, and they're fascinated — they only want to know what I've gotten recently. And I take them in the den and make sure the den door's closed so my wife doesn't see anything new." •

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▲ Nathan Hilu is among Weisman's favorite artists because his work is whimsical and humorous but also deferential to tradition and ritual. Courtesy of Robert Weisman

▲ **Natalie K. Levant performs.** Photos courtesy of Natalie K. Levant

Natalie K. Levant Brings the Laughs at 88

ERIC SCHUCHT | JE STAFF

She's the silver vixen of the stand-up — the comedic grandmother audiences wished they had.

"They used to say mother," Natalie K. Levant laments.

While others may be slowing down at 88, Levant is just getting started.

In the last seven years she has made a name for herself in the local comedy scene, as the East Oak Lane resident has performed at clubs, restaurants and dive bars throughout the Delaware Valley and beyond.

"I always loved show business," Levant said. "When I was born and the doctor did that little spanking, I really thought he was applauding. And ever since I've been out there as an enormous fan of theater, comedy, musicals, dramas, everything."

Levant started pursuing standup at 81. The catalysis for the lifestyle change was the passing of Bob, her husband of 55 years. The two met in Atlantic City when Levant was 18 and married in

1954. From there, the couple settled in Philadelphia and raised three sons and an adoptive daughter from Korea. Her husband worked as an attorney while Levant was a stay-at-home mother.

Once her daughter turned 16, Levant began working, first as a medical secretary at an OB-GYN office, followed by an administrative assistant position at a psychiatric practice.

But Levant was at a loss when her husband died of a heart attack in 2009.

"After my husband passed away, I really didn't know what to do with myself. It wasn't that my husband was my identity. It's just that the house was empty with me and our pets. And when I was out in this new world that I found myself in, it even more so felt that I had no identity as a woman who was recently widowed."

"I always loved show business ... I've been out there as an enormous fan of theater, comedy, musicals, dramas, everything."

NATALIE LEVANT

So Levant began volunteering and eventually ended up at the Siloam Wellness Center. One day, a colleague asked if she had ever considered stand-up and handed her the business card of Alejandro Morales. The Philadelphia comedian was producing a comedy show at Tabu Lounge in the Gayborhood and, after their introduction, agreed to put Levant on stage.

"I went, and I felt nothing but love in that room. I sometimes wonder if the folks at Tabu had not embraced me as warmly as they did if I ever would have stuck with it, but they did and I did and the rest is history."

Most of Levant's material comes from real-life experiences. She prioritizes honesty and authenticity above all else.

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"Sometimes folks will come up to me after a show (and ask), 'Oh, it's all that stuff up there that you talk about true?' And I always answer them, 'Who would want to make that up?'"

Levant draws inspiration from comedians like Buddy Hackett, Alan King, Milton Berle, Henny Youngman and Shecky Greene. She likes to think that her Reform Jewish upbringing in Pittsburgh had an effect on her sense of humor and cultural identity, so much so that one of her four tattoos is l'chaim written on her bicep.

"These are people that are part of the tapestry of my life," she said, "Being Jewish is something that I have all been proud of. It's a part of who I am. Maybe that's why I love that Borscht Belt humor so much because I heard so much of it in my home from my daddy."

Once a month, Levant co-hosts a comedy night at Ray's Happy Birthday Bar in South Philadelphia. Venue owner Lou Capozzoli said comedy is "a tough business," but that Levant has found success.

"She's well-liked. People love her. She changes her act a lot of the time, I'll give her that," Capozzoli said. "And she does a couple of jokes, but just tells stories about life, about her family, how they don't get along. She just tells stories about life. Her big

"When I go up on stage nothing is in my head but performing, which is one of the great joys of doing stand-up for me," she said. "When I get up on that stage, whatever sh-- is going on in my life, I leave it."

NATALIE LEVANT

thing is you're not too old to do it. Don't let nobody tell you you're too old to keep going. What do you do, sit home and die? That's her thing, which is great."

Despite coming from an older generation than most of her audiences, Levant described her set as multigenerational. Her material dips into her youth, telling stories that can resonate with people of the same age today. Stand-up is an opportunity for Levant to express herself, regardless of what's going on in her life.

"When I go up on stage nothing is in my head but performing, which is one of the great joys of doing stand-up for me," she said.

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"When I get up on that stage, whatever sh-- is going on in my life, I leave it. I mean, if somebody wants to come forward and add to the pile, that's fine. But when I'm on stage, it's a love affair with me and the crowd."

For those looking to Levant for inspiration and hope to follow in her footsteps, she encourages them to perform authentically without worrying about what others think.

"I would encourage anyone who is blessed with a lot of years and still relatively good health, God willing and hopefully, I would encourage them to follow your dreams. And don't worry. Certainly don't worry at this point in your life what people are thinking of you," she said. "You don't have time for the worry of what will my next-door neighbor or my daughter-in-law, or even my son or the person standing behind me in the line at the supermarket (think)."

Levant doesn't plan on slowing down anytime soon, so people should be on the lookout for her next performance. With luck, she'll make her dream gig come true, opening for Ricky Gervais or possibly Jeff Ross.

"And I don't make that offer lightly." •

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▲ Magic, Malissa said, "is a hobby that carries you into these wild experiences, if you let it." Photo by Virginia Glatzer

ROBERT MALISSA BELIEVES IN MAGIC

JESSE BERNSTEIN | JE STAFF

Robert Malissa, 60, was making magic on a street corner in Phoenixville. It was a First Friday, and Malissa had a pretty good rhythm going, getting a couple of laughs, making onlookers wonder just how, exactly, he did *that*.

A young man walked by and made a snide remark.

"Hey, a magician, the lowest form of entertainment," he said, and kept walking.

Malissa had an idea. "I thought, you know, that's a great opening for a show," he said. And so Malissa made that remark the intro for his new show, "A Case for Magic."

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Egor Suvorov / iStock / Getty Images Plus

MAGIC

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▲ Robert Malissa started doing magic when he was 10

Photo by Ellen Malissa

Malissa, a civil engineer in his non-magical hours, is used to making something appear where there used to be nothing. The Northeast High School product and current Lower Makefield resident has performed magic for 50 years, in venues as varied as an Amsterdam sidewalk to the Cheeburger Cheeburger at Oxford Valley Mall, and everywhere in between. Malissa hopes to disabuse you of the notion that there is a disconnect between his day job and his entertainment career; "a magician," he said, "is an engineer with panache."

Malissa's magic career began at the age of 10. His parents, members of Adath Tikvah-Montefiore in Rhawnhurst, had a friend named Sy Constantine. That was his civilian name, of course. Onstage, he was Sy the Great.

At a picnic, young Malissa joined the adults for a game of horseshoes, and struggled to reach the stakes with toss. Seeing Malissa's frustration, Sy the Great walked over and turned a handkerchief into a chain in front of Malissa's eyes.

That's the first trick he can remember seeing, and it's the one that led to his new name: Robert the Great (name courtesy of Constantine). Constantine would take Malissa along with him to shows, feeding Malissa's passion as the newcomer picked

RomoloTavani / iStock / Getty Images Plus

up tricks from Kanter's Magic Shop in Center City, or books on magic from the Northeast Regional Library, a "treasure trove" of such material.

"It was a world that he opened up to me that I didn't know about," Malissa said.

He'd tag along with Constantine on shows at the Police Athletic League, and the Philadelphia State Hospital at Byberry. Malissa was mostly there as a gopher to Constantine, but every once in a while, he'd step in to show off his stuff.

Soon, it was time for Malissa to start putting on his own shows. His first headlining gig was his family friend Jerry's birthday party, all of Malissa's tricks stuffed into a blue alligator skin makeup suitcase. With that first show, Robert the Great became a known and sought-after quantity, at least among the adolescent boys of Northeast Philadelphia. Back then, you could get a Robert the Great show for round-trip transportation and $5.

Malissa's magic habit survived the glare of a high school social milieu, that place where many a childhood interest wither and die. But magic became valuable to Malissa in ways he didn't anticipate. Magic always had a cool factor for him, ("It just blows you away, and you wanna be a part of it," he said), but he didn't expect that it would become a site of competence and confidence in a high school hallway. On weekends, you could catch him at Burger Doodle on Castor Avenue between Longshore Avenue and Glenview Street, doing six shows in a weekend if he was lucky.

It was then that he started to develop

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his "performance edge," as he calls it. It was "real standard issue stuff," ropes, rings, cups and balls, parlor tricks and card manipulation, along with a few jokes. By the time he left for Albright College, he was good enough to win a talent show. That was a big victory for him; he became the magic guy on campus.

"Everybody wants to be known for something, I guess," he said.

After transferring to Drexel University, he'd go down to Headhouse Square on Saturdays and watch a couple of talented street magicians who introduced themselves as Penn and Teller. Malissa and his friend Larry would juggle knives with Teller after the show, which is not a "chop-it-up" or "shoot-the-breeze"-like euphemism; they literally juggled knives together.

Malissa continued to improve as a magician. He started doing his own street show, and won a contest put on by the Philadelphia Houdini Club. The prize: a lithographic plate of the man himself, donated to the club by his wife, Bess. A few months after he graduated from Drexel, where he had begun the engineering work that would become his career, Malissa traveled to Europe, hopping from hostel to hostel and busking on the street. In Europe, Malissa said, street magic and performance is considered to be closer to art than stylized begging, as it is in the states.

Malissa came back and began his career as an engineer in earnest. He met his wife, Ellen, and they had a few children. He took a long break from performance, but eventually came back to it, performing regularly in Doylestown and Princeton. He joined the Society of American Magicians (Mid-Atlantic region, Assembly #4). He has plans for a magic walking tour of Philadelphia, an idea picked up from a fellow magician in Bath, England.

The thrill of winning contests and the pleasures of performance are rewards in themselves, Malissa said.

"But then eventually, you realize, you really bring joy to people. It can do that. And when you mature to that level, and you realize, that's the value of it, then you feel you're doing something, in your own little way. If you can bring some joy to people, you feel pretty good about that."

Magic, he said "is a hobby that carries you into these wild experiences, if you let it." •

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Pushing 80, Mike Tabor Is Still Pushing Himself and the Cause of Jewish Farming

BY ARNO ROSENFELD

Kamada Kaori / iStock / Getty Images Plus

On the wrinkled sheet of paper, a black-and-white Mike Tabor looks away from the camera with a grimace. Through the graininess of the tiny photograph you can make out his full beard and shock of white hair jutting out from under a baseball cap. The photo accompanies a dense block of text that starts: "Michael Tabor — Tireless activist, organic farmer, justice-seeker, husband, father. The ultimate pot-stirrer. A non-conformist."

But unlike most obituaries, this one is written in the present tense. And Tabor is seated at his dining table, looking at the piece of paper.

Last winter, Tabor went to the doctor with back aches. Routine tests flagged an irregular heartbeat and Tabor was hospitalized. He quickly underwent surgery to replace a damaged heart valve, a procedure that requires "turning off" the heart for several minutes.

Tabor didn't know if he would live.

At some point during the eight-hour surgery, Tabor said that he perceived a conversation in which God asked what he'd done with his life to make his children proud and to make the world a better place.

Though the recovery has been long, Tabor, is back to holding court in his Maryland home and overseeing the vegetable harvest at Licking Creek Bend Farm in southern Pennsylvania. In many ways, it's business as usual for the 79-year-old Tabor, who has split his time between the farm and home since the 1970s.

But the brush with death spurred Tabor to start putting his life down in writing, attempting to answer the question posed to him during the surgery: What has he done with his life?

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Photo by David Stuck

Farming

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The would-be obituary, penned by a friend for a party held shortly after the successful surgery, hits the highlights: Tabor helped create the Freedom Seder in the late 1960s, co-founded the Fabrangen chavurah and Jewish environmentalist group Shomrei Adamah, and created the now-defunct radical Jews for Urban Justice and the still-active Maryland political organization Progressive Neighbors.

Rabbi David Shneyer, who has known Tabor since the 1960s, said Tabor has had unique influence during his decades of work.

"He's a sage of Jewish activism," Shneyer said. "What can I say? He's a pleasure to hang out with and he's a pleasure to get arrested with."

Digging Deeper

Tabor was raised in a "Conservadox" household in Brooklyn. His undergraduate experience at SUNY Oneonta in upstate New York was his first exposure to rural culture, as the college drew students from two-year agriculture school programs.

Those students didn't get much respect from Tabor and his friends back then. "If you had told me then that I was going to become a farmer, I would have been in complete disbelief," he said.

After Oneonta, Tabor enrolled in graduate school at the University of Maryland, planning to become a teacher. The 1963 March on Washington took place on the weekend after Tabor's first week of classes.

"I went to it and everything became irrelevant after that," he said.

A few weeks later, Tabor invited a black classmate to grab beers together in College Park, Maryland.

"They wouldn't serve him because it was all segregated," Tabor said. "I was shocked coming from New York City — I didn't know I was going into the Deep South. I immediately got involved in everything: the sit-ins, working in the South on voter registration."

Tabor was active in Hillel during college and continued leading an observant Jewish life during his first few years in Washington, D.C.

"Throughout all the civil rights involvement, for a long time I kept on going to shul on Saturdays," Tabor said. "I kept a strong identity but I was really unable to fuse that identity with a sense of change happening in the world."

It was in this context that Tabor headed north with a contingent of fellow Jews looking to reconnect with the faith on their own terms.

"It came out of yiddishkeit and a basic feeling that we

▲ Mike Tabor sells his farm's goods at farmer's markets.

Photos by David Stuck

were going in the wrong direction as a community of Jews," Tabor said. "What's this heritage about? Where's it coming from? Why don't we dig deeper?"

On the Farm

Tabor started farming in Pennsylvania in the early 1970s as part of the "Diaspora kibbutz" movement, helping create a communal farm with Jewish activists from Washington, D.C., who wanted to escape the bleak political scene during the height of the Vietnam War.

"It was the time of communes," Tabor said. "The war didn't want to seem to end, no matter what we did, and there was an attempt to look at other avenues for resolving our mental and existential distress."

Tabor decamped to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains and set about creating a sustainable community. The group wrote to the Baron de Hirsch Society, which helped develop Jewish agriculture in pre-state Israel, for advice, and sought guidance from a handful of similar communities in New Jersey. In the end, it was a short-lived effort kept afloat with funds from Tabor's side job as a columnist in the Jewish press and paid speaking engagements.

"We didn't know how to make a living farming," Tabor said.

But Tabor stayed, struggling through a series of lean years to build what is now a successful fruit and vegetable operation. The farm raises its harvest "naturally,"

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but eschews the organic label, and accepts food stamps and even the occasional barter.

In recent years, Tabor has taken on a mentoring role for younger Jewish farmers. He said he deepened his relationship with Judaism through closeness to the land.

"As we became more and more involved in farming, I realized there were overlays with the holidays," he said. "We were a nomadic people, and then became a pastoral people, and so Pesach is the barley harvest and then 49 days later Shavuot is the wheat harvest."

But even with a slight uptick in the number of young Jews getting into farming, American Jews remain a decidedly urban people. Tabor recognized early on that he was largely on his own at the farm.

"Right from the beginning, it was very difficult being in a rural Protestant area," Tabor said. "You learn the taboos of rural culture: You don't talk politics and you don't talk religion, so it was very difficult to talk about the things I believed in."

The isolation got him interested in the success of Jewish peddlers, who used to frequent rural areas like the one where his farm is located.

"A peddler's purpose was to have a 50 mile circuit, get back by Shabbos so he could be with other Jews who spoke Yiddish, save money and bring his family over," Tabor said. "There's something very noble about that to me. That's very appealing."

As part of the writing project he began after his heart surgery, Tabor has been researching the history of peddlers in his county and nearby areas.

Tabor believes the story of these peddlers, who may have traversed some of the same roads he uses, is being lost to history. Peddling, he said, offered new immigrants a path to economic stability — spend a few years on the road before opening a store of one's own — while exposing rural Americans to a variety of goods they otherwise wouldn't have had access too, especially in the case of women and African Americans often shut out of traditional retail consumerism.

"It's a remarkable history of Jew and non-Jew getting benefit from each other in a positive way," Tabor said.

Tabor is on the farm most months of the year and attending conferences and traveling for his book research during the off season. And if he has any second thoughts about having worked a life of manual labor interspersed with political agitation, well past the age that most of his peers have retired, he doesn't show it.

"Had I gone through the normal path of taking a job and then in my 50s retiring and, I don't know, being in Florida, what would I do? I just can't conceive of that," he said. "It's a good way to die early." •

Arno Rosenfeld is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C. A longer version of this article first appeared in Washington Jewish Week, an Exponent-affiliated publication.

6 Memoirs That Explore the Mother-Daughter Bond

BY BABETTE DUNKELGRÜN

In Season 2 of the Hulu comedy "Shrill," based on the book by Lindy West, there's a restaurant scene in which the central character's mom closely monitors her daughter's food intake. It's clear the tendency is familiar — even in their relationship as adults, the mother discloses her almost political stance against dessert and bread baskets.

After the episode, I messaged my friends to see if their tension spoke to them, too. What had been so recognizable?

One friend related to the dinner scene, saying, "My mother said the word 'fat' like it was dirty porn."

Another commented, "Mine marched me into Weight Watchers the day before Thanksgiving."

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Illustration: Malte Mueller/Getty Images via JTA.org

Bond

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As a reader, mother-daughter stories like this have resonated with me since I was a preteen obsessed with Anne Frank's diary. My own experience as a daughter was unlike the fraught relationships portrayed in most memoirs, but I still reread their pages endlessly, studying the universal adolescent desire to both accept and reject a parent.

For Mother's Day this year, while stuck in California and unable to visit my mom abroad in the Netherlands for the foreseeable future, I decided to revisit memoirs that have provided comfort through their relatability over the years. My life isn't exactly like those of my beloved memoir writers, but so many details and stories ring true, almost bringing me back to being in close proximity to my mom.

Here are a few memoirs that I've found particularly compelling as the daughter of a Jewish mother over the years.

Just recently, the essay collection "What My Mother and I Don't Talk About" reminded me how daughters can put their mothers' lives under a microscope — searching for a blueprint on how to develop bravery, courage and other life skills. The writer Sari Botton's contribution (15 writers contributed essays) features her observations of the men in her mother's life, including how the Chanukah gifts she received would depend on the male partner of the time. Ultimately, she chronicles the marriages as a lens to examine her mother's generous and resilient spirit.

In college, I devoured Julie Klam's debut "Please Excuse My Daughter," about the privileged childhood in Bedford, New York, that left her unable to navigate her world as a grown-up. Some books find us at the right time, and this author helped me feel less alone during a stage where one is expected to have acquired more wisdom about life than I had.

Reading sections about the department store shopping sprees that Klam's mother dragged her to during school time, I thought about my own brushes with missing school for an unnecessary reason. I'd summer with my mother and her parents in the Midwest, and sometimes we'd stay too long and I'd miss the beginning of the school year back in the Netherlands, where I grew up. My mother wrote notes for my Dutch high school teachers on the plane on the back of airsickness bags.

"What will I tell the teacher?" I asked, worrying about how her paper of choice made me look.

"Tell him your mother works," she would say.

Klam's mother has three sisters. She writes how the "Jewish Gang of Four" encourages her to embrace a performative brand of womanhood. To me, my mother was as chic and stylish as Marcia Klam, insisting on new outfits for both of us every time the High Holidays came around.

In "For You, Mom. Finally," Ruth Reichl writes about my grandmother's generation. I was in my mid-20s when the book came out, wanting to know how Reichl, one of my favorite food writers, had arrived there. The answer lies in her opportunity to deviate from the path of her mother, whom she describes as born in the worst time to be a middle-class American woman.

"She wasn't much at keeping house and I don't think I've ever met anyone who was a worse cook," Reichl writes.

Though her mother could make people sick with her cooking, matzah brei was a rare recipe she could make well. Even the Jewish daughter-starved-for-flavor-turned-successful-cook attests, a mother helps you become the person you are.

A similar contrast plays out in Elissa Altman's latest memoir, "Motherland." Altman's mother, a singer, performer and TV host, restricts her eating along with everything else. The author, determined to live a bigger life, revels in dinners with her father at French bistros all over Manhattan, where she learned to be an eater.

> "A mother and a daughter are an edge. Edges are places of danger or opportunity ... Why can't they be both?"
>
> ELISSA ALTMAN

The dynamic between the writer and her frail mother is plagued by co-dependence. As she forges into a career and relationship of her own, Altman faces what she calls Jewish guilt over moving from New York to Connecticut. That turns the majority of her visits to phone calls, and the limits of her caretaking come at a cost.

"A mother and a daughter are an edge. Edges are places of danger or opportunity," Altman writes. "Why can't they be both?"

I also listen to "Family Secrets," a podcast with Dani Shapiro — a novelist and essayist raised Orthodox — that sprouted from the publication of her most recent memoir, "Inheritance." A handful of episodes are enough to bring mothers (and parents) across the spectrum of character into the mix.

For Jewish readers, I especially recommend Arianna Neumann's episode, "The Mysterious Boot Club," or Adam Frankel's story, "Bubbe and Zayde and Grandma and Pa."

Then there's Vivian Gornick's 1987 memoir "Fierce Attachments," which is often cited as one of the paradigms of the genre. She couldn't have chosen a more suitable title. •

Babette Dunkelgrün is a native of the Netherlands who now lives in California. This piece was originally published at JTA.org.

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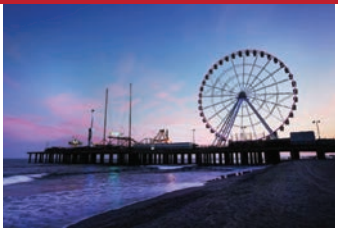

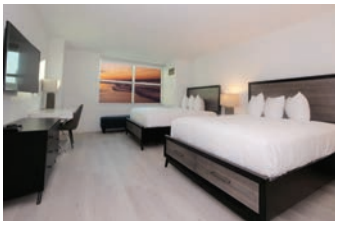

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