

I'm reading a book on anti-gravity.

I just can't put it down.

I'm concerned about health care because so many hospital names include the word "memorial."

Jokes. There are so many kinds of jokes! There are...

- **Knock-knock jokes:** Just ask a 4 year-old.
- **Dad jokes:** How do you recognize a dad joke? When the punchline is apparent.
- **T-shirt texts:** It takes a village to raise a child, but only one child to raise a ruckus.
- **Observational humor:** Why is it that we park on a driveway and drive on a parkway?
- **Riddles:** *mah nishtana halayla hazze?*
- **Shaggy dog stories:** Maggid, the haggadah's answer to *mah nishtanah*.
- And more...

There are loads of joke books, and plenty of books about jokes.

One book of long-form joke-stories is "Two Jews on a Train" by Adam Biro. The first tale is about an existential crisis:

In this story, scientists have determined beyond all doubt that in two weeks, a huge asteroid will hit Earth. The polar ice caps, snow cover and glaciers will melt, raising sea levels to the point that human life will be unsustainable.

This is a certainty, they say.

Around the world, wars cease. Families reunite. Disputes of all sorts are reconciled or simply set aside.

Myriad religious groups gather around the clock for prayer vigils, meditation, magic mushrooms, sacred dancing — all seeking divine intervention.

Except for us. Where are we Jews in this effort? Well, we're doing something different.

An unlikely coalition, representing nearly every conceivable faction of world Jewry, gathers in Jerusalem to discuss a response to what appears to be the apocalypse.

Over the course of four days — four days! — they gather, they talk, they bicker, they peruse texts, consult mystical

teachings, consider the story of Noah and research building large ships.

At the end of the fourth day, the disheveled and sleep-deprived chair of the gathering holds a news conference. Every possible communication mode is employed — from streaming to broadcasting to teletype — so that all Jews around the world can receive the group's findings at the same time:

"My dear fellow Jews, we have ten days to learn how to live underwater."

Learn how to live underwater.

Learn how to live underwater ... in just ten days?!

Have we not been trying to do just that since October 8, 2023?

October 7 was a day of terror, shock, dismay.

October 8 ushered in three years (so far) of resentment, reassessment and retrenchment. Three years of articles, books, podcasts, webinars, speakers, essays, panels, films... telling us: We need to do **this**. We need to do **that**. We need to **sue them**. We need to **correct them**. We need to **educate** ourselves and our children. We need to **protect** ourselves and our children.

Against our will, we've been learning **how to live underwater**.

Dr David Davar, Director of the Jewish Theological Seminary Counseling Center, writes about the singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen: In a period of existential crisis, "Cohen felt like a ghost, paralyzed by internal darkness and isolated from humanity."

Cohen came through okay, and the next year he released a song titled "Who by Fire," based on the Rosh Hashana liturgy "*un'taneh tokef*."

Un'taneh tokef teaches that there are so many ways to die — by fire, by water, hunger, thirst. *Un'taneh tokef* forces us to consider how our year may unfold — who will be tranquil, who will be tormented. And it states what we need to do to skew the odds in our favor: Repentance, Prayer and acts of generosity.

Dr Davar notes that the surging global hatred of Jews can instill in us feelings of isolation, insecurity, vulnerability.

However, he continues, facing uncertainty is seen in our High Holy Days liturgy not as an affliction but rather as a “sacred instrument for spiritual awakening.” In other words, an opportunity.

Leonard Cohen came out of his funk when he reacted to the surprise attack of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War by visiting Israeli troops in the Sinai Peninsula. Cohen sang, cared for and connected with the soldiers.

Similarly, Davar says, facing uncertainty and fear — and **DOING something about it — can strengthen us.**

Davar closes with the prescription that “reconnecting with our Jewish roots, strengthening our community and deepening our caring **offers a pathway through the dark... [turning] us from dread** toward meaning, hope and renewal.”

Since 2023, Israel and Jews everywhere have been dealing with two surprise attacks: A well-planned, horrifically executed one-day massacre in Israel, and a massive dismayingly successful ongoing propaganda assault worldwide.

Both have consumed us for nearly three years now.

We Jews have faced existential crises before. Really, **when have we NOT been in existential crisis**, challenged from without or from within?!

The author **Dara Horn** has published five works of fiction, a graphic novel inspired by the Pesach Haggadah, and a book of essays titled “People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present.”

People Love Dead Jews focuses on the world’s preoccupation with or popularity of memorials to Jewish life. These memorials may be in places where no Jews now live, in places where Jews may have lived long ago ... before being expelled or slaughtered. The memorials range from a fanciful reimagining in China to tourist-friendly Jewish quarters in European cities whose non-Jewish citizens, just 80 or so years ago, helped usher their Jewish neighbors to the trains.

Recently, Dara Horn published a new work: **The Final Solution to The Jewish Question: A Love Story for the Living.** She tackles antisemitism, anti-Zionism, American Jewry, the devious and influential digital long war against

Israel, the decay of elite university educational standards and more.

Horn bemoans the dilution of **Holocaust education** that has produced programs focusing on platitudes like resilience, or good moral conduct, or ending hate of “the other.”

She asks, Where are we, the living Jews? In schools, is there space for an explanation or appreciation of what is, or why is, Judaism? About why we **were** and **are** singled out? About **what makes us so special that people want to kill us?**

For over a decade, we staged a musical here. “**Number the Stars.**” It is based on Lois Lowry’s middle-school-appropriate book about Denmark’s clandestine transport by boat of nearly all its 7,000 Jews to safety in Sweden. Attending the performance met one of our state’s Holocaust Education requirements.

In the book and musical, the only indications of Jewish practices was a mention of lighting candles for the Jewish New Year and a reference to a service where the rabbi warned the congregation about an impending deportation.

According to the script of “Number the Stars,” why are the Germans closing Jewish businesses and threatening Jews? “Hatred, bigotry, greed; that’s what oppressors do.” The finale celebrates ferrying Jews to safety “because that’s what neighbors do!”

About half the sometimes inflated charges for transport was paid by the Jews themselves. The balance was covered by a coalition of generous Danes.

This bema was the stage. An irony is that for most of the students this was their first time in a synagogue. And there were 8-foot high black curtains covering the ark and side walls! The short introduction and the closing Q&A served some purpose, but we really missed an opportunity.

Turning to address the **contagion of antisemitism**, Dara Horn writes that a major part of the shock of October 8 “was the sudden and dramatic revelation of the true thoughts and feelings of ... people in the United States whom we thought were our friends.”

She asks: How was it that “professional associations and labor unions from psychoanalysts to postal workers” issued identical statements decrying Zionism? And that organizations of all kinds, universities, celebrities, restaurants, on-line gaming groups for teens were suddenly marching in lockstep to impugn Israel for genocide and famine, virulently yelling “Free Palestine!” even if they can’t locate Israel on a map.

As I understand it, most **hate comes from fear**: Fear of losing something, fear of falling behind, fear of change.

Dara Horn’s thesis is that hatred is enabled by a **lack of curiosity** — lack of curiosity about other peoples and cultures, lack of curiosity about other ideas — leading to suspicion rooted in ignorance.

However, she notes, **antisemitism is special**. Historically, it was devised as a political tool, then nurtured by religious leaders and curated by state powers to serve as a distraction, a scapegoat, for the failings of those in charge. **LOOK! A NASTY SHINY THING! AND IT’S COMING FOR YOU!**

That shiny thing is, in Horn’s words, **the Big Lie**, the Big Lie that Jews are coming to take or destroy whatever a group, a society, values most. Remember the chant at Charlottesville: “Jews will not replace us!”?

We are a versatile villain: For example, those who promote capitalism can accuse us as being socialists; to socialists, we are craven capitalists.

A poll by the Honesty Project was published the other day in the Free Press. The poll contrasts Americans’ private and public views on a variety of topics (what do they say, how do they *really* feel?). One question was “Do Jews in America have too much power?” Combining the private and public, about 20% responded yes.

At first I was startled. But something seemed off: why was that question asked in the first place? Did they define “power”? Did they ask, if you think Jews have too much power, what should be done about it?

The poll — or, at least, that question — struck me as something that might generate some headlines and traffic, but it didn’t enlighten.

For Dara Horn, **antisemitism** isn’t primarily a social prejudice or even a conspiracy theory; antisemitism is a deliberate and calculated denial of truth and promotion of lies that has been in circulation for well over a thousand years.

Horn writes that **The Big Lie** is directly related to a threat that we Jews have posed since biblical days: we are against the ideas of conformity and blind submission to mortal leaders.

The Big Lie, she adds, is promoted by some of the richest people on earth who live in the world’s most tyrannical regimes. They’ve spent billions of petrodollars spreading the Big Lie.

Maybe we should feel honored.

Horn describes us Jews as a diverse people, a tribal community, that has never sought empire, has never proselytized or forced conversions. We respect the law of the lands in which we live. Yes, we maintain some idiosyncratic practices and beliefs. And we’re all of .2% of the world population.

Are we truly so terrifying?

Apparently so, she answers, since Jews can live freely and openly in only a handful of countries on earth. Even there, **even here!**, we pay a premium — **a Jewish security tax** — so that we can pray together, send our kids to religious schools, and celebrate life cycle events with slightly less fear of attack.

Jewish Federations of North America reports that we spent more than \$1billion for security in 2025; more than \$1billion! If you’re thinking “no way!” you weren’t at Devotion by the Ocean this summer. Safety concerns impelled us to have **three armed guards** by the Ventnor library and on the boardwalk; since the Pittsburgh massacre in 2018, we had been hiring two.

Earlier this week, we had a security meeting here in the lobby. Today and Yom Kippur morning, the protocol is **two armed JFed security guards**, a Ventnor Police Department officer and car, and an early walk-through by a K-9 officer with a bomb-sniffing dog.

And some of us will have panic buttons.

It all adds up.

Dara Horn emphasizes that we Jews comprise a civilization that, among other things, gave the world monotheism. Monotheism is the faith foundation of the majority of religious peoples around the world — Christians and Muslims — who have not forgiven us for rejecting their newer, truer iterations of our faith.

Along with monotheism, our biblical laws and prophets inspired many American ideals of liberty and law!

Horn writes that for most Jews in the United States, particularly after World War II, our refusal to be just like everyone else was hijacked by the lure of apparent access to and acceptance in general American culture.

Still, fear of Jewish success led to discrimination, with rejections and quotas stymying our capabilities and ambitions. To serve ourselves, Brandeis University was founded in 1948; Einstein Medical School in 1953. Linwood country club, anyone?!

If we couldn't join them, we could try to match or beat them.

In tomorrow's Torah reading, Adonai will tell our biblical patriarch Avraham: "*v'hitbar'chu v'zaracha kol goyei ha'arets* / By the actions of your descendants, all the peoples of the world will be blessed."

To the peoples of the world, our actions have contributed mightily, far above our weight, in so many fields. But those blessings, those gifts, mean nothing to those who need to hate us, or who need to have us to hate.

Just a couple of weeks ago, in the Torah reading on Shabbat, we were offered the choice of life or death, *chayyim* / *mavvet*. **Life**, by upholding our laws and traditions; **death**, by spurning them.

"Choosing life," says Dara Horn, "is an act of love," love of ourselves, love of our forebears, love of other Jews, even love of the others when they're not trying to kill us.

Pirkei Avot, Teachings of the Sages, from about the year 200, offers that the world stands on three pillars: **Torah** — studying and revering our sacred saga, **avoda** — worshiping our singular God, **gemilut chassadim** — acts of generosity.

Dara Horn sees our Jewish world today, and our future, resting on three other pillars: **Literacy, Community and Memory**.

For thousands of years, **literacy** was effectively mandatory for Jews. The printing press did not create a **literate** class of Jews, it merely expanded our range of reading material. And we prioritize education.

Community is built in to our practices: Many religious services require the presence of ten adults. And there is solidarity in reading the same Torah portions worldwide on the same days; *tefilot*, prayers, too, with melodies shared across oceans and continents.

Horn calls **memory** "love across time." We remember so much in so many ways: Every Jewish festival or commemoration — rituals and foods — draws on our past, invigorates our present and promotes continuity.

Our festivals and their customs — with enhancements and constraints — help distinguish us. Horn writes that **assimilation** would have been so much easier: Give in, don't bother with Shabbat, eat what you want, don't feel guilty!

On the other hand, says Horn: We have outlasted empires. We have thrived despite oppression. We are anti-tyrannical and nonconformist. We accept laws that don't rely on human rulers.

We hold that **freedom demands responsibility**. For more than two-thousand years, we have engaged in responsible debate and civil discourse with the expectation that there will always be disagreement.

We are a family of families, with ancient roots and a specific religion; and we have become a global clan or tribe. We accept that not all Jews believe in God, and that we may have varying practices or rituals.

Despite its warts, Israel deserves our support as our ancestral homeland. Today, Horn writes, Israel is an island of religious, racial, ethnic, cultural and political diversity, a state that promotes freedom of expression, civic duty, open inquiry, debate and dissent. (Compare and contrast with its neighboring states.) And it is deeply and unapologetically Jewish.

For me, Dara Horn's message is clear: learn more Jewish; DO more Jewish; be more aware; know your history; lay

claim to what we've accomplished and don't deny that we haven't been perfect.

And she is not just talking about it, she is acting on it: She recognizes that some 97.5% of America doesn't know much about who we are and what/why we do. So she founded the Tell Institute to educate.

The Tell Institute has crafted a pilot bar/t mitzvah age curriculum and plans to expand over time to older and younger groups.

I hope that at least some schools across the country will offer students the Tell 8-part series about **us**. I expect that **many** Jewish religious schools — from day schools to our 3-hours-a-week Sunday program — will grasp those curricula like life buoys to help our next generations stay afloat in a roiling sea of assimilation, apathy and antagonism.

I have secured private funding for the pilot project and I look forward to using it to strengthen our students' Jewish identification.

For some aspects of educating our young'uns, we don't need a curriculum, we don't need funding; we need **the intention and willingness to step out of our comfort zones**. I tripped across one of those comfort zones earlier this week as I was completing this talk.

Here, especially during summer, those at services Shabbat morning are delighted when someone brings grandkids with them; on occasion, the kids participate to the degree they're comfortable. Or they just play in our toy corner. Everyone wins.

I realized that at least as often as **that** happens, someone will tell me that they won't be coming to services the next week because "the kids are visiting." There may be issues at play here that bear discussion, but it remains a curiosity.

Some of us have lasting memories of going to shul with a grandparent. How wonderful an example you would set by bringing the kids with you to a service! (*Case in point: We were blessed with a raft of boisterous children first day of Rosh Hashana!*)

I started this talk by talking about jokes. It's clear that our predicament, or achievement — **learning how to live**

underwater — is far from funny. October 7 was terrifying; the date should be seared into the memory banks of every Jew.

October 8 will be remembered for a very long time, because we have been reliving it **every single day since**.

For now, we can live underwater by learning and doing, supporting and participating. We must continue to value and reinvigorate our religious practices and ideas, our drive to excel, our connections to one another and our support of Israel.

How do we learn to live underwater? Remember the words of Dr David Davar: "reconnecting with our Jewish roots, strengthening our community and deepening our caring offers a pathway through the dark... **[turning] us from dread toward meaning, hope and renewal.**"

Dara Horn closes her book **People Love Dead Jews** with a somber feeling of being haunted, "as all living people always are... [by] the fears and hopes of those who came before us."

She ends **The Final Solution to the Jewish Question: A Love Letter to the Living** with an historical view of Jewish idiosyncrasy that melds into a manifesto for our present and future. Speaking of our ancestors who faced multiple challenges, she writes, "There were so many people who made unlikely choices, choices that were unfashionable, choices that were inconvenient, choices that were dangerous, choices that required extreme devotion.... The people who refuse to bow to tyrants are the final solution. They always will be."

WE are now the people who are the final solution, and we must refuse to bow to the tyranny of the times.

Instead, let us uplift one another with a love of joyful Judaism.

Because WE are the solution.

And WE always will BE.

Am yisrael chai!

Shana tova!