

ESSAY

Ten Ways to Recognize a Sephardic "Jew-ess"

Ruth Knafo Setton

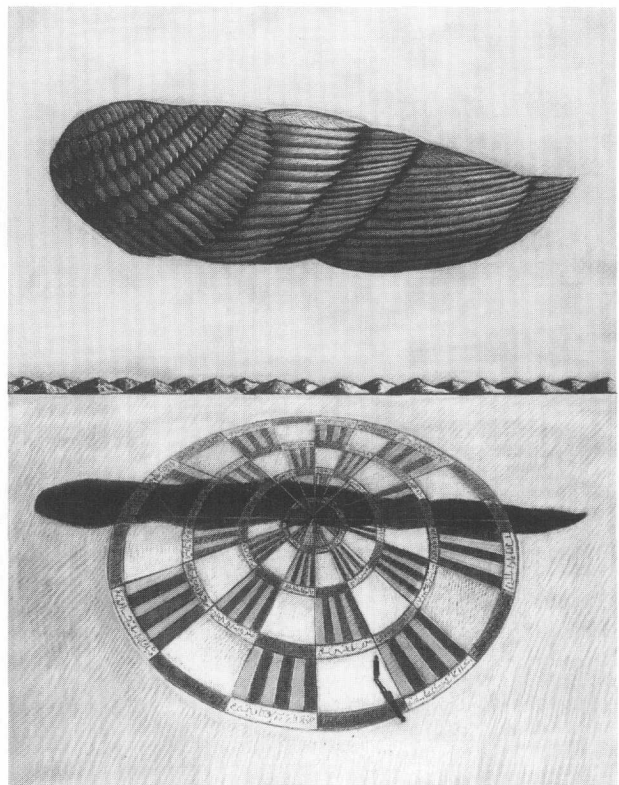
ONE: *Name.*

Often unpronounceable, unmanageable, redolent of incense and cumin. A name that twists letters into spirals the way a djinn emerges from a lamp. Abitbol. Afriat. Bahboul. Buzaglo. Aflalo. Dweck. Ohayon. Ben'Attar. Bensussan. Chouraqi. The Spanish echoes too, of arches and Alhambra, dusty streets and brown hoods: Cabessa, Corcos, Mendes, Pinto. But the true names are weirdly resonant, heavy, harsh, satisfying; a name you can sink your teeth into, one that emerges from dirt and mud and roots: Knafo. A certain brilliantly colored cloak, *knaf* also refers to a honey-drenched, shredded phyllo dough Middle Eastern sweet, the kind set a thousand on a large tray in Jaffa or Casablanca that you eat with your fingers, swirling the flaking pastry and syrup and nut mixture on your tongue with burning Moroccan mint tea—perfumed with a drop of orange blossom water. *Knafo*. Say this name aloud, every which way you can imagine. Try being called Knaf-Knuf. Knasoo—a singularly ugly aberration, Konfoo, Kanfa, Knee, or in a stroke of malevolent genius: Kohenfo. The mysterious letter "k." To pronounce or not? Arabs whisper it like a "h." Hanafu. It's a breath, a wing. Knaf in Hebrew is a wing. Legend has it that Knafo means "under God's wing," even to be protected by God because we are literally under His wing. This was especially evident for Maklouf Knafo and his family on a Thursday morning in July 1790, in the Berber village of Oufran hidden in the Anti-Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

TWO: *Food.*

Feed this child. Wide-eyed and yearning. This child has never tasted a bagel! Her mother distrusts anything served in a gel. Gefilte fish? She whisks her child away from it quickly. Kugel? The dough is too heavy, sinks into the stomach. Lox and cream cheese? Mom clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. They don't know how to be subtle, she murmurs, wielding her knife and beginning to chop. Behind her henna'd hair—beautiful auburn waves flowing down her back—I see my American backyard. A swing set on which my little sister soars, lost in her recurring day-dream of rescuing stray cats and dogs and bringing them to her doll hospital. A sandbox in which my tiny naked brother

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sits and throws handfuls of sand back and forth. Mom chops, cuts, slices. I lean on my elbow and watch everyone at once. Even my dad far away at work sorting produce at the A&P, struggling to make sense of English syllables—coiled and Germanic—as opposed to fluid French, guttural Arabic.

I think about my own rescue fantasy. Every night in bed I return to our little backyard. The alley behind is flooded. Help! Help! someone screams. It's *I Love Lucy!* I race from my yard to save her, bring my trusty canoe through the gate, and paddle up the hill. I pull her into the boat. Her red hair gleams in the dark. She thanks me, and I set her safely in my backyard, and return to save Desi and little Ricky. It's a dangerous world, something I can't remember ever learning and yet something I must have always known. To open the front door is to enter danger. I prefer leaving from the back, where I can ease my way into the outside world, through the yard and the gate, down the alley and around the corner past Old Man Minnich's store and his display of comic books and penny candy in the window.

See, Mom says, and gestures towards the salads: oranges and black olives, the colors alone nearly sending me on another voyage; purple beets and celery; cooked peppers red,

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ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD ROSS

ESSAY

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yellow and green, drizzled with olive oil and seasoned with preserved lemon, chili peppers, and cumin. Flavors shouldn't be obvious, Mom says; mix the unexpected: chicken with sweet tomato jam and dark honey, fish with almond paste and confectioners sugar, preserves made from baby eggplants and walnuts, *tagines* simmered with *smen*, saffron and *za'atar*. And *ma fille*, remember the importance of cinnamon.

THREE: *The Knafo Wheel.*

My cousin handed it to me one night at a lecture in New York. A huge sheet of paper to revolve, separated into sections: a round graph. I look at the center: Maklouf Knafo. The one who burned to death along with the other forty-nine *nisrafim* (burnt ones) in Oufran. And the branches spread out from him. Knafos, Knafos, as far as the finger extends. Knafos in Mogador of course, because that's where his wife walked with her baby. I close my eyes and imagine her voyage. A young woman, her eight-day-old infant son (just circumcised by Maklouf that morning), walking down the mountain paths—rocky and steep. But the danger is not in the rocks and winding roads; it is in the robbers and brigands who populate these mountains. A young woman and her baby. I scan the Knafo wheel, turn it around and around, try to read between the black lines and words and letters, but find no name for this young woman. A nameless woman making her way down the mountains to save her son. Nameless—except for her husband's name, Knafo. Is she under God's wing as she stumbles down the road? Sun burns on her head. The baby is hot, hungry, crying. How does she maintain her supply of milk? Everything she owns is on her back. The baby cradled in a blanket against her breasts. Her husband left behind. Her husband, Maklouf Knafo. She walks fast, head down, afraid to breathe, to smell smoke.

FOUR: *Purple Palestinians.*

Now this goes back years: we all lived in a shabby apartment building on Valencia in the Mission in San Francisco—above a bar, across from a bar, next door to a bar. Stumbling over drunks and homeless—only back then we didn't call them homeless, we called them bums. And winos. And I was alone for the first time in my life, scared to death, but—here's the great mixture I can't get a handle on—high on hippie life, memories of my strange isolated family haunting me, trying with my gut to be as American as you, and to that end, sitting in my third-floor apartment in the Mission, looking down at the barmaid, at least eighty, with enormous pale tits and iridescent blue eye-shadow, walking to the bar on the corner to start her shift, and I set pen to paper and begin the American novel—as interpreted by a Moroccan Jewish immigrant girl. But I've been burned already, even though I'm barely twenty-one. The first story I sent out returns with a rejection note: *You write well. Next time try writing about the real Jews.*

I am frozen to my soul. Too afraid to inquire more deeply into what the editor means. So ashamed I tear the note into a thousand slivers, shred them with my fingers, and throw them down the toilet. There. It's gone.

"And the pain?" as my father would say. He's known for that final aside, the joke after the punch line that sends it spinning into another dimension. He is known for that, the ironic aside that makes people realize that no joke has an end. No story truly finishes.

And so I write about an old Polish Jewish man as I stare outside and ignore Hassan from down the hall, banging on my door and screaming: I'm going to rape you the way you raped Palestine! And Amar, his roommate, the head cab-driver (the one who gives them all purple Hafiz Cab tee-shirts when they arrive in the city, and the one who cooks for me and gets high with me, and we listen to Procol Harum and wonder over *A Whiter Shade of Pale* together, and stare at each other, attracted though trying not to be). Amar, sweet Amar, with the desert eyes and the tightest purple tee-shirt of all, tells his friend: leave her alone. She's a girl, she can't rape anyone....

FIVE: *Exotic.*

Erotique. I line my eyes with black *kohl* and wear large gold hoops and long gypsy skirts and low-cut hand-embroidered Romanian blouses. Paint my toenails red and wear sandals that tie around my ankles. But my legs are always cold so I begin to wear leggings beneath my skirts—and don't realize it's the way Arab women dress until my mother tells me. I play up the exotic, pronounce words with a faint French accent, *le bagel, qu'est-ce que c'est?* Boys like me; you and your crazy name, one murmurs as he bites my ear. They see me and think of *Casablanca* and Ingrid Bergman and play it again Sam. My first real boyfriend is black. He tells me: I am from Afrikaaa. I tell him: so am I. He tells me: I am black first, a man second. I tell him: in Paris they call me *pieds noirs*, black feet. He tells me: here, they call me nigger. I tell him: they called me *dhimmi*, or the lowest of the low. We outblack each other, and even in bed, scratch and lash and attack, until we lie back, exhausted and content. We're an odd couple: he listens to Jimi and (in secret) Sweet Baby James. I listen to James Brown and John Lee Hooker. I dance better than he does. Later, the best dancer I will ever see, a Moroccan soul-sex machine come to life, whom I watched move to James Brown for hours at a time in a Netanya club called Azazel (or Hell), died at twenty-one in the Yom Kippur War.

SIX: *Memory.*

The years in the sunless *mellabs* and *juderias* and *quartiers juifs* have bleached our skin until it's fashionably Mediterranean, only a shade or two darker than yours. Our nomadic history has given us a variety of languages, none of which is ours, but all of which we have learned to speak—

with a bite. You can recognize us by the rage we carry in us, the rage of the colonized, those who are still not permitted to meet the master class eye to eye. The bitter eyes that now refuse to stay lowered, the angry tongue that can no longer be silenced, the poet's heart that in spite of everything continues to dream and hope, the soul that cannot forget. There is no wind and the smell of burning flesh remains in the square, incapable of moving elsewhere and freeing us.

SEVEN: *Invisible.*

Even within postcolonial, third world, border-crossing, multicultural ethnic feminist identities, I am nowhere to be found. I dare you. Look for me. Born in Morocco, raised in America, in a small town—a Jew from Africa who probably scared my Pennsylvania-Dutch neighbors as much as they scared me—a minority within a minority. Be invisible, my father told me. I tried—but my black feet peeked out from every disguise. And now when I take off my veil and let you see the scratched lines of henna crisscrossing my face, the embroidered scrolls and curlicues that lace my palms, you avert your eyes. By multicultural, I didn't mean you. Latina is hot now. Lesbian Latina even better. Caribbean, mon? Remote Indian provinces, hot as curry. Even Arab American, hotter than you. Who you anyway? Afrikaan? Arab Jew? Oriental Jew? Tied in with Israel. Israel not hot.

EIGHT: *Nomad.*

I believe she traveled north to Taroudant in the Grand Atlas, then wound her way down the rocky hills and ravines to the east and the breezes of the Atlantic Ocean, and north once more, following the coastline past Cap Guir and Tamanar to Mogador. Mountain air is thin and clear, but in the Anti-Atlas Mountains it is pale gray, tainted with smoke. Take a deep breath. The smoke doesn't escape. Locked in the square, over a hundred years later, it smells of death, the end of the oldest Jewish community in Morocco, with a hiss and crack.

NINE: *The Choice: Life or death?*

Take a deep breath and decide if it's going to be life or death, says Bou Halassa, the sheik who owns the Jews of Oufra. Think carefully, he says. The choice is simple: Die as Jews, or live as Muslims—under my protection. All you have to do is say the words: *There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet.*

The sun is shining. It is a July morning in 1790 in the Anti-Atlas Mountains. Bou Halassa is on horseback, surrounded by his men who are already at work building the funeral pyre. The fifty Jews, merchants all, are wearing black (the only color permitted them); they are barefoot (no shoes allowed for Jews); and they are standing on the ground because they are not permitted to ride a horse. The horse is considered too noble an animal to carry a lowly Jew. Bou has interrupted the *souk el'khemiss*, the Thursday morning

market. Merchants selling carpets and leather, artisans with brass trays and iron kettles. Cattle, mules, donkeys, chickens.

The leader of the Jews, Rabbi Naphtali Afriat, tells them: We have no choice. To say the words and live a lie is another form of death. To die for God is to live forever as Jews. It's the only way to carry on our faith so that our children can be Jews. So that everything doesn't die this morning.

A young man on the edge of the group is torn. Only this morning, with his own hands, he circumcised his first son. Die—for what? For Bou Halassa's whim? Bou is a tyrant, a sadist, notorious in the mountains for his hatred of Jews. Even though Bou's men have swords and are now circling the Jews, we are fifty in number—maybe we can fight back? And if they overpower us, then what? If we walk into the flames, will he then turn on our women and children?

Afriat, his gold earring glinting in the sun, announces in his quavering voice: We have decided. We choose death—in the name of God. You do not frighten us, Bou Halassa. You will answer for your brutality to God, not to us.

The young man bolts—without a thought, without hesitation—slips from the crowd of Jews and Arabs, and runs to his small cottage. Then he does—what? I'd love to see this scene: how he convinces her to take the baby and leave without him. I can almost hear her: you've already come this far! They don't know you're gone! Come with us. You'll do more good to us alive than dead. Why should you die for this sadist? Come with us!

He walks his wife and baby to the town wall, the stone wall that enclosed Oufra. She is unwieldy: the blanket that supports her baby forces her to lean forward, while the bag Maklouf stuffed with bread and dates loads down her back. He helps push her up the wall, and for a moment is caught there, in the cobblestones, between death and life—his wife's hand pulling him up, the hand of "God" pulling him back. Beneath his feet, red and purple flowers sprout in crevices between the rocks.

TEN: *The Question of Home.*

The sun shines through Amar's window. The Moody Blues sing about nights in white satin. I lean over Amar's shoulder as he fries a mixture of eggs, potatoes, and meat on the stove. The violent Hassan has left San Francisco. Crazy, Amar tells me, tapping his temple and handing me a fat joint. I breathe in the harsh smoke and the pungent spices that smell like my mother's food. You have to create your own home wherever you go, he says. This sounds wise, heavy. But first you have to know what a home is, I say, and hand back the joint. With a deep sigh that echoes through me, I move to the window, sit on the edge and lean out. The sun licks my cheeks with burning tongue. The old barmaid walks down the street. I yell to her. She squints up, sees me, and waves, smiles an orange and yellow smile. Her blue-veined, speckled tits jiggle like blobs of cream cheese, like gefilte fish squashed in satin. □