

David Amram: *THE FINAL INGREDIENT*

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Vivite fortes, fortiaque adversis opponite pectora rebus.

(Live as brave men; and if fortune is adverse, front its blows with brave hearts.)

—Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace)

I can be high all the time on life.

—David Amram

David Amram's opera *The Final Ingredient*, to a libretto by Arnold Weinstein and based on a story and play by Reginald Rose, was commissioned in 1965 by the ABC Television network, in cooperation with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America for national broadcast that year on the Seminary's weekly program, *Directions*. The opera, written as historical fiction, takes place in the German death camp Bergen-Belsen during the Second World War.

The Final Ingredient is thus Shoah-related in terms of its specific situation and backdrop, but it is not so much a realistic or plausible drama about the Shoah per se as it is about the tenacious reaffirmation and perpetuation of Judaism, even under the most unimaginably barbarous and dangerous circumstances. At the same time, it is about the rediscovery of Judaic heritage in the face of unmitigated oppression.

David Amram (b. 1930) remains—as of the third decade of the twenty-first century—a sui generis eclectic celebrity as both a composer and a conductor, especially on the East Coast, where throughout his musical life he has inspired much admiration and recognition for his special brand of individuality.¹ In the late 1990s he recalled that he'd been motivated to write this opera out of concern for the stirrings at that time of what would come to be called Shoah revisionism and Shoah denial.² And there had emerged some floating protests—even among many American Reform rabbis in their sermons and articles—against the hanging of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, though still acknowledging his guilt. The convicted chief architect and administrator of Germany's Final Solution, Eichmann had been abducted from hiding in Argentina and brought to Israel, where he was tried in an exceedingly fair, long-running trial and then sentenced to death—a sentence upheld on appeal by Israel's highest court. However, in some smaller circles, questions arose regarding Israel's right to try him, with a defense counsel of the highest order provided him, instead of some (nonexistent) international tribunal; the nature and wording of the verdict; and similar reservations—all fueled albeit only in part by Hannah Arendt's still controversial book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (NY, 1963).

There are some who think that parts of Hannah Arendt's book (essentially slapped together from her series of reports of the trial in *The New Yorker* magazine) may have been—and continued to be—misunderstood, perhaps not least because it lacked the attention of a competent, hands-on editor. For some, it is not entirely clear what she meant by "banality." But others—probably most—continue to condemn the book as a personal, agenda-driven

diatribe, reminding us that banal evil is incompatible with the concept of radical evil that she explored in her earlier book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Though it is true that Hannah Arendt had no objections in principle to the death penalty for Eichmann, the closing part of the book can be misleading in that regard, especially without keeping in mind what she wrote in earlier chapters and how she phrased it. (As a philosopher, however, she pointed to the theoretical jurisprudential matter that his “crimes against humanity” and pursuit of genocide were not actually in violation of any so-named laws “on the books” of any nation, and certainly not of a sovereign nation that didn’t even exist during the Shoah.) But she raised other issues concerning what she called Jewish cooperation—especially though not exclusively that of councils and their leaders in the ghettos, and even Jews in the camps. Though she had a point that perhaps shouldn’t be dismissed without deliberation, this infuriated and still infuriates many who have accused her of “blaming the victims.” She fervently denied and rejected any such interpretation.

Still, there have been those, few in number as they may be, who have taken seriously Hannah Arendt’s critique of Jewish cooperation, acknowledging its possible legitimacy not so much as an accusation with hindsight but as a valid point at least in theory. (Yet we do know for a fact that there were indeed at least a few Jewish council leaders who were neither innocent nor innocently misguided and were morally corrupt if not evil themselves, some of whom were later attacked physically in Israel by victims who recognized them.) These observers have found it difficult to refute entirely her thesis that, in retrospect, had the councils and their leaders refused any cooperation whatsoever with the Germans by assisting with transports to camps through their demanded selection process—and had not a single Jew in the camps cooperated in the slightest way regardless of immediate consequence—the Germans would not have been able to pursue the Shoah to the extent they did so easily and so smoothly. In that case, so goes her thesis, the Shoah still could not have been prevented or stopped. And yes, by the time of Germany’s surrender, in 1945, there would have been millions of murdered Jews, but probably significantly fewer than the six million assumed to be more or less the number—with no Jewish cooperation whatsoever, perhaps four or even five million, maybe even fewer.

However, the assumption of the vast majority of Jews since 1945 has generally been that the councils and their leaders thought they were doing the only thing they could under the circumstances, whenever possible putting off deportations of children and the younger generations overall while “giving” the Germans the older and unwell Jews to board the trains first—in the hope that the end of the war would come sooner than it did. Somehow it did not occur to them to refuse that or any other type of cooperation, assuming that such defiance would be futile.

Hannah Arendt’s turn to unhidden anti-Zionism after her previous alignment with the movement during her student years in Germany hardly endeared her to the majority of living Shoah victims and their families—and not only those who had found a permanent home in Israel. Then, too, the speed with which, after the war, she resumed her friendship with her former, prewar lover and mentor, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger—who had joined the Nazi Party of his own free will, refusing later to explain it—was and still is abhorrent to many as unforgivable and deserving of condemnation.

Amram had read Hannah Arendt’s book upon its publication. He was initially impressed and even persuaded by some of her arguments, not so much concerning her characterization of Eichmann’s evil as “banal,” but with regard to Jewish cooperation. But he was also a bit confused and of two minds about the issue. So at first he was reluctant to write an opera about the Shoah, all the more so an opera with a setting in a death camp to which the inmates could have been transferred as a result of some ghetto council’s cooperation. The ABC/JTS commission, after all, had simply been for a Passover-related opera, with no stipulations vis-à-vis the Shoah. Yet he felt drawn to Reginald Rose’s story and play, and the depiction of Judaic tenacity in the face of monstrous persecution and probably approaching murder. He soon overcame his hesitance, eventually letting go of Arendt’s analysis, with the realization that even the least admirable Jews had never sunk to the barbarity of their tormentors. More than thirty years later, Amram recalled that he and Weinstein “knew that we Jews had committed plenty of sins and crimes in our history, but we never built a cage for people.”³

Somehow that metaphorical observation relieved them of any reservations they had had based on Arendt's thesis. They proceeded to write an opera set in a death camp in which their "make-do" substitute Passover seder is derided by the brutal guards but not prohibited outright. That attempt to find replicas for as many of the ritual objects as possible ends in tragedy, however, when the inmates seek what they feel is the needed "final ingredient."

Also, even by 1965—apart from the vague American awareness that a huge number of Jews had been killed by the Germans in the course of the war, and despite press coverage of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem that few had followed with any regularity—most Americans, it seemed, wanted not to be told or reminded of the day-to-day horrors of the Shoah: neither the gruesome details nor its historical uniqueness vis-à-vis the Jewish people. Encouraged by the success of the poorly conceived, inferior, trite, and largely de-Judaized Broadway play *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955), its 1959 cinematic version, and the many succeeding amateur and professional productions across the country, a foggy mist still masked the savage realities of the Shoah.

The play and the film are confined to the attic in Amsterdam during the two years when the Frank family was in hiding, along with another family (the Van Pels) and a single dentist (who, according to the Nazi Party criteria, was only genetically Jewish). For the majority of Americans, the play and the less familiar film—and the expurgated and abbreviated published version of Anne Frank's diary—were the most they knew or cared to know about the Shoah. The play and the film avoided any direct confrontation with the camps, gas chambers, crematoria, mass shootings, murders by the *Einsatzgruppen*, starvations, sadistic tortures, packing Jews into railroad freight cars en route to camps, etc.

In fact, the producers of the play written by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett had rejected alternative scripts by others that were based on the published version of Anne's diary, on the grounds that in their professional judgment, those were too uncomfortably graphic and too infused with Jewishness and Jewish content for 1950s audiences.⁴ They predicted that the Goodrich and Hackett play would be far more consistent with contemporaneous liberal, universal themes and thus acceptable and welcome by Jewish audiences of nearly all orientations, as well as by non-Jews. Even its Hanukka celebration is absurdly Americanized, with some key components missing. And irresponsibly to ice the cake of obfuscation, the play closes with Anne's adolescent, innocently naïve musing, taken completely out of order and context from the diary, that

"In spite of everything, I still believe that
[all] people are really good at heart."

This is heard by the audience, prerecorded with Anne's stage voice, after they know that she and the rest of the attic occupants, with the exception of her father, have been murdered by the Germans. And her father's only response, after he reads those lines from the diary as the curtain is about to descend, is that "she puts me to shame!"

Goodrich and Hackett have thus turned Anne Frank into possibly the first "Holocaust denier," if not certainly one of the first. For if "in spite of everything . . . people are really good at heart," not only would she and all the other attic occupants be alive, but the Shoah did not happen and could never have happened.

Appalled by the ending of the play, Amram was determined to counter that innocent sentiment with the camp realism of his opera.⁵

Neither the most highly cultured and educated nation in the world, which had invented and built such camps, nor the guards within them, nor the hundreds of thousands of collaborators from several countries, nor the *Reich* that had sought the end of the Jewish people, nor the Gestapo that arrested Anne and all the other attic occupants, nor the millions of the Jews' savage torturers, nor the world that had permitted the genocide and mostly stood by—nor, for that matter, much of the Red Army in its vengeful barbarity in taking Berlin (even though it liberated German death camps along its way westward as it hastened the end of the war)—were "really good at heart." But that Pollyannaish optimism was not Anne's conclusion *after* she had experienced the truth of the Shoah, as if she could have rendered her verdict from the "next world"—the "world to come" in Jewish parlance. Amram and Weinstein

would seek to rescue the memory of Anne Frank from the careless damage inflicted on it by Goodrich and Hackett (and their producers) in the name of commercial viability, if not sheer stupidity. Both Amram and Weinstein felt a moral as well as artistic obligation to do so.⁶

The ABC network and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, however, were more concerned about the Passover dimension. They conceived of the work as a potential “Passover opera” that might be broadcast annually. But that did not happen, and after the initial broadcasts, the opera was soon forgotten.

The Final Ingredient was publicized as an opera about “spiritual defiance,” which Amram later regretted as an unfortunate bit of Shoah babble with no meaning.⁷ Just whom did the Jews “spiritually defy”? Is there even such a thing? And what does that mean anyway? Nothing about the Bergen-Belsen inmates’ substitute Passover seder defied anything or anyone; it had not been forbidden. The Germans and Austrians (and Ukrainian or Polish camp guards) had not the slightest concern with “spiritual” or Judaic beliefs, practices, or observances. Neither the persecutions, nor the atrocities, nor the systematic pursuit of genocide had anything to do with the religion of Judaism—only with the annihilation of the Jewish *people*. The most that improvising a seder here could elicit from the guards was mockery—as if it were a kind of hate-filled reassurance that they would not have to deal with actual defiance of any sort that could spread to become rebellion.

Moreover, from the 1960s on, the faddish twaddle of “spirituality,” along with the adjective “spiritual,” could often be a bit of annoying, pretentious banter, intended to mean who knows what. “Spirituality,” after all, simply means “of the spirit.” So we might guess that many of those who have gone along with the hijacking of that terminology are referring to some undefinable, ethereal, extramundane, and/or psychic if not quasi-mystical experience, not necessarily driven by or connected to any formal, established religion or its practices. (Indeed, the late Beethoven string quartets, for example, or his last four or five piano sonatas; Bach’s passions; certain Scriabin works; or Wagner’s *Tristan*—when one listens to such music with total absorption and unalloyed concentration—are, or should be, spiritual experiences of the highest order and deepest level.) Of course those wedded to the jargon of “spirituality” mean something else, but what? One seeks in vain for an answer that makes sense. In any case, “spiritual defiance” is an ill-advised, foolish, meaningless, even insulting tag for anything Jews did as Shoah victims, whether praying in their barracks, writing poetry, observing some Judaic ritual, or performing publicly a major classical work such as Verdi’s *Requiem*, as they did at Terezin.

Actual Jewish defiance, by any standard definition, would have meant (and did mean on certain occasions apart from this incident of the seder) an attempted escape, inviting reprisals; participation in a coordinated rebellion, such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; acts of sabotage as perpetrated by underground resistance groups; or Jews exacting some higher price for their lives, no matter how small or inconsequential, such as causing the death of (or even just serious injury to) at least one guard or soldier in an altercation—even if the battle could not be won and their murders would still follow.⁸ And for non-Jews now memorialized at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as the “Righteous Among the[Other] Nations,” defiance meant risking their lives by hiding or otherwise protecting Jews.⁹

None of this is to suggest with the benefit of hindsight presumptuous, retroactively cast opprobrium of weakness, cowardice, or poor decisions. After two millennia of accommodation to their rulers and ruling societies in place of national sovereignty with a military apparatus of their own, the Jews were not conditioned in the vast majority of cases to respond in kind to the Germans, the Austrians, or their collaborators. Also operative was the sheer inability to believe—until too late—in the extent to which such savage insidiousness and internally unprotested evil could have overtaken what was assumed to be the most civilized society in all history. Although it was not any type of defiance, the attempt to replicate a seder at Bergen-Belsen in the opera is a manifestation of tenacious adherence to Judaism and Judaic continuity, even when these seemed no longer to matter.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE (Principals)

AARON.....	Lyric Baritone
AARON'S FATHER	Dramatic Tenor/ Helden Tenor
WALTER	Bass
ELI	Tenor
MAX	Baritone
THREE WOMEN:	
.....	Soprano
.....	Mezzo-Soprano
.....	Mezzo-Soprano
RABBI	Tenor
SIGMUND	Tenor or Baritone
HERR FELDWEBEL	Tenor or Baritone
* THE CORPORAL.....	Tenor
* THE PRIVATE	Baritone

*Although German and Austrian soldiers could be camp guards, especially if they requested that assignment as a cowardly way of avoiding the dangers of battle, most camp guards were not recruited from the regular army. Moreover, the rank of private is strange here, as that terminology is usually applied to the American army. Presenting the guards here as German soldiers was probably done on the assumption of resonating with American audiences.

THE ACTION

The plot concerns a group of Bergen-Belsen inmates at Passover, 1944. Of course, according to Judaic law, under such dire life or serious health-threatening circumstances the observance of Passover is not even required. In fact, it could be discouraged or even forbidden, if refusal to eat the minimal food provided in the camps, which obviously could not be kosher for Passover, would further jeopardize one's health or lead to starvation. Among several related communications to God that have survived is one particularly moving one that "reminds" the Almighty that the supplicants are approaching Him with heavy hearts at their unavoidable desecration of so sacred an occasion and their violation of so central a commandment, at the same time acknowledging their awareness that Jews have been commanded to *live* by the divine laws, not to die by them.

The inmates are nonetheless determined to improvise a seder, the annual Passover home ritual that recounts the biblical story of their liberation from Egyptian bondage and their exodus across the Sea of Reeds. They will then be able to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai as a free people and eventually to take possession of their Promised Land.

At every seder, each Jew at the table is supposed to regard himself as if he personally had been brought out of Egypt on that ancient night. Thus the ritual meal is a reconfirmation not only of collective existence, but also of each Jew's identification with the Jewish people. For these Jewish inmates awaiting their eventual murder by the Germans and their collaborators, their determination to improvise a seder—however makeshift under the circumstances—represents their refusal to ignore or forget their faith, their sacred traditions, or their pride in their perpetual Jewish distinctness—which, of course, is what brought them to Bergen-Belsen.

In preparation, the inmates must assemble substitutes for the ritual objects of the seder table, locating or fashioning such substitutes for the symbolic food items that are used to explain the principal themes in the telling (*haggada*) of the story and recalling the significance of the Festival and its observance. First and foremost is the *matza*. This recalls and symbolizes that, by the time the people believed Moses's notice of the Pharaoh's release of the Israelite slaves, they were unprepared, with no time to allow the dough to rise before baking bread to take with them. Because of its association with the Israelites' bondage, *matza* is called the "bread of affliction." During the week of Passover, Jews are prohibited from consuming anything that might be leavened from any of the five grains specified in the Torah.

Then there is the illustrative seder plate, with its symbolic items. It must contain a roasted lamb shank (or other bone resembling the paschal lamb)—the Passover burnt offering in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem as well as the lamb sacrificed and roasted in the hope of the exodus, which was to be eaten together with *matza* and *maror* (bitter herbs) on its eve. The blood of the lamb had been smeared on the doorposts or lintels of the Israelite dwellings, a signal to the "angel of death" to "pass over" their homes when visiting the tenth and final plague upon the Egyptians to persuade the Pharaoh to release the Israelites: the death of every firstborn Egyptian male, the first nine plagues having been ineffectual. Also essential on the seder plate is the *maror*, representing the bitterness of the Israelites' suffering under bondage and slavery. The *matza*, the lamb bone, and the *maror* are considered the originally commanded and oldest seder symbols, about which the sage Rabban Gamliel is said to have admonished, "Whoever does not explain" them at the Passover table "has not fulfilled his duty."

In addition, the seder plate should contain a sample of a green vegetable, the *karpas*, for which parsley is widely used but which differs among community traditions—and about which there is no consensus concerning its origin or *raison d'être*. (It is often said to be a symbol of springtime and thus renewal, although obviously, Passover in Argentina or South Africa, for example, occurs in autumn). Then there is a sample of *haroset*, a condiment that symbolizes the mortar used by the Israelite slaves in laying bricks; and a roasted egg, which commemorates the sacrificial offering in the ancient Temples (*zekher l'hagiga*). Over time, the egg has acquired other possible meanings or explanations—as a symbol of regeneration and renewal as well as the continuum of the life cycle.

The egg is not the only necessary item that cannot be found in the camp, and the inmates resort to improvised, metaphorical versions. Of course there could be no remotely legitimate substitute for *matza* that would be kosher for Passover.

The egg, however, remained the one item for which not even a symbolic substitute could be found anywhere in the camp. One could conduct a seder without it, but the inmates are intent upon it, perhaps not least for its emotional connection to the seders of their former free lives. The egg then becomes the "final ingredient" of the opera's title.

Just past the barbed wire fence of the compound is a small tree on whose branch a bird is nesting over her eggs. Aaron, a young inmate in his twenties who has succumbed to total despair, sings to the bird: "Who are you to sing, bird? Bird, don't you know? God has told each creature that we are here on earth to suffer?"

However, Eli, one of the older inmates, tells Aaron that they need him to risk the dangers of scaling the fence to procure one of the eggs from the nest, as he is the only one with enough physical strength left. But Aaron has no interest in the seder, nor, for that matter, in anything to do with Judaic practices or ritual observances. He has rejected Judaism since childhood, which has placed him at odds with his father. And there is lingering antagonism in their relationship. So he has replied to Eli's appeal that "No one cares less than I; no one believes less than I, not even those we bury by the hundreds every day." And if, as Eli continues, they have nothing left but belief, Aaron's retort is that he prefers nothing. For him there is no purpose in a seder, no purpose in reaffirming Jewishness, freedom from Egyptian bondage, or anything else. Nothing has any meaning.

In a brief aside, two guards, singing symbolically in German, taunt some of the Jews by throwing food to them, but deliberately throwing it over the fence so that they cannot retrieve it—all to the guards' mocking laughter.

Aaron's elderly father, who, like most of the others, still clings to belief, tries to persuade his son to go after the bird's egg even though he does not share their faith. But Aaron still refuses.

Inside the barracks, Walter, an inmate lying on his pallet and too weak to write, asks his fellow inmate Max to write down for him a message for posterity: "For generations hence, this shred of evidence." Here Walter is foretelling what many survivors would recall in postwar interviews, that, resigned to their deaths and to the Germans' successful annihilation of all Jewry, they would pray fervently that God would allow at least one Jew to survive, if for no other reason than to be able to tell the world what had happened.

In what Amram considered the most powerful aria in the opera, Walter, now singing with "philosophical detachment and bitterness," asks if there will be anything for future generations to learn from all this—any lesson that might be extracted to prevent recurrence and to teach the world the consequences of hatred. But the question is rhetorical, for his immediate answer to his own question is no—they will all die for no cause or purpose. And he refers to their rabbi-inmate, now dying for the "crime of being a Jew"—for the crime of trying to teach what he knew: "No judges heard his plea. He was born condemned, only death will set him free."

Aaron expands on Walter's surrender to despondency and the utter futility of it all: "No matter how much burning flesh commands the skies, the bodies will burn and burn; world, rummage through the ashes . . . nothing will you learn. Look for no lesson." So demoralized are they all that Max awaits the rabbi's death so that he can have his shoes, acknowledging that he has lost all shame.

In a quartet, Aaron's father explains why his son will never help them. Judaism had been a "dead religion" for Aaron from childhood, and the gulf between them had only widened beyond repair when Aaron disobeyed him concerning a girl his father thought was wrong for him. But Eli suggests that some gentle group pressure might work if they all ask Aaron together.

By the fifth scene, the setting has changed to the women's barracks, where three women—babies in their arms—are mourning those who have already been murdered. Their hummed lament becomes a lullaby, while the guards taunt them and call to be entertained—heckling them to sing louder and more lustily.

Such demands were not infrequent in the camps, and they had roots among medieval Polish nobility, who are known to have required Jews to sing and dance for them. Here the women respond by singing Psalm 137, *Al naharot bavel* (By the Waters of Babylon), which refers to the Babylonian Captivity following the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem.

In that sixth-century BCE scenario, too, the Jews' Babylonian captors made similarly sadistic demands that their captives sing to them their "Song of Zion." But Psalm 137 also contains assurance of eventual divine restoration: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem . . ."

In the following scenes Aaron finally breaks down and accedes to his father's plea, but only after witnessing an incident involving the guards' vicious brutality. Until then, his father's attempts to prevail upon him by recalling his youthful bravery and sense of compassion were in vain. He had reminded Aaron how, as a young man, he had overcome fear and climbed a much more forbidding tree to restore a bird's nest, filled with hatching eggs, that had been dislodged by a windstorm and was dangling from a branch. But Aaron had remained unmoved, as if embarrassed by the memory.

Indeed, there are irresistible, related talmudic and later rabbinic echoes here, rooted in two commandments in the Torah. One of these (Deuteronomy 22:6–7) prohibits the taking of a mother bird from a nest while she is sitting on eggs or tending to her young. And in the event that one must take either the young or the eggs for some good reason, he must first shoo away the mother bird. Observing that commandment carries with it the reward of prolonged life—one of only two of the 613 commandments in the Torah that have this reward specifically attached.

The other commandment with that reward is to honor one's parents (Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16). Comparison of these commandments has not been lost by rabbinic commentators, who have found significance in the same reward applying to both—one of them seemingly the least profound or consequential, as well as the easiest to obey, and the other the most important, if not *the* most important, but often complicated and not so easy to observe. For that commandment refers not merely to obeying one's parents, but to *honoring* them, which, in all its ramifications, may not always be so easy.

In an account in the Talmud (Kiddushin 3b, *Hullin* 142a), the great sage turned apostate Elisha ben Abuya (first half of the second century CE) is said to have witnessed a father instructing his son to climb a tree to fetch chicks from a nest. The lad does so, remembering to observe the related commandment, but he is killed falling from the tree. The son had obediently fulfilled *two* commandments promising long life—honoring his father by following his instructions, and remembering to shoo away the mother bird.

In the opera, only when Aaron witnesses a guard brutally beating his father—upon discovery of the hidden wooden clubs he and the other inmates were intending to use to build a ladder to scale the fence—does Aaron change course in an instant and decide to honor his father's wish. It is Aaron's revelatory moment. Despite his earlier protestations, there remains within him a dual spark of defiance regarding Judaism and Jewish connection. While the other inmates stage a diversion, he successfully scales the fence and snatches an egg, but he is shot and killed by the guards as he returns with it, the egg still in his hands.

Reginald Rose maintained that he had written of the substitute seder at Bergen-Belsen as a theatrical reflection of "a true story," an event he claimed had actually happened there in 1944. Weinstein and Amram accepted Rose's word, repeating his claim in writing their opera. But where had Rose gotten this "information"? And, more specifically, where could he have heard about the incident involving Aaron's death? Leaving aside the highly questionable matter of the substitute seder as nonfictional, the part about Aaron and the bird's egg is troublesome. Rose was no serious student of the Torah, the Talmud, or the Midrash. He would not likely have known about this obscure related commandment on his own—unless perhaps from its mention in a sermon or other reference in a synagogue service. But what about the connection to Elisha ben Abuya? It may be uncomfortable to suggest the possibility of something bordering on plagiarism, yet we cannot overlook the fact that the incident involving the bird's egg in a nest in a tree and the taker's losing his life as a result appears in a novel by Milton Steinberg, *As a Driven Leaf*—a work of fiction based on the life of Elisha ben Abuya and his theological and philosophical internal struggles. The book was published in 1939 and became especially popular and widely read in the 1950s and 1960s. The novel draws on talmudic tradition to create a framework for ben Abuya's life. But Steinberg emphasized that it "springs from historical data without any effort at rigid conformity or literal confinement to them." And obviously he was not referring to any German camps. In any case, let us just say that the same incident is unlikely to have happened twice. The possibility of sheer coincidence strains credulity.

Aaron's father, heard in his anguish at the opening of the ninth scene, believes that his son has died for some purpose after all—once again as a "returned" Jew. "Now he believes!" cries the distraught father over his son's lifeless body.

Aaron's father summons forth the words of the central monotheistic credo and proclamation of faith that observant Jews recite twice daily in their prayers, as well as, if possible, at the moment of imminent death: *Shma yisra'el adonai eloheinu, adonai ehad* (Listen, Israel! *Adonai* is our God; He is the one and only God; His unity is His essence). All the inmates join in, and although it is too late for Aaron, his father nonetheless calls upon him to "Say it with me, Aaron my son."

In the balance of that scene and the next, the inmates make their final preparations for Passover and the seder. As one of them tosses out a loaf of rotten bread (forbidden on Passover even if fresh), which the guards have left them as their daily ration, another symbolically recites the customary pronouncement invoked on the night before the eve of Passover, that no *hametz* (leaven), nor any food items or ingredients forbidden during Passover remain in one's possession.

After the seder commences, the participants refer to the various symbols. Max holds up a piece of what they pretend to be matza, which they have baked in secret from a handful of stolen flour, as he recites from memory the Aramaic words in the Haggada that refer to the “bread of affliction” and invite all who are hungry to partake.

Walter substitutes a clump of freshly pulled grass for the *maror*, in their case the “bitter grass” upon which they must walk daily to their slave labor. A handful of brown earth substitutes symbolically for the *haroset*.

When it comes to Eli and Aaron’s father’s respective explanations of the egg (which is not part of the established seder ritual, but can be added) and the substitute for the lamb bone, we are faced with the inexplicable, bizarre turn to Christian liturgy. It is simply impossible to understand the father’s deliberate paraphrase (technically a parody, in ethnological terms) of the Christian Eucharist—viz., the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion—to which the reference at this point in the opera is not only strange, entirely foreign, and out of place, but utterly baffling as an invocation of a template for this (or any) part of a Judaic ritual. Moreover, the connections both historically and in Christian theology between Passover and the Crucifixion notwithstanding, it is highly unlikely that these Bergen-Belsen inmates had ever heard the words of the Eucharist or known anything about it. But its echo in the libretto at this point is unmistakable—meant to be sung, according to the instruction in the score, without hesitation. So this is no matter of interpretation.

Corresponding to the Israelites’ Temple rite of the annual Passover sacrifice of the paschal lamb, with its biblical roots in the Book of Exodus of the Hebrew Bible, is the Christian concept of Jesus as the “sacrificed lamb of God.” Hence, for example, the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) in the Mass, along with the idea that God “gave His only son” so that (believing) mankind could thus be cleansed of its sins and attain permanent salvation.

So here we have Aaron’s father proclaiming that on that very night, the eve of Passover, 1944, the lamb that had been sacrificed was his only son—clearly implying, with no objections from the others, that, whereas the shank bone has always served as remembrance of the paschal lamb’s significance vis-à-vis the Israelites’ freedom from Egyptian bondage, its purpose now is to mark the sacrifice of *his* lamb, his son Aaron. And that this sacrifice will now provide immortality for the rest of the Jews there has already been assured by Eli: “Here tonight, our Aaron gave his life that we might have it [the immortality or renewal of life represented by the egg].” Eli’s reference to “we” would, in Christian terms, mean all humanity. But of course Aaron had no such goal in mind.

The operative words of the Eucharist and their connotations are Jesus’s body, His blood, and remembrance of Him:

“This is my body, this is my blood. Do this
in remembrance of me.”

Jesus is said to have spoken these words at the Last Supper, which, according to the Synoptic Gospels, occurred on the first night of Passover, although the Gospel of John places it on the night before. (The seder per se as we know it had not yet been rabbinically formulated, and the principal observance of Passover then involved the pilgrimage to Jerusalem—as near to the Temple as possible—with lambs brought for the priests to slaughter and roast, separately from the paschal lamb sacrifice.) So the commonly understood link to Passover is based on the account that the Crucifixion—and, in Christianity, the Resurrection—occurred during the week of the biblically ordained Festival.

For the lamb shank bone on the seder plate, Aaron’s father has substituted his son’s belt. That comes across as bizarre at first, acquiring meaning only when we realize that he wants something that has been as close to Aaron’s body as possible (and with his blood on it), inasmuch as the belt has been touched by his hands. And Aaron’s bloody corpse, which, in their mockery, the guards have left to the other inmates, has been brought to their seder and lies before them—bleeding and blood-caked from the fatal wound as well as representing bloodshed in the wider sense of death.

Moreover, we may presume that something representing wine—which is central both to celebration of the Mass and to a seder—has been drunk at the very beginning of the seder (as the first of the required four cups), with the recitation of *Kiddush* (sanctification [of the occasion] pronounced or chanted over the first cup of wine). This precedes the telling of the Passover story (the *Haggada*) in the established order of the proceedings (the word *seder* in fact means “order.”)

To recognize and confirm the paraphrase of the Eucharist here, we need only compare its wording with that of Eli and Aaron’s father:

EUCHARIST

DO THIS IN **REMEMBRANCE**
OF ME.

THIS IS MY BODY.

THIS IS MY BLOOD.

ELI

REMEMBER HIM UNTIL THE
DAY YOU DIE.

AARON’S FATHER

THIS WAS HIS BELT.

THIS IS OUR SHANK BONE
[pointing and referring to Aaron’s
blood-soaked corpse, viz., whose
blood has been shed].

How this echo of the Eucharist found its way into the opera has proved impossible to guess, much less know or understand, except that it cannot have been a coincidence. When questioned about it thirty-five years later, Amram had no recollection of the wording of that scene. And when it was read to him, he did not pick up on any connection with the Eucharist. Nor did he even know what the Eucharist is. And that was obviously true in 1965, for as a committed Jew writing a Jewishly related opera for broadcast on a Jewish television program, he could certainly have had no reason to want to connect it to any transparently Christian ceremony. He was merely following Weinstein’s libretto. Could Weinstein have been so ignorant? And what about Reginald Rose? Did someone put one over on Amram out of some secret agenda of which he was obviously unaware?

And what can we make of the fact that there was no pre-broadcast objection from anyone at the then very traditional Jewish Theological Seminary? Did no one there examine the opera, particularly the libretto, before a “sign-off”? In those days there were no committees. But the answer lies unfortunately in the outright ignorance on the part of one person at the Seminary whose job included everything connected to those broadcasts; and she was not subject to any oversight. She was Jewish, efficient, at least fairly well educated, politically liberal, and not unintelligent. So we can only assume that she had no idea what the Eucharist is, or anything about basic Christianity, and simply would not have recognized it in this scene. Still, inasmuch as the Seminary typically received hundreds of letters from across America following each week’s broadcast, it is inconceivable that none alluded to this absurdity. And what about the Seminary’s brilliant, scholarly, and also worldly chancellor, Louis Finkelstein?¹⁰

* * * * *

Customarily pronounced at the end of a seder is the hope that the messianic era in Judaic terms will have arrived by the following year: *l’shana haba’a biy’rushalayim* (Next year in Jerusalem!). Viz., this year we have conducted our seder still in the Diaspora, but next year may we be able to do so in the Land of Israel with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem—as an ingathered, reunited people. Aaron’s father begins to sing that hopeful phrase, joined by the attending inmates—including the women.

But they add a hymn before the final curtain, which is not part of the established seder ritual. It is, however, frequently sung in the synagogue on various occasions, including (optionally) to conclude the Passover eve service

prior to going home for the commencement of the seder: *Yigdal elohim hai*, a medieval poetic setting of or based on Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith:

We exalt and praise the presence of the living God;
His existence and being transcend all time—was,
is and will forever be.
His essence is unity—His uniqueness lies in His oneness,
He is unlike any other unity.
That oneness is inscrutable and without end.
He has no physical form—nor anything even corresponding
to form.
His holiness is incomparable; His holiness is unimaginable.
He preexisted all of His creations—
Was and always has been the beginning, the first of all
that ever was.
He is the master of all creation;
All creatures reflect His dominion and majesty.
He abundantly shared His prophecy with His beloved
and treasured people.
Never among Israel has anyone appeared who could in greatness
compare with Moses, our prophet,
Whose closeness to God exceeded that of all others.
God gave to His people a Torah of truth
Through the agency of His faithful prophet, Moses.
God neither amends His law nor changes its character;
His precepts remain forever, for eternity.
He searches out and understands our deepest and
most hidden secrets;
He knows every ending at its very beginning.
He rewards the pious according to their deeds,
And repays evildoers in proportion to their guilt.
He will send our messiah at the End of Days,
To bring redemption to those who faithfully wait.
With the greatest of lovingkindness God will bring
the dead to eternal life.
Praised be His glorious name for all eternity.

(Translation: Rabbi Morton M. Leifman)

Appending *Yigdal* to the seder was a perfectly permissible bit of artistic license.¹¹ In fact, in many communal traditions it is sung in the synagogue at the conclusion of the evening service that precedes the seder. Singing it at the end of the seder does make dramatic sense by virtue of its powerful theological statements and assurances. Amram chose, however, not to rely on or incorporate any of the well-known strophic musical versions, but rather to compose his own setting as a compelling conclusion to the opera, in a through-composed non-strophic hymn.

The stage directions specify that the guards watch in silence as the inmates sing *Yigdal*, with no thought of interfering. The Jews are, after all, not defying them. They are singing a hymn, in a language unknown to the guards, that expresses tenacious historical adherence to Judaic faith in the Almighty—regardless of the circumstances, the more so since the hymn quotes Maimonides's principle that God is unfathomable.

The opera has a musically as well as dramatically cohesive structure that sustains uninterrupted attention as its flow unravels. There are several recognizable central themes that are treated continually by various permutations. As Amram has suggested, this technique affords the work its synergetic combination of simplicity and power. Much of the melodic material, often but not always in fragments, is left to the orchestra. And those orchestral passages are punctuated by vocal lines of declamatory yet lyrical cells, motives, and phrases—with minimal emphasis on developed arias. All this is typical of much American opera written during the first two postwar decades.

Particularly interesting is the assignment to continually varied small instrumental ensembles from the orchestra, especially involving winds—and sometimes solo passages—leaving the full orchestra for key dramatic moments. In a way, the singers and instrumentalists are equal partners, so that every word is heard clearly and distinctly.

At the same time, Amram demonstrated his ability to handle a type of song-speech (not quite *Sprechstimme*) with sufficient lyrical phrases upon which the vocal lines can expand—really a kind of semi-speech-song interspersed with instrumental gestures. Yet the vocal lines always prevail where appropriate, as, for example, in Walter’s aria. And in the scene in the women’s barracks, the lullaby is developed as a transfixing, haunting melodic line with both modal echoes and modernistic leaps that are never jarring and somehow remain lyrical. Overall, one feels a sense of fusion of melody and modern influences, which led the *New York Times* critic Theodore Strongin to assess the work as “some of the best operatic writing of our day.”¹²

The Shoah per se is not an appropriate, transcendent metaphor for broader humanistic or universal themes—nor for anything that diffuses its historical uniqueness and exclusivity as the calculated attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. Yet Amram was attracted to what he perceived as a universal message of the consequences of bigotry and sheer hatred. Unlike so many artistic works that have traded shamelessly and opportunistically on the Germans’ war against the Jewish people, however, *The Final Ingredient* is not in any way an exploitation of the Shoah, but a genuine expression of Judaic faith.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a brief biographical sketch of David Amram, see my essay in the accompanying booklet to the Milken Archive/NAXOS CD devoted to Amram, 8.559420, to which access can also be had on the Milken Archive of Jewish Music website.
- 2 Amram's remarks at a panel discussion that I chaired at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, following the recording there of excerpts of *The Final Ingredient* for the Milken Archive of Jewish Music/NAXOS CD series, January, 2000.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The most famous such case of a rejected script for Anne Frank's diary as a play is that of the journalist and novelist Meyer Levin. The diary was first published in Dutch in 1947, in an abbreviated, expurgated, and partially censored version, with some parts deleted altogether—in accordance with the caveats and conditions imposed by Otto Frank, Anne's father. Its English translation was first published in the United States in 1951 and was reviewed by Meyer Levin for *The New York Times* (The complete, unexpurgated, and uncensored diary was not published in an English translation until 1986.) Although Levin apparently obtained the necessary (publisher's) rights to adapt that incomplete, expurgated version of the diary for the stage, any such rights became moot when producers turned it down as too direct, too provocative, too uncomfortably graphic, and too infused with Jewishness and Jewish sensibilities. Also, Levin claimed to have been told by producers that one could not expect [1950s] audiences to come to the theater to watch onstage people they know to have ended up in crematoria, mass graves, and so on simply and only because they were Jews. (Various sources have alluded to bad blood between Otto Frank and Meyer Levin, not only or not necessarily related to the latter's review, but especially after the Goodrich and Hackett play was chosen for Broadway instead of his, and then his none too silent public "displeasure" about that. But even had Otto Frank preferred Levin's script—which he had not—it is fairly certain that the producers would not have accepted it anyway.)

Rinne Groff's play *Compulsion*, a loosely fictionalized story about the Meyer Levin–Anne Frank episode and its aftermath, opened at the Public Theatre in New York in 2011—following productions at the Yale Repertory Theatre. (*Compulsion* was a rather strange albeit deliberately chosen title for the play, inasmuch as it is the title of Meyer Levin's once widely read 1956 book of historical fiction about the infamous Leopold and Loeb murder of a young boy in Chicago in 1924—for no reason other than, reportedly, to prove to themselves that, as supposedly genius *Übermenschen* not subject to normal morality, they were both capable of and justified in committing the "perfect crime." More recent serious nonfiction studies, however, have disputed this motive by itself and much else that Meyer Levin wrote. His book was made into a feature film in 1959, starring Orson Wells and E. G. Marshall, which was as foolish as the book but enjoyed far less commercial success.)

Groff's play features a semi-fictional character, Sid Silver, who is apparently supposed to represent and personify Meyer Levin. Played by Mandy Patinkin in the 2011 production, Silver seeks to adapt Anne Frank's diary for the stage. When the Goodrich and Hackett play makes it to Broadway instead of his, he becomes enraged on several counts, not least because Goodrich and Hackett are not Jews—an absurd, irrational objection. Silver (cum Levin) is getting at the play's avoidance of a reasonable degree of Jewishness, but that was not necessarily a result of its playwrights not being Jews. And in real life, that fact was not part of Meyer Levin's legitimate, even objective criticism of the play.

- 5 Amram's remarks at University of Michigan panel, op. cit.; also p.c. oral history interview at Ellis Island, March, 1997.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 The Torah does provide a single day postponement of Passover, *Pesah sheni* (lit., second Passover on the 14th of the month of *iyar*, i.e., one month later than the actual Passover; Numbers 9:6–12). But this concerned only the postponement of the *Korban pesah* (the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb) in antiquity, if there were some who, on the 14th of *nisan*—the actual eve of Passover—were unable to participate in the *Korban pesah* because of temporary ritual impurity or “uncleanness” for having just been in contact with a dead body for burial, or because they were unavoidably “far off” on some necessary journey or delayed. (According to tradition, that was the only *Paschal* sacrifice offered even while wandering in the wilderness before reaching the land of Canaan.) In that case, the *Korban pesah* would be performed on the 14th of *iyar* instead, and eaten together with matza and *maror* (bitter herbs). However, following the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, the *Korban pesah* could no longer be performed at any time anywhere, so all of this became irrelevant. Nonetheless, even in modern times, some who were unable to observe a seder on the 14th of *nisan* for good reason have utilized the *Pesah sheni* date to have some semblance of a partial seder, purely for emotional satisfaction and unrelated to the commandment in Torah or any divine commandment, without any elements that can be observed or recited only on the actual Passover seder on the 14th. In fact, as recently as the Second World War, when a naval battle was raging in the Pacific on the 14th of *nisan*, an American Jewish naval chaplain with the rank of commander organized just such a substitute seder on the 14th of *iyar* for the Jewish sailors, petty officers, et al., who had had to miss the experience on the 14th. Today, some add matza to their regular meals on the 14th of *iyar*, which is not required.

There is nothing in *The Final Ingredient* to suggest that the Bergen-Belsen inmates have improvised their substitute seder after the 14th of *nisan*. For their situation would have been no different a month later, if by then they had not been murdered.

- 8 See in Bruno Bettelheim, “The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank,” in his *Surviving and Other Essays* (NY, 1979). Also of tangential interest is his *The Informed Heart* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1960).
- 9 We must acknowledge that, officially, the memorial at Yad Vashem in honor of the righteous non-Jews of all nations who helped or tried in one way or another to help Jews during the Shoah employs in its English name the phrase “righteous Gentiles.” I personally always shun the term for a number of reasons, not least because it is flat-out incorrect. And I am typically unmoved by arguments that misuse English words or grammar that have “come to mean” this or that. (For example, “decimate” has “come to mean” destroy, or nearly destroy, most of a population or culture or ethnicity, when in fact it means “to reduce *by* a tenth.” Otherwise, what word shall be used when one *means* reduction by a tenth?) The word “gentile” is derived from the Latin *jentilis*, meaning “of the same clan or so-called race,” used in ancient Rome to refer to non-Romans, then by early Christians in Rome to mean pagans or heathens, i.e., those who did not accept universal monotheism, which is to say those who did not believe in one universal God. Thus Christians cannot, and ought not, nor should non-Jews ipso facto who reject any religious beliefs, be called “gentiles.” Moreover, I find the term demeaning and distasteful, even when not ill-meant. Indeed, historically, when used by my parents’ and grandparents’ generations, the implication generally concerned non-Jews of only *some* European or British Isles backgrounds, whether in America or in their countries of residence. No one in those days would have referred to Italians as “gentiles,” for example, and certainly not Chinese Christians, nor, for that matter, Christians or Muslim Arabs, Iranians, or others committed to Islam.

- 10 One would have thought that among all the prominent Judaic scholars at the Jewish Theological Seminary in those days, at least one would have picked up on this and “raised the roof” as it were, and certainly brought it to the attention of the chancellor of the Seminary, Louis Finkelstein. The fact is that none of them were inclined or had any reason to watch those broadcasts, even if they were not opposed to them in principle, and the weekly audiences across America were largely non-Jewish. Finkelstein took no interest in those broadcasts and did not review the scripts prior to broadcast. He was active in interfaith initiatives, apart from which his focus was primarily on serious scholarship. He would not have known of this travesty in the script of *The Final Ingredient* either before or after its broadcast.
- 11 Authorship of the hymn *Yigdal* is generally ascribed to R. Daniel bar Yehuda of Rome, fourteenth century. But that authorship is not universally recognized, and some—certain Hassidic dynasties or traditions, for example—insist that the poem is anonymous.
- 12 *New York Times*, April 12, 1965.