

**133
YARMULKES**

LEO D. OLSON-URY

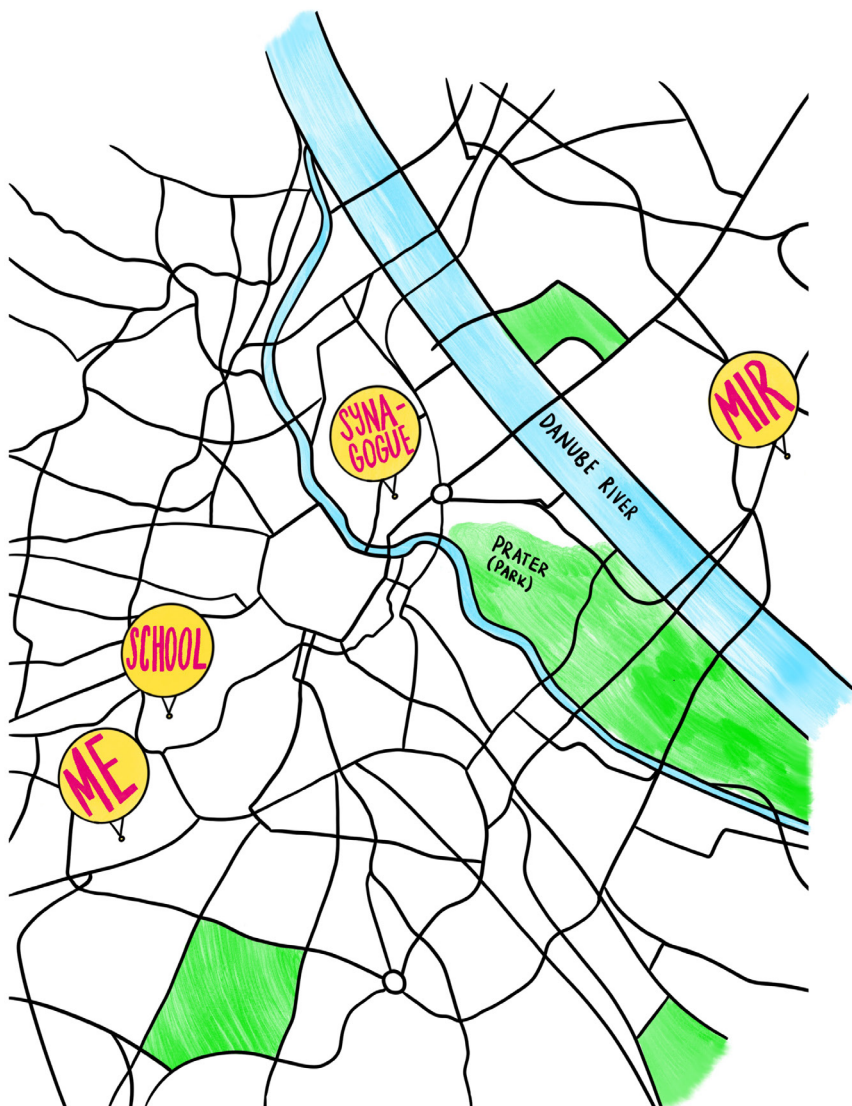
THIS JOURNAL
BELONGS TO



DAVI (ME)

MY WORLD

(A.K.A. VIENNA)



A NOTE FROM THE RABBI...



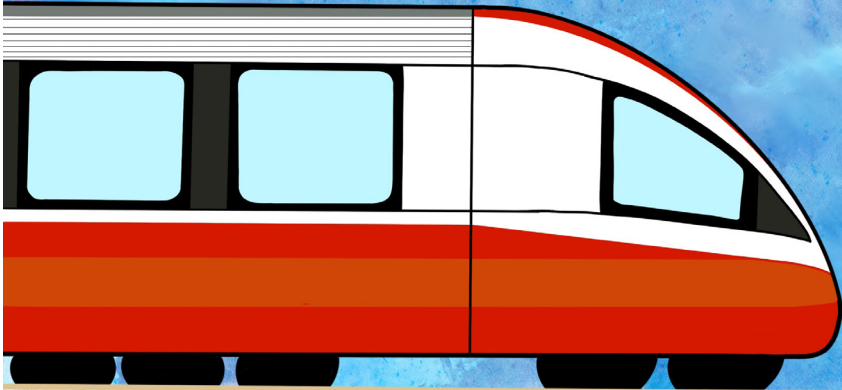
In case I ever become very famous, I'm sure people will want to read my journal. If that happens, I want everyone to be able to understand it. So I have invited Rabbi to make a few notes explaining Jewish things I mention.

THANK YOU DAVI. I PROMISE TO FILL THE SPEECH BUBBLES YOU HAVE GIVEN ME WITH LOTS OF RABBINICAL WISDOM FOR YOUR FUTURE FANS



CHAPTER 1:

WHERE IT ALL BEGINS



Even though my grandma gave me this journal a month ago, as a present for my eleventh birthday, I haven't written in it until now. I have been afraid to open it because I want to make it really good. This journal needs to contain the action packed chronicles of my life filled with incredible stories and cool illustrations. If I ever become famous, or die prematurely, I want people to open up this journal and say: wow, Davi was the most incredible person. For a long time it felt like nothing ever happened to me, and I had nothing worthwhile to write about. But that all changes today. Mir's twelfth birthday party is going to be amazing and will finally give me something worthwhile to write about in my journal.

My dad just interrupted me by

asking, "Oh wow are you finally starting to write in the journal that grandma got you?" I told him, "Yes I am, but I will need a little peace and quiet if I am going to write in it properly." Then he said, "Okay okay I'll be silent, but at least let me sit next to the window so that I have something to look at while you write."

"Fine," I replied. We switched seats and hopefully now I can continue writing in peace. I am a little disappointed that my dad is coming with me to Mir's birthday party, but I guess there was nothing I could do about that. I know he's just coming to keep Mir's mom company. But as the youngest attendee of the birthday party, it's embarrassing to arrive with my dad. We just got on this train which means that I know I have about 20 minutes until we

arrive at the stop near Mir's house. I know this sounds like a short journey, but spending 20 minutes on the same train feels like an eternity to me. I wish Mir didn't live on the opposite side of Vienna from me.

This party is going to be different from all the other birthday parties Mir has had, and I would know. I will be the only friend there who has been to every single one of her birthday parties, even the ones that she and I were both too young to remember. This, of course, is not because Mir and I somehow decided to become besties when we were babies, but because Mir's mom and my dad are best friends. They, like many Jewish people in our community, are from the United States. But they met here in Vienna at our synagogue, years before either Mir or I were born.

Rabbi is also part of their friend group because before he was our rabbi, or even a rabbi at all, he went to the same synagogue as my dad and Mir's mom, and they all became friends.

Officially, Mir's birthday party is a sleepover at her house. Her real birthday is tomorrow, so we are meant to all go to bed, and then wake up and celebrate her actual birthday in the morning. But what no adult knows is that we have a secret plan to sneak out late at night and go to Prater to celebrate the start of her actual birthday at midnight. I know of older kids doing stuff like this, but I've never heard of anyone in my grade doing something this cool. I have to admit I am pretty nervous because I know that if my dad finds out that he will lose his trust in me and start watching me

like a hawk. If that happens I will once again have no interesting happenings in my life to journal about. Luckily my dad will go home before we go to bed, and it seems unlikely that Mir's mom will catch us. This is good because if Mir's mom doesn't find out, then there's no way my dad will find out.

When Mir sleeps over at my place, my dad always brings us homemade snacks and plays board games with us. When we stay at Mir's, her mom gives us 20 Euros and lets us go to the store and pick out whatever we want. Then she lets us watch movies until we fall asleep. One time we stayed up until sunrise and I don't think she even noticed. I fear that sneaking out is potentially more noticeable, but I think we have a chance, especially since we have such a good plan.

My dad just tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Davi stop writing. We're almost there." I guess the journal did make the train ride go by faster. I didn't even notice when we crossed the Danube River; probably because my dad took the window seat.



My dad and I were the first guests to arrive at Mir's house. The four of us have spent loads of time together so it wasn't weird. Thankfully, since our parents knew the party was going to start soon, they retreated to the kitchen. Mir and I started playing a game of cards while we waited for the others to arrive. I told her, "I can't believe you're already turning twelve tomorrow, do you know what that means?"

"what does it mean?" she asked.

"It means that the next time we celebrate your birthday it will be"

"MY B'NAI MITZVAH," she interjected.

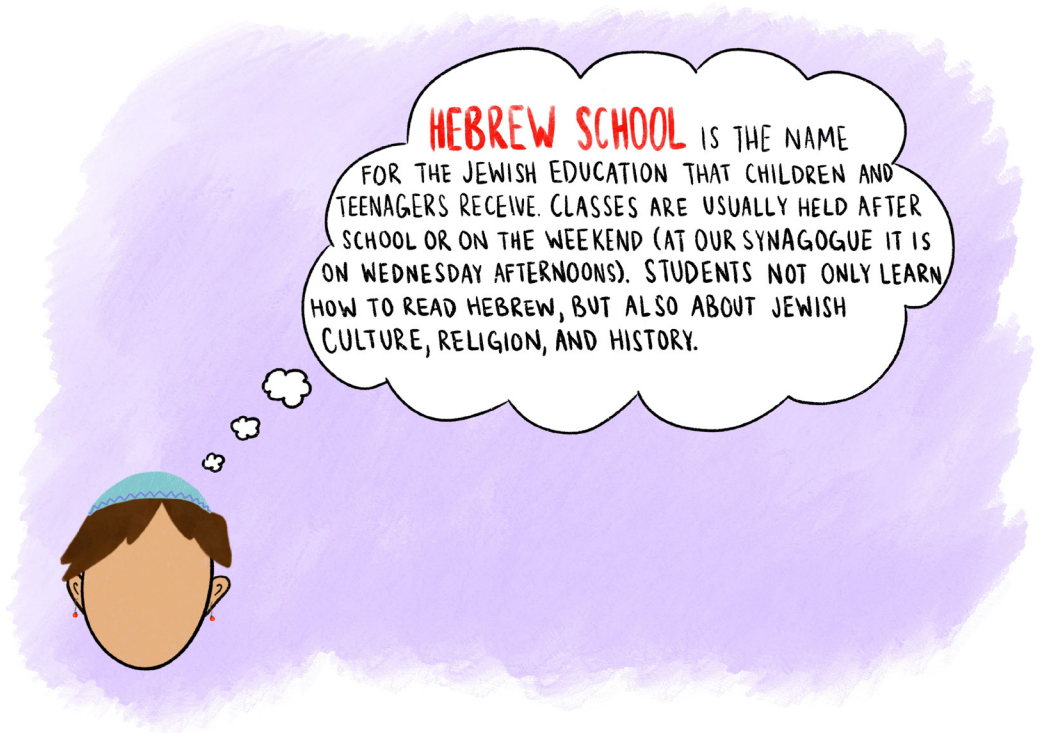
"Oh my god Davi you know how long I have been waiting for my B'nai Mitzvah. I am so excited but also a little nervous."

"But why are you nervous?" I asked.

"You are the best student in Hebrew school and I'm sure you will do great."



WHEN A JEWISH PERSON TURNS 13, WE SAY THAT THEY BECOME **B'NAI MITZVAH**. THIS MEANS THAT THE PERSON BECOMES AN "ADULT" IN THE JEWISH TRADITION AND NEEDS TO START TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN ACTIONS. BECOMING B'NAI MITZVAH IS OFTEN MARKED BY A JOYOUS CELEBRATION, WHICH IS ALSO CALLED A B'NAI MITZVAH.



HEBREW SCHOOL IS THE NAME FOR THE JEWISH EDUCATION THAT CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS RECEIVE. CLASSES ARE USUALLY HELD AFTER SCHOOL OR ON THE WEEKEND (AT OUR SYNAGOGUE IT IS ON WEDNESDAY AFTERNOONS). STUDENTS NOT ONLY LEARN HOW TO READ HEBREW, BUT ALSO ABOUT JEWISH CULTURE, RELIGION, AND HISTORY.

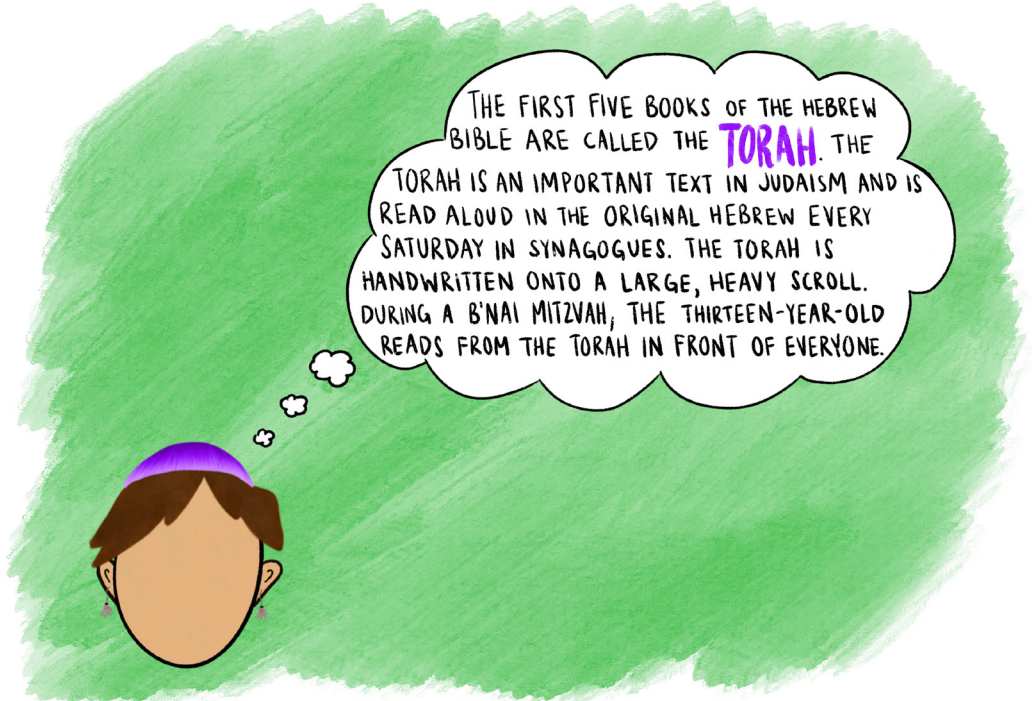
Mir turned her head in both directions as if to check the room for something. Then she began to whisper, "it's not that, it's just, did I ever tell you what happened to my mom's B'nai Mitzvah?"

"No." I certainly don't remember ever hearing any stories about Mir's mom's B'nai Mitzvah.

"Well," Mir continued to whisper, "I once overheard Rabbi telling her

that he could arrange a late-age B'nai Mitzvah for her at the synagogue, and then I asked my mom why she would need that if she already had one when she turned 13. Then she told me that she has actually never had one. She said that she had been going to Hebrew school at her synagogue, and she was on track for everything to turn out fine. But then, a few months before her scheduled B'nai Mitzvah date, she started getting really bad stage fright. Every time she tried to read Torah, her voice got all wobbly and she wouldn't be able to do it. Then she started getting anxious from just thinking about her B'nai Mitzvah. She wasn't able to come up with a theme or write a speech or anything because she was so nervous.

Finally, one day, during a practice



THE FIRST FIVE BOOKS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE ARE CALLED THE **TORAH**. THE TORAH IS AN IMPORTANT TEXT IN JUDAISM AND IS READ ALOUD IN THE ORIGINAL HEBREW EVERY SATURDAY IN SYNAGOGUES. THE TORAH IS HANDWRITTEN ONTO A LARGE, HEAVY SCROLL. DURING A B'NAI MITZVAH, THE THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD READS FROM THE TORAH IN FRONT OF EVERYONE.

session in front of all her Hebrew school classmates, she was carrying the Torah around the synagogue and her hands started to shake. All of a sudden the scroll felt really heavy and she couldn't carry it anymore, but before she could ask her rabbi to take it from her, she dropped it."

I gasped. Everyone knows that dropping the Torah is a big no no.

"After that, she started crying and

ran out of the synagogue. She told the rabbi that she couldn't take it anymore. She ended up having to cancel her B'nai Mitzvah and drop out of Hebrew school. To this day, that's why she never reads Torah at services. Davi you know I've been looking forward to my B'nai Mitzvah for so long and that I would be devastated if something like this were to happen to me. But now it's always in the back of my mind as a possibility."

Oh my god that must have been so embarrassing. I don't know if I would ever recover from dropping the Torah like that. But there's no way this will happen to Mir. She is the calmest and most confident person I know. I tried my best to comfort her.

"Okay Mir I see that this story is scary, but you are not your mom. There is absolutely no reason that this would

happen to you, unless you think too much about it and let it psych you out."

"Yeah I know," Mir sighed, "I am just a little nervous about everything because I already feel the returned generation pressure, if you know what I mean, and now that I have this story on top of that, it feels like so much could go wrong."

I know what she means about the pressure. The majority of the kids at our synagogue belong to the so-called "returned generation." This means that our ancestors were Jewish people from Vienna or somewhere else nearby. But they had to flee to the United States during the Holocaust since it wasn't safe for them here anymore. Now, a few generations later, they have decided to return to Europe from the US and live their Jewish lives here,

now that it is safe again. I think it is really cool that our parents decided to come here and create their own Jewish community again. But sometimes they put a lot of pressure on us since we are the first full generation of this community to grow up in Austria. It can feel like our performance in Hebrew school is a direct reflection of how well our parents have done in creating a successful Viennese Jewish community, and that's a lot for a bunch of kids to handle.

I could see how all of this might lead Mir to think that her B'nai Mitzvah has to be perfect, and now that I've heard the story about her mom too, it seems like it might all be a bit much. But if anyone is capable of pulling this off under pressure, it must be Mir. She's always so flawless. I'm glad that Mir

OUR ORIGINS

I suppose this large and slightly mysterious country is where my family is from. But before my ancestors were here, they were in Vienna. So its all quite complicated really.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



feels like she can talk to me about this. I think that us having similar family backgrounds is what makes us able to be best friends even though we are such different people.

I have to assume that the same is true for my dad and Mir's mom. I am always surprised that they are able to be such good friends since my dad is so intense and organized and Mir's mom is so relaxed and go-with-the-flow. But I've seen them together, and they seem to really get each other. Maybe people would say the same thing about Mir and me.

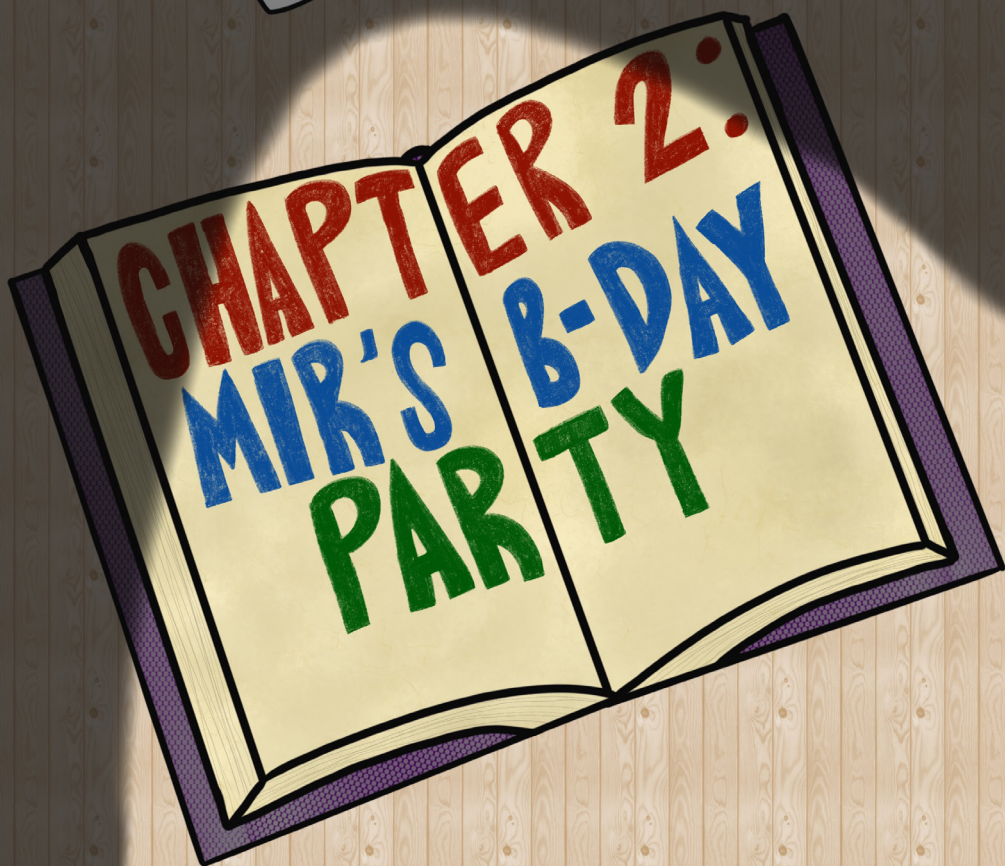
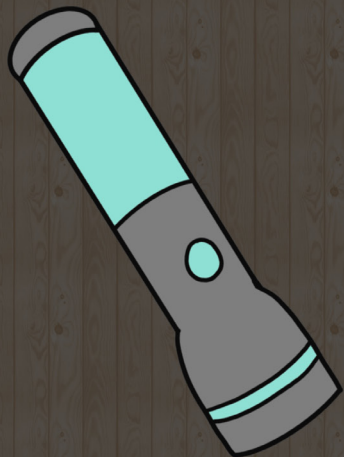
Even though I know I would be really worried about all of this if I was Mir, I felt like I had to help calm her down. So I decided to tell her, "Okay look, I know that it's a lot of pressure, and that everyone in the community is

going to be watching you. But we've been dreaming about your B'nai Mitzvah for years. Remember when you were six, and I was five and we had to make a dream B'nai Mitzvah journal in Hebrew school? You said that you wanted a zebra themed B'nai Mitzvah and asked if you could have it earlier since you thought you were going to be ready soon."

"Davi I can't believe you would bring that up now, that is so embarrassing."

"It's not embarrassing. It's cute, and it shows that you are more ready for this than anyone. So don't think about the people watching you or the bad things that can happen. Just think about how exciting it is that the day you've been waiting for is finally getting closer."

"Yeah I guess. Thank you Davi," Mir smiled. At that moment her doorbell rang and the first of her school friends arrived. I felt really bad for Mir after we had this conversation, but I'm sure everything will end up fine with her B'nai Mitzvah. It was lucky that her friends arrived right after we finished talking about it because I think she was able to forget all about it once we started the party.



It is currently 22:00 and we are all crammed into Mir's room pretending to be asleep, except for me of course. I am hidden in the corner using a flashlight to write in my journal. We all agreed that having me write in the corner would make the whole scene more believable in case Mir's mom came in here for any reason. Was I a little offended that I was chosen to be the nerdy person in the corner writing in my journal instead of sleeping? Yes. But I know what kind of people Mir invites to a birthday party, and they are very different from me and would probably never write anything down unless it was a school assignment. So they may not have been entirely wrong about me being the best candidate for this job.

Journaling in the corner is only the first part of my job. The second part

is that I have to go to the bathroom at 23:30, and while I'm out, I have to peer into Mir's mom's bedroom and make sure she is asleep enough not to have woken up even after I flush the toilet. I've known Mir's mom since I was a baby because she is so close with my dad. Despite having spent so much time with her, I don't feel like I have a great sense of her personality. I only know that she is super friendly and loves to talk. This means that if she sees me tiptoeing in her hallway at night, she will definitely say hello. Unless, of course, she is sleeping, and that is why this is the perfect test.

Once I establish that Mir's mom is asleep, we will grab our bags and climb out Mir's window. Mir lives about a five minute walk from the Stadlau station, so all we have to do once we make it

out the window is get on the U2 line, get off at the Praterstern station, and walk to a good spot from there. It's Saturday night so there will probably be lots of people out. I've never snuck out before because what would I do once I got out? I'm barely eleven years old and practically still a child. But that's why going to Prater is perfect. No one there will judge us for having a birthday party and they will all assume that our parents are somewhere in the park doing their own thing and ready to take us home any time. We also packed a picnic blanket and lots of snacks so that we can have a whole setup.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't even a little bit afraid of getting caught. But I'm hoping that if someone finds out, Mir will get in more trouble than me, since it is her birthday party

THE PLAN

- ① We walk from Mir's house to Stadlau.
- ② We take the U2 (subway) from the Stadlau station to the Praterstern station.
- ③ We walk from Praterstern to our favorite part of Prater (the park) and have our party.
- ④ We do it all over again in reverse order to get back to Mir's house.



and her idea. I will certainly feel bad for her if that happens, but I also take comfort in the fact that I know there is nothing that could possibly be done to convince Mir's mom or my dad that this plan was my idea because it just obviously wasn't. So I'm trying to just enjoy the ride, and celebrate Mir's birthday.



I was too busy to write in my journal during the rest of the party. Now it is Sunday afternoon and I just got home from Mir's birthday party. I can say with confidence that it was the best birthday party she's ever had. It was even better than her tenth birthday party, which was a pizza making competition that I won.

When we arrived at Prater, we

were able to locate a prime spot next to the giant swings, which are my personal favorite part of the park. You can never be too old to ride these swings. In the middle of the night, the majority of people riding them are university students who swing very high and sometimes even ride two at a time. Mir and I tried riding together, but then I fell off and scraped both my knees, so we went solo from then on. Luckily we figured out a pretty good arrangement where one person got on the swing and the other person stood behind them, pulled them back, and let go. Then we were flying just as high as anyone.

I was worried about my scraped knees because, while I figured that Mir's mom wouldn't say anything, I was sure that my dad would see and ask what happened. I resolved that

instead of lying to him and saying I fell in Mir's garden or something like that, I would just wear long pants until the scrapes were healed enough not to be noticeable. If it were June, there would be no way I would get away with this, especially since my dad knows that I love shorts, but since it is still May, I think I can wear loose pants and be in the spring mood. Mir even told me I could tell my dad I spilled juice on my shorts and then borrow some of her pajama pants to wear on the way home.

The knee scraping actually turned out to be a minor concern compared to what happened afterwards. While we were hanging out on our picnic blanket, I glanced around at all the different groups of people to see what was going on around us, and I saw what I was

pretty sure to be the back of Rabbi's head. It looked just like him, and he was wearing a shirt that I know I've seen him wear before. I was so afraid I started shaking. In the past I've told Rabbi plenty of things that I didn't want him to tell my dad, and he always respected that. But if he caught Mir and me at Prater without either of our parents knowing, I feel like he would call our parents and tell them.

I tapped Mir on the shoulder. "what?" she said. I simply pointed across the grass to where I saw Rabbi sitting. She gasped and responded, "oh my god we have to hide."

"Do you think it's him?" I asked.

"Oh yeah that's definitely him. My mom got him that shirt for his birthday two years ago. We need to get out of here." Mir turned to her group of

friends. "Okay everyone, the swinging has been fun but I want to go to a quieter part of the park now and relax. So let's pack up the stuff and move. Davi and I will go first and then you guys can follow. We will leave now."

"But can't you guys wait for us to pack up the stuff?" asked one of Mir's friends.

Mir looked very stressed. "can you guys please just do it for me? It's only going to take five minutes, and besides, I set everything up. Now it's your turn"

"Alright but only because it's your birthday."

"Thank you! We'll be right in front, don't worry we won't go too far. We're just gonna look for a good direction to go."

I was unsure why Mir wouldn't just tell her friends the truth. I'm sure that

if Mir had told her friends that she and I need to go since Rabbi is here and will recognize the two of us but not her friends, that they would have gladly let us go and done the packing up. I decided not to even ask about it. There are so many things that I don't understand about Mir and her cool kid friends, and I'm sure this is just one of them. Sometimes I fear that Mir will realize how different I am from her friends and won't want to hang out with me if I reveal it too much. So it may be to my advantage if I just pretend that lying to your friends about silly things like this is normal to me too.

In the end Mir and I were able to successfully lead the whole group in the opposite direction from Rabbi. But I wasn't keeping such close tabs on him while we discussed the packing up, so

I guess it is possible, maybe even likely, that he turned around at some point and saw us. I really hope he didn't. Or maybe he didn't know that we weren't supposed to be there? Although it seems more likely that Mir's mom told him that she was hosting Mir's birthday party and that he knew we were supposed to be sleeping over at her house. I guess we will surely find out eventually if Rabbi ended up seeing us or not.

We got back to Mir's house around 5:00, an hour before sunrise. We were able to climb back into the same window we climbed out of, and we were all asleep in Mir's room by the time her mom knocked on the door and asked if we wanted any pancakes. She didn't mention anything about Rabbi having called her to tell her we snuck out, so I guess that was a good sign. When I

got home a few hours later, I told my dad about the sanctioned parts of the sleepover, and he didn't mention having received a call from Rabbi about our secret subparty, so I guess we got away with it.

CHAPTER 3: AT HEBREW SCHOOL



I usually love going to Hebrew school. Regular school is full of judgemental people who don't understand me. I especially hate the teachers at my school. Some of them barely know the students' names, let alone anything else about us. Because they don't know us, they are also incapable of making their lessons fun. How could they possibly create a decent lesson if they don't even know what we find interesting. Hebrew school is different though. Rabbi is the Hebrew school teacher, and he has known most of us since we were born. He makes everything fun, even if it's something that no one would want to learn otherwise.

In regular school I am in the first grade of secondary school, but my Hebrew school doesn't have grades.

Hebrew school is usually connected to the synagogue you go to, so our small synagogue has a small Hebrew school. The adults at our synagogue tell me that the Hebrew schools that they grew up going to in the US are separated into classes of 15-30 kids for each grade from five to thirteen years old. Not only do the Hebrew schools have a separate class for each grade, but each city has multiple Hebrew schools to choose from. Families can decide which synagogue has their favorite Hebrew school program, and decide to send their child there. I can't imagine what it would be like to live in a place with so many Jewish people.

Our Hebrew school has 23 kids in total, which is a record high for this school. Rabbi told me that there were only three Hebrew school kids during his

first year teaching here. Now we have a nice and sizable class, but it's nowhere near big enough to break everyone up into grade level classes. So we are a single class that ranges from ages 5 to 12. Mir is the oldest of course, and has been for the whole time we have been in Hebrew school. Sometimes I am jealous of that because it automatically makes her the coolest one there, and everyone wants to be like her. But then I remember that I am not only the second oldest, but also Mir's best friend, so I think my Hebrew school social status is pretty high.

I am the only one from Hebrew school who got invited to Mir's birthday party. Of course we have lots of friends here, but I think Mir would have been a little embarrassed to invite our 8-10 year old Hebrew school friends to her

12th birthday party. Her school friends probably wouldn't have understood how and why we became such good friends with our younger Hebrew school classmates.

Today, Rabbi finally changed the seating chart. He changes it every month so that we all get to know each other well. While I do think this is a good practice, sometimes it angers me because he sticks me in a bad seat. Last time I had to sit between Ezra and Ava, both of whom are six years old. While they were sweet and I enjoyed helping them, it's not nearly as fun as when I get to sit next to my friends. I think Rabbi took pity on me for sitting with the six year olds because this time he gave me a prime spot in the front between Mir and Isaac. Isaac is my second favorite classmate after Mir.

He's only nine, but he's very funny and surprisingly good at reading Hebrew.

After establishing the new seats, Rabbi usually tells us to get out our notebooks and start right away. But today, he started pacing around the room with a suspicious look on his face, which was a little scary because he eventually zeroed in on Mir and I. My heart started racing. What if he had seen us at Prater after all, and waited until now to bust us? But that wouldn't make any sense, I hope.

He eventually said, "I heard someone had an absolutely epic birthday party last weekend." Mir briefly glanced at me with a terrified look on her face, but she played it cool and started to give Rabbi a painfully detailed description of our time sleeping over at her house and how fun it

was. Rabbi seemed unimpressed and proceeded to say, "That's interesting because I was at Prater on Saturday with some old friends and I was pretty sure I caught a glimpse of some familiar faces on the swings in the distance, but I must have been mistaken."

Oh no. Rabbi must have already seen us when we were on the swings, before I even noticed that he was there. But it seems that he didn't tell our parents, and at this point, now that we have gotten home safely, he probably wouldn't, right? I mean, he did just tell the whole Hebrew school class, but he also told them that he must have been mistaken, and half of them probably have no idea what he was even talking about. Even though Rabbi is best friends with Mir's mom and my dad, I also think that Mir and I can

trust him not to rat us out. It's not like our parents finding out after the fact would make a big difference anyways, maybe we would just be more strictly supervised in the future. But then we'll just behave well for a few months until they loosen up again and we all forget it ever happened. But maybe I'm just telling myself this so that I can calm down and stop worrying.

Rabbi didn't end up saying anything more about our sneakout, so I assume that means we are safe and he is not going to tell our parents. After acknowledging the sneakout, Rabbi congratulated Mir on turning 12 and said that she has now officially entered her B'nai Mitzvah preparation year. Rabbi said that every B'nai Mitzvah he supervises has a special element that makes it unique, so Mir's first

assignment is to give a presentation about what she wants her unique element to be and how she plans on creating it.

I don't know if I have ever been more jealous of anyone in my life. When Rabbi announced that Mir was in her B'nai Mitzvah preparation year, everyone in class audibly gasped. Having a B'nai Mitzvah is the most exciting thing that can happen to anyone in Hebrew school, so now I feel like Mir is way above my league, especially since she'll be the first one to have a B'nai Mitzvah in such a long time.

I have been thinking about what I want my special B'nai Mitzvah element to be for years, but I have never actually talked to Mir about what she wants hers to be. For the rest of the lesson, Rabbi taught us about the

haftarah. But I was not really listening because I was so focused on potential ideas for Mir's special element. I unfortunately don't have such a firm grasp on what the possibilities are because I have never been to a B'nai Mitzvah at our synagogue before, since no one has ever been the right age. I've actually only been to two B'nai



THE **HAFTARAH** IS A
READING DONE EVERY SATURDAY MORNING
AFTER THE TORAH PORTION. THE HAFTARAH
READINGS ARE CHOSEN FROM THE BOOKS
OF THE PROPHETS.

Mitzvahs in my life: one that my dad dragged me to at a historic synagogue in Vienna and one for my cousin in Philadelphia. Both of these are such wildly different contexts from our little progressive synagogue in Vienna, that neither of them will help me know what to expect from a B'nai Mitzvah at our synagogue.

After class, I asked Mir if we could hang out together to brainstorm the unique element of her B'nai Mitzvah. I was relieved when she said yes because I honestly wasn't sure how involved she would want me to be in the decision. She asked if we could meet at my place and discuss ideas tomorrow after school, probably because my dad always makes the best snacks.

In the meantime I will try to be as prepared as possible for our meeting.



EVERY JEWISH COMMUNITY IS DIFFERENT, BUT THE COMMUNITIES CAN BE GROUPED INTO A FEW MAJOR BRANCHES. THE COMMUNITY AT OUR SYNAGOGUE IS **PROGRESSIVE**. THIS MEANS THAT WE TREAT ALL PEOPLE EQUALLY, AND WE CAN HAVE RABBIS OF ANY GENDER. IT ALSO MEANS THAT WE DO NOT FOLLOW EVERY SINGLE LAW OF JUDAISM. EACH MEMBER OF OUR COMMUNITY CAN CHOOSE WHICH LAWS FEEL RIGHT FOR THEM TO FOLLOW.

I know that Mir likes to act cool and confident, but she must be so terrified. If she doesn't think of a good special element quickly, then she might start getting stressed and end up letting her B'nai Mitzvah fall apart just like her mom's. We can't let that happen. The unfortunate thing is that I can't think of any special elements for Mir. It's actually so hard to come up with

something, especially for someone else. If it were my B'nai Mitzvah, I would know exactly what to do. I love sci-fi novels and think that having a sci-fi themed B'nai Mitzvah would be really cool. The theme could be seen in the invitations, decorations, music, and everything else. But I know I will have to save that idea for my own B'nai Mitzvah because it is not going to be Mir's thing. Mir is more lowkey and chill. She's very muted, but also fun and sweet on the inside. I am more of a splashy, talkative, bright colored type.

Mir keeps most elements of herself very close. Sometimes I wonder if it is because her mom is so hands-off and nonchalant. She's nice enough and does what moms are supposed to do, but sometimes I feel like she's kind of boring. I couldn't imagine living with a parent

like that. My dad and I always hang out together on the weekends, travel together, and do all kinds of other fun stuff. I don't think Mir has ever gone anywhere with her mom without me and my dad being there as well.

Now I can't stop thinking about a sci-fi B'nai Mitzvah, I guess I will just have to wait until tomorrow for Mir and I to come up with some actually constructive ideas together.

CHAPTER 4: THE BRAINSTORMING



When Mir got to my house, she admitted that she really needed my help. That made me nervous since I hadn't actually come up with any specific ideas yet, probably because I spent my whole afternoon yesterday designing an invitation for my own sci-fi themed B'nai Mitzvah. We talked for a while about different things Mir could do. The first thing we seriously considered was that Mir could make her own short film. She has always loved taking videos and pictures so she would have plenty of material to work with if she wanted to make a film about her life so far. But I think she was a little worried that it would be embarrassing to show videos of her from when she was a little kid, so she didn't seem too excited about this idea.

The next thing we discussed was



that she could grow lots of plants and put them all in the synagogue so that it felt like a garden. We are always complaining that the synagogue decor is too drab, and adding some plants would make it way more fun. Mir is really good at taking care of plants. She has so many of them in her room that it feels like a jungle. If she was able to transform the synagogue into this type of cool forest, it would definitely be a unique element to remember. Mir seemed a little more enthusiastic about this idea, but it still seemed potentially complicated and not that interesting.

After about an hour of fruitless brainstorming, Mir said that she was getting stressed because we weren't making any progress. I wasn't sure why she was so impatient all of a sudden because we hadn't been talking for

that long, and I would've expected her to need quite a bit of time to come up with her special element. When I told her to calm down she looked even more upset. She sighed and said, "Davi, I think I'm going to end up even worse off than my mom. She failed to have her own B'nai Mitzvah even though she knew what was supposed to happen during one and had been to loads of them before. How am I possibly going to be able to do better if I have no idea what even belongs at a B'nai Mitzvah? I've only ever been to one, and it was that one at the historic synagogue, so it didn't even give me any idea of what mine could look like."

I didn't realize this was the only B'nai Mitzvah Mir had ever been to. But I guess it makes sense because she doesn't visit her family in the US as

often as I do, and even I have only been to one more B'nai Mitzvah than she has. I understood how having only been to the B'nai Mitzvah at the historic synagogue would make it hard for her to picture her own. I personally found that my cousin's B'nai Mitzvah in Philadelphia gave me a way better idea of what to expect than the one at the historic synagogue, but I guess the one at the historic synagogue taught me other things.

It must have been three years ago that our guitarist, Jacob, got invited to play for a B'nai Mitzvah at the historic synagogue. He was able to invite all of us to come watch him. Everyone at our synagogue was really excited about this for some reason. I was only eight years old so I didn't really care. But I will always remember the lesson

Rabbi did about the historic synagogue in Hebrew school the week before we went. He told us all about how it was the only synagogue in Vienna to survive World War II. I was expecting this piece of information to be accompanied by some type of heartwarming story of the congregants defending their synagogue. But it turned out that the Viennese chose not to burn it down because it was connected to apartment buildings in which non-Jewish people lived, and they didn't want to risk burning those down as well. So it was only spared to protect the non-Jewish people around it. I found that extremely disappointing.

Rabbi told the story in a nice way, but it still haunted me for months afterwards. Knowing this story makes me thankful that our synagogue occupies just a few units out of many

on the ground floor of an apartment building. This means there would be no way for someone to burn our synagogue down without hurting the other apartments in the building. I hope this will protect us from arson attempts.

Even though the historic synagogue and our synagogue are both close to other buildings, that is where the similarities end. Our synagogue is literally a bunch of old apartments that have been slightly remodeled and combined into a bigger space, but the historic synagogue is this huge architectural marvel, or at least that's what the adults call it. It has pillars and fancy lights and lots and lots of seating. I guess it is pretty, but I feel like if I went there I would never have that cozy feeling that I always get in our synagogue. They also do a lot of things

differently than we do, which Rabbi prepared us for before we went.

I feel like everything at the historic synagogue is dependent on people being men or women. The men sit downstairs on the main floor of the synagogue and the women sit upstairs and have to look down on everything from above. The men and women there also dress differently, and only men wear yarmulkes?! There was not one woman there wearing a yarmulke, which I found unbelievable. They even do their B'nai Mitzvahs differently. In our synagogue, and in the one my dad grew up going to, everybody has a B'nai Mitzvah when they turn thirteen. But at the historic synagogue, boys have a Bar Mitzvah at thirteen and girls have a Bat mitzvah at twelve.

All of this separation seems



A **YARMULKE** IS A TRADITIONAL JEWISH HAT. IT HAS A UNIQUE SMALL ROUND SHAPE. MOST PEOPLE WEAR YARMULKES IN SYNAGOGUES, AND SOME PEOPLE WEAR THEM EVERYWHERE THEY GO IN THEIR DAILY LIVES. IN HEBREW, THE HAT IS CALLED A KIPPAH. AT OUR SYNAGOGUE WE USE THE YIDDISH WORD YARMULKE BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT OUR ANCESTORS WOULD HAVE CALLED IT.

complicated and unnecessary. At our synagogue, everyone sits in the same seats, wears yarmulkes, and has a B'nai Mitzvah at thirteen. I think it's just easier that way. Rabbi told us that apparently the way they do it at the historic synagogue is the old fashioned way, and that most people used to do it like that, even in his lifetime. But it slowly started changing so that it would be easier and better for everyone. He

said that the word B'nai Mitzvah is actually the plural of Bar Mitzvah and originally meant multiple people who were having their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, but now it is used as a term for anyone having their B'nai Mitzvah. I had never thought about any of this, I had only ever known to say B'nai Mitzvah, but I guess it all made sense. It must have been weird for the people back when they first changed it, but I'm glad they did because now my generation can grow up without worrying about all that.

Remembering all these differences made me realize the extent to which Mir actually has no idea what she is doing, but I tried to calm her down anyway since she was so worked up. I suggested we talk to my dad because I am pretty sure that he had his own

successful B'nai Mitzvah at thirteen and I know he has also been to tons of B'nai Mitzvahs. Surely he could give us some ideas.

When I suggested asking my dad for help, Mir said that she was hoping I would say that. She admitted that she had actually come over because she wanted my dad's advice. She said she didn't want to ask her mom because she knows that her mom gets sad when she has to talk about her failed B'nai Mitzvah. Besides, Mir's mom hasn't been to nearly as many B'nai Mitzvahs as my dad, and she probably wouldn't come up with anything fun. Rabbi would have actually been the best person to ask about the special element, since it was his idea. But Mir wanted to impress and surprise him with her presentation later, so that made my dad the next best

person to ask. When we went to get my dad, he was in the living room watching his favorite TV show. Mir asked me if I thought it would be okay to interrupt him. I recognized the episode he was watching, and I know he has probably watched it ten times before, so I told her it would be completely fine.

When Mir asked my dad to tell her all about his B'nai Mitzvah, his face lit up. "Oh my goodness, is it that time already? I have been waiting years for the day that one of you wants to hear about my B'nai Mitzvah," he said. It was at that moment that I realized that I've never asked my dad about his B'nai Mitzvah, and he's also never volunteered any information about it. So I actually have no idea what it was like. I always assumed it was just like the one that my cousin in Philadelphia

had.

My cousins go to the same synagogue my dad grew up at, and I have to admit it is a fantastic synagogue. I'm not jealous though because I'm glad to be from Vienna and I like our little synagogue, but the synagogue in Philadelphia is also great. It's a huge congregation, and they all seemed so happy and relaxed, probably because there was barely any security. We did have to use a discreet back entrance and go through some metal detectors, but that was all. The synagogue even had a big sign out front with the name of the congregation written in English and Hebrew.

Our synagogue in Vienna doesn't have any type of signage outside, and we also have bulletproof doors and windows. Even with all of these safety

measures, we still always have a police van parked out front during services just in case. Sometimes I feel like all this security gives our synagogue an unnecessarily dreary vibe, but we still have good times inside. Although I loved my cousin's synagogue, his B'nai Mitzvah was nothing special. We sang some songs, he read his Torah portion, we threw candy at him, he explained his preparations, lots of people gave heartwarming speeches, and that was pretty much it.

I asked my dad, "but wasn't your B'nai Mitzvah basically the same as cousin Eli's?"

"well yes and no," was his response. He then went on to explain that he and his friends decided to crochet all the yarmulkes that the guests wore at the service. In the end they crocheted

400 yarmulkes in different colors and patterns, and every single one was taken by a guest. I know it's normal to have silly little disposable yarmulkes with the name of the B'nai Mitzvah and the date on them, but I've never heard of anyone crocheting all the yarmulkes by hand before. I was especially surprised that my dad did this because I have never seen him crochet or do anything crafty before.

Mir actually loved this idea so much that she wanted to take it for her own B'nai Mitzvah, which my dad said would be alright. At first I thought she was just looking to copy my dad for an easy way out. I know how much pressure she is putting on herself to come up with a theme fast and not turn out like her mom, but I would hate to see her choose a theme she's not completely excited

about just because of that. Afterwards, she told me how excited she was, and that no other idea could possibly be better. She said she liked this idea because it is simple, not too flashy, and will make her B'nai Mitzvah memorable because everyone who comes will have a little gift, reminding them of her special day forever.

She also told me that she hates how boring most of the yarmulkes worn at our synagogue are, and that she hoped people would want to keep wearing the nice colorful ones that we will make even after her B'nai Mitzvah is over. That was when I was really sold on the idea because I always feel like a fool being the only one over the age of eight in a colorful yarmulke. I was excited to see Mir so committed to changing the yarmulke trends at

our synagogue because she usually just wears a plain white one herself. But maybe that's just because she is too embarrassed to wear a more fun one.

I think she especially liked the long lasting potential of this idea because she knows everyone in the congregation is going to be watching and judging her B'nai Mitzvah since it is the first one in a long time. If she does a project that makes a positive contribution to the synagogue, then people are sure to view it well and think she is growing into a good member of the community.

Even though my dad made 400 yarmulkes for his B'nai Mitzvah, he specifically told us to make way less than that because it would be too many for our small synagogue. Mir and I agreed that this made sense, but neither of us knew how many we should make

because my dad didn't really give us an indication of how many he thought would be appropriate. Later Mir and I talked about it and decided that if everyone from our synagogue comes, and Mir invites all of her friends, it would be about right to make 130 yarmulkes. I then suggested that we make 133 because it sounds like a cooler and more specific number. Mir said that was fine, as long as I made the final three.

Then it was decided that we were going to crochet 133 yarmulkes in an effort to make Mir's B'nai Mitzvah a successful event with lasting influence. Hopefully the congregation will be sporting the colorful yarmulkes for many years to come. There was only one final issue with this plan: neither of us have ever crocheted before.

Mir asked my dad if he could teach us to crochet, but apparently he hasn't done it since right before his B'nai Mitzvah and doesn't remember how. I told Mir we would figure it out together. My grandma has made all the yarmulkes that my dad and I own, so I'm sure she could at least help us get started. I told Mir I would video call my grandma later and ask her what we should do.

Before she left, Mir made me promise that I would give it my all in helping her complete this homemade yarmulke project because she didn't think she could do it alone. I promised that I would be there every step of the way. I love that she chose something she can't do alone and that we need to do together. This will make her B'nai Mitzvah even more special. I am so excited!

CHAPTER 5:

The Crochet Journey



I just finished calling my grandma. She was quite optimistic about the crocheting project. Perhaps too optimistic, given that neither Mir nor I have ever crocheted before. When I told my grandma that she was putting too much faith in my future crocheting skills, she said that she knows I will learn quickly because I have made so many friendship bracelets with such elaborate patterns. While this did give me some hope, I think friendship bracelet making is a very different craft, almost unrelated to crocheting, barring the fact that they both involve some type of string. It was, however, nice that she filled me with confidence and told me that she thought Mir and I could make a bunch of yarmulkes no problem.

As for actually getting started,

she said the first step was to learn how to crochet a plain square, then a circle, then a yarmulke. After that we could start working on cool patterns. She told me that she could make time to call Mir and me and teach us, but I thought it would be easier to just learn with videos from the internet. So I told her we would try to figure it out ourselves first and then call her for troubleshooting, since videos can't really help you when you're stuck. I hope she wasn't offended that I didn't want her to give us a full lesson, but sometimes trying to learn something over video call can be difficult. I learned that a while back when my grandpa video called me and tried to teach me how to make matzah balls.

My grandma gave me clear instructions for what kind of crochet

hooks and yarn to buy. I decided I would buy some for Mir too and give them to her as a late birthday present since all I got her so far were the cupcakes I brought to her party. I really hope the crocheting doesn't end up being too difficult because if it fails Mir will have to pick a whole new unique element and it was already a lot of work to come up with this one.



Mir and I met today to learn how to crochet a simple square and a circle. We found videos to teach us both of these skills. Each video was about half an hour long, so we thought that if we budgeted one whole day for the circle and the square, we would have figured them both out no problem, but we were very wrong about that.

More than anything, what we learned today was that crocheting is a lot harder than we thought it was. Even though the video was for people who have never crocheted before, we struggled to follow it. Figuring out each step took us way longer than anticipated. Sometimes I had to push the hook so hard to get it through the holes in the yarn that my hands would start hurting. Then I would usually get frustrated and unravel the square. After a full day of crocheting, all we managed to make was a lumpy square that looked nothing like the square that the person in the video had made. We didn't even get to the circle video.

Towards the end of our crocheting session, we called my grandma to complain about how much we were struggling. We showed her our lumpy

squares and described all the agony that went into making them, hoping that she would either admit that she was wrong in her optimism about the project, or give us some kind of magical tip that would make us suddenly able to crochet perfectly. Unfortunately, neither of these things happened. What she did say was that the lumpy squares are a good start and that, apparently, if we each crochet a little every day, it will get easier. I will believe it when I see it.



I have been crocheting pretty much non-stop for the last month or so and my progress has been minimal. I barely even have time to write in my journal now because I am so busy crocheting, but that's okay because the crocheting

is very important. At this point I can make squares reasonably well, but the circles are still giving me trouble. The first one I made wasn't a circle at all but the shape of a little thimble that I could fit on my thumb. That set the bar really low. My subsequent circles have been better, but sometimes they turn out ruffly like a flower, and sometimes they mysteriously turn into hexagons. One time I actually made a nice circle. I was so proud that I thought I was ready for the next step, but when I tried to turn it into a yarmulke, it ended up lying flat like a regular circle. The yarmulkes my grandma makes have such a nice shape, but I guess I just don't know how to make them like that yet, even though I am trying my best to follow the pattern she sent me.

Mir is having a little more luck than

THE PR



→ Ugly Square



→ Pretty Square



→ Can you even
call this a circle?

OGRESS



→ Puffy Circle



→ Finally a good one!



→ But now it's hexagonal?

I am. She has been able to make one or two successful yarmulkes that look pretty alright, but she says that each one takes her hours. If I can barely even crochet a circle, and Mir needs five hours to make a single yarmulke, I don't know how we are ever going to make 133. Plus, we only have two more weeks of school, then I will be leaving for the summer.

Every summer my dad sends me to the summer camp in Pennsylvania that he grew up going to. The first summer I was a little unsure about it. After all, seven weeks is a long time for an eight year old to spend in the care of strangers in a country they have barely been to. But now I have grown to appreciate camp and even ask to go back. My dad started sending me there so that I could meet other Jewish kids

my age, besides just Mir. Camp is good for meeting other Jewish kids, but the kids in Pennsylvania don't really get me like Mir does. They know so many Jewish kids already that they don't need to meet me, even though they are still great friends to have for the summer. Everyone there is always asking me what my life in Vienna is like, and I happily tell them. But I think that I could never make them understand what it is like to only know one Jewish kid my age in my entire Jewish community because they will never experience that in their cities.

I am hoping that camp will be a good place to learn to crochet because we have a lot of free time and there are so many people there. Someone at camp is bound to know how to crochet and be able to help me. The only sad

thing is that I can't use my phone there so the only way for me to contact Mir is by writing letters to her. I plan to write her a weekly letter and put a small sample of my crocheting progress in each letter. But I know my letters take a long time to arrive in Vienna all the way from Pennsylvania, so I hope she gets at least some of them before the end of the summer. If my crochet progress doesn't improve throughout the summer, then I don't know what I'm going to do. But I guess I will have to worry about that later.

CHAPTER 6.
THE SUMMER

I am leaving for camp tomorrow morning. I have packed an abundance of yarn, my crochet hook, an unusually large amount of stationery, and several bundles of stamps that my grandma sent me. This way I will be ready to master crocheting and send my progress to Mir throughout the summer. I will send letters to my other friends too of course, and my dad. But Mir is my main concern at the moment. I don't want her to think that I am abandoning her by going away for so long, but she knows I go to camp for seven weeks every summer so I'm sure she doesn't think that.

My dad says that all Jewish kids in the US go to summer camp, but I know that's a massive overgeneralization on his part because Mir's mom grew up Jewish in the US and she has never

been to summer camp. This means that Mir also doesn't get sent to camp. It's honestly a shame because I think Mir would really like camp. Mir always gets mixed in with these ultra cool kids at school who judge everyone. But Mir never judges anyone at Hebrew school because that's just not how we act there. Hebrew school is our place to be able to relax and act however we want, and camp is like that too. Maybe if Mir went to camp, she would act like she does at Hebrew school and make some nice, less judgemental friends.

But I know Mir will definitely not be going and will probably just hang out with her school friends all summer, which she will enjoy on some level I'm sure. I will keep her updated and make sure she is still living the crochet journey with me. I will also use my time

in the US to communicate more with my grandma about the crocheting process. She only lives about a two hour drive away from camp, so my letters will only take a day to get to her. This means that, in case no one at camp can crochet at all, which I find very unlikely, I can send her my pieces and she can look at them herself and tell me what I am doing wrong. We also have two visiting days per summer and she always comes to both of them, maybe she can give me a little lesson then.

I realize that mailing my grandma failed crochet circles makes me extremely desperate. I never expected to still be struggling this much after two months of diligent practice, but here we are I guess. Mir tried to help me out the other day. She said that I'm not paying enough attention to the number

of stitches, and that I'm crocheting with uneven tension or something and that's why my circles are so ugly and hers are turning out fine. The counting stitches thing I will give her because I just find it so exceedingly boring to sit in my room counting stitches one after the other. I asked her how I could fix the uneven tension though and she said she didn't know and I had to just feel it. I definitely do not feel it. I just hope that if I spend more time practicing, and maybeee grudgingly work on my counting, that it will mostly get better on its own.

I am in a group chat of all the kids at my camp who usually end up in the same cabin every year. I texted them last night and asked if any of them knew how to crochet and they all said no. That was a little discouraging. But

I guess I'll just have to leave the cabin to find someone who can help me. My favorite bunkmate Noah mentioned that there was a crochet elective last summer that anyone could sign up for, but he didn't know if they were going to offer it again this year. I really hope they do because that would be exactly what I need.



It is now the evening of the third day of camp. The first days are always very intense welcome days, which I like because it makes me glad to be back. But the welcome days are also exhausting, and I usually feel a little dead afterwards. I have some weird counselors this year. I think they are both new at the camp and one of them is overly enthusiastic and asks way too

many questions, while the other one is almost never there and has basically just slept through the past days.

During the introduction circle on the first day, we all had to introduce ourselves with our names, where we live, and our favorite activity at camp. Usually counselors don't ask where we live, at least not on the first day. They ask something that says more about us, like our favorite animal or our favorite camp meal. I like those types of questions much better, but my counselor this year is nosy.

Most of the kids in the cabin already know me from the previous years, so they know I live in Vienna. It is always a little awkward when they first find out. Most people have never heard of Vienna, and then when I tell them it's the capital of Austria they have also

never heard of Austria. After years of practice, I have crafted a fool-proof response that can all be summed up in one sentence. So now I say: "it's a large city in a German speaking country next to Germany." At this point people get all shocked and start asking me if I speak German and what my life is like. As if I could be from Vienna and just take a pass on speaking German, what a ridiculous thought.

This is pretty much the conversation I've had with all the people in my cabin at one point or another. I usually don't mind telling them where Vienna is because they are always nice and want to learn, but I know that with adults it's worse. They have usually heard of Austria and all they know about it is that it's where Hitler is from, and that the Holocaust

partly happened there. You would think that people would maybe keep this to themselves when a kid is telling them where they live, but you would be wrong. Sometimes people ask me if I'm Jewish, which I of course am, because why would I go all the way to Pennsylvania to go to a Jewish summer camp if I wasn't Jewish? I think they just assume that there are no more Jewish people left in Austria because of the Holocaust, which for the most part was true, but it's been a long time since then. Now the returned generations are there, along with some other Jewish people as well.

Despite my perpetual preparedness for people at camp saying weird things about my being from Austria, I was not fully prepared for what my counselor said to me today. As expected, when my turn came in the intro round and I

said I was from Vienna, a couple people gasped and one kid asked me where it was. My counselor skipped directly to saying, "oh how interesting. Are you Jewish?"

"Yes I'm Jewish," I obviously replied.

Then she asked, "Is living there scary?"

I had no idea why she was asking me this so I just said, "no of course not, it's very nice there."

"Oh well that's good," she said. "I would be way too scared to live in Austria as a Jewish person because of everything that happened there."

So that's what she meant by scary. This is again such a messed up thing to say to a kid who is from there. Of course I think about this sometimes but it's so inappropriate for a counselor to talk to me about it. why would you tell

a kid that you would be too afraid to live in the city they are from? I decided the best thing to say was, "Well then it's a good thing that you don't live there, but I don't really have a choice but to be from there because it's where my dad lives and where I was born. Even if I could choose, I would still choose to be from Vienna because I love it there, even though it is a little more difficult for Jewish people than it is here."

I know that being Jewish in Vienna is a little different from being Jewish in Philadelphia or New York or wherever these adults at camp are from, but it's not so bad. We just do it. I have never known any other life and I don't need to. I have my dad, Mir, Rabbi, and the other Hebrew school kids. So if someone at school or anywhere else treats me weirdly, I can just brush it off and

go laugh about it with my friends at Hebrew school. People here are probably just way too weak for that because they've never experienced it before. Which I'm sure is nice, but it's just never been my life. This was honestly a drag on the introduction round and I really wished she would have just asked us our favorite color instead so I could have talked about the many shades of purple which make me happy.

CHAPTER 7:

THE CROCHET ELECTIVE



Today is the day I have been waiting for. On the last day of the first week of camp we get to sign up for our electives. When my counselor handed me the elective choice form during breakfast, I was thrilled to see that crochet was one of the choices. I marked it as my first choice right away. I have been crocheting throughout this week, and all that has come out of it are more lumpy circles. Once, while I was crocheting during free time, someone came up to me and told me they knew how to crochet, and that they could help me sometime. I said that would be great, but then they rushed off to play a game on the field, and I didn't even get to ask their name. I haven't seen them since then, and I don't even know how to find them because I don't know which cabin they

are in or even how old they are. At this point I have put all my hopes in this crochet elective to get me back on track because otherwise I am really going to let Mir down.



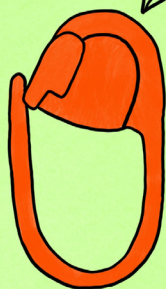
I had my first day of the crochet elective today. I know it's embarrassing, but I would be lying if I said I hadn't expected to already be a crochet expert by now. Unfortunately, after the first hour of the crochet elective, I am not yet an expert. I would, however, say that it went pretty well. The counselor who leads it is very nice, not like my counselors who are both annoying. I told her all about Mir's B'nai Mitzvah plans and why I am learning how to crochet. She loved the idea of our project and told me that she would

help me learn throughout the summer, and that she could also give me extra crochet tasks to do during free time so that I could get better more quickly.

I showed her how I have been making circles, and explained to her that Mir said I need to count the stitches, but that I simply refused because I find that sooo boring. The counselor told me that, instead of counting the stitches every time, I could use a stitch marker to show me where one row ends and another one begins. She had an extra stitch marker that she gave me so that I could pin it next to the first stitch I made. This way, I could make rows that are accurately counted, without doing the work myself. I can't wait to tell Mir about this.

I also talked to the counselor about my uneven tension and she said that

can only get better with time, practice, and worst of all, patience. Apparently I am just stitching super fast and crazy all over the place and if I calm down and spend a lot of time trying to do the stitches more slowly and evenly, they will come out better. This is probably why Mir has already made so much more progress than me. She is a master



The stitch marker is kind of like a safety pin. But it's plastic and doesn't have a sharp point.

of being calm, chill, and patient, and those are three things that I could never be. But I am determined to figure this out eventually, so I am going to try. Hopefully the crochet counselor's supervision will also get me somewhere. I will attempt her task of making a small, even, well counted circle this afternoon during free time.



After a few weeks of the crochet elective and some intense practice, my circles are thankfully getting better. I have been practicing during every moment of free time and my hands feel cramped and sore. I sent my grandma some pretty ugly circles in the mail and she always sent me letters back saying not to give up. I finally made a halfway decent circle that I sent to Mir

a few days ago, but she probably hasn't received it yet. Sometimes I wonder if this crochet journey was a good idea or a waste of the summer. I am so committed to the project, but I also get jealous during free time when I see my friends playing volleyball and swimming while I just sit here crocheting.

I usually sit with the kids making friendship bracelets while I crochet. This is nice because it means I don't have to be alone, but it's also frustrating. I am a very competitive person, and I am better at making friendship bracelets than almost anyone else at camp. But the kids here don't get to see my killer friendship bracelet skills because I am always crocheting. I worry that they see me here making my ugly circles and think I am a completely incompetent human being when in fact I am more

competent than them. I am just somehow unable to master the skill of crocheting.

One day while I was crocheting away during free time as usual, some boy came up to me. I recognized him from the cabin of kids that are a year older than me. "why are you always sitting in the corner crocheting?" he asked. "I remember you from last year, and you would always play gaga with us during free time. But now you're always sitting here. what happened?" He's right. I did always play gaga during free time, and I do miss it a little bit, but this crochet project for Mir's B'nai Mitzvah is just too important. I can't waste any time.

"I still love gaga, but I don't have that much time to play this summer because I need to work on my



crocheting skills. I promised my friend Mir that I would help crochet 133 yarmulkes for her B'nai Mitzvah, and so far I have barely been able to produce any."

"You're spending this much time preparing for a B'nai Mitzvah that isn't even yours? That's crazy. I have my own B'nai Mitzvah coming up in

just five months, and I've barely done anything to prepare for it. BUT I'm not worried about it, and you shouldn't be either. As long as there are one or two kids in your Hebrew school class that are overachievers and have a good B'nai Mitzvah, everyone else can kind of do whatever they want. Your friend must be one of these overachiever types, but how did she convince you to get looped into it too?" This kid clearly has no idea what it is like to live in the returned generation. His life must be so simple just going around Hebrew school with a whole bunch of people his age barely doing any work because no one will notice if he doesn't do anything. Mir is having the first B'nai Mitzvah at our synagogue since we've been alive, and our synagogue has been preparing for this moment for years. Everyone

is watching her every move, and there is no room for error. Plus, doing well in Hebrew school is the way that we show our parents how grateful we are that they created this community for us. Sometimes I want to just goof off and not do any work in Hebrew school too, but I know that Rabbi, my dad, Mir's mom, and all the people at our synagogue work so hard to make sure that we have the possibility to get a good Jewish education. They would be too sad if I didn't take Hebrew school seriously, and making my dad sad is the last thing I want to do.

"Well it's different at our synagogue. It's very small and my friend Mir will be the first one to have a B'nai Mitzvah there in a long time, so it needs to be perfect, and she needs my help to make it perfect."

"Hmm," he sounded puzzled. "I've been to small synagogues before but I've never heard of one being that small. Do you live in the countryside or something?" I guess this might be a logical assumption. I would assume that most US cities have a synagogue that is big enough to have more than one B'nai Mitzvah per decade.

"No, I live in Vienna. It's the capital of Austria. It's quite big, but there's just not so many Jewish people, and our synagogue there is particularly small."

"Oh, I guess that makes sense. Well, can you take a break to play at least one game of gaga with us?"

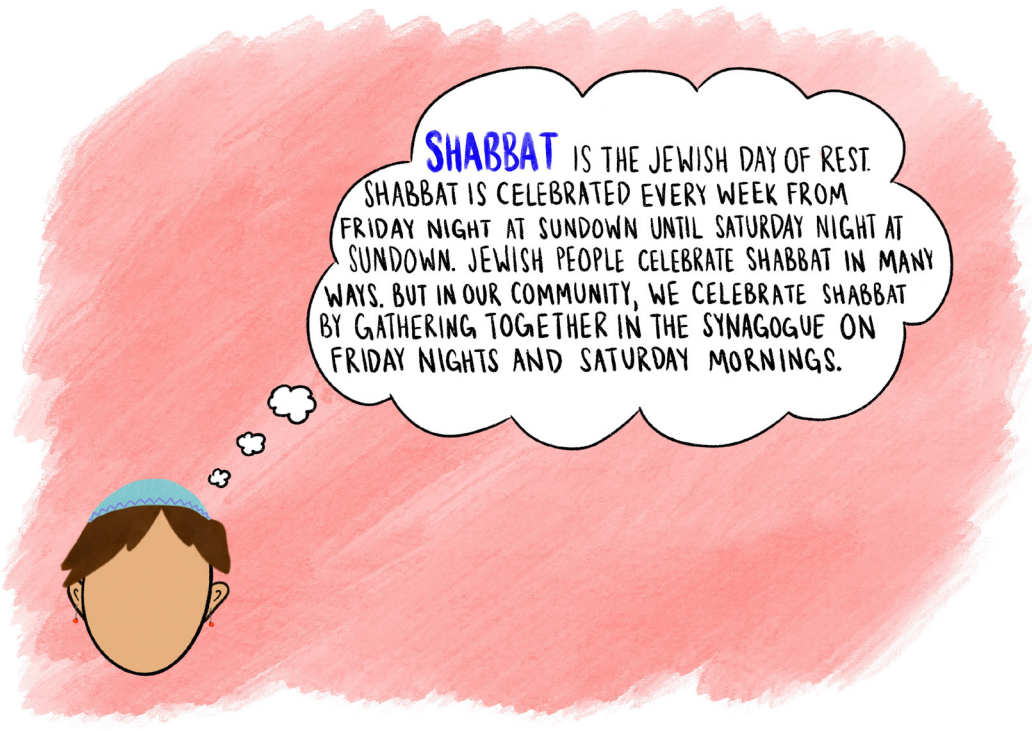
"Yeah alright." I'm sure my crocheting progress won't suffer from one game.



Next week is already the last week of camp and my crochet skills have finally become what I would call sufficient. I thought I was gonna have some type of enlightening aha-moment and all of a sudden be able to do it, but instead I just gradually got better. While practicing under the crochet counselor's supervision, I slowly came to the point where I could crochet successful yarmulkes. The good news about being at a Jewish camp is that the crochet counselor already knew how to make a yarmulke and had done it many times before. Usually in Vienna I have to explain to people what a yarmulke is and give them a little Jewish cultural lesson. But my counselor here just jumped right into teaching me how to make them once I had mastered circles. She also didn't ask any stupid

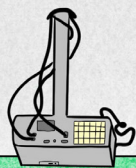
questions about why we wanted to make them or wear them, she just thought it was totally normal. I sent my first successful yarmulke to Mir. She said it was great and sent me one as well. I have been wearing it for the past few Shabbat services.

When my grandma came to visit me, she brought me a yarmulke that she had made and said that I could add

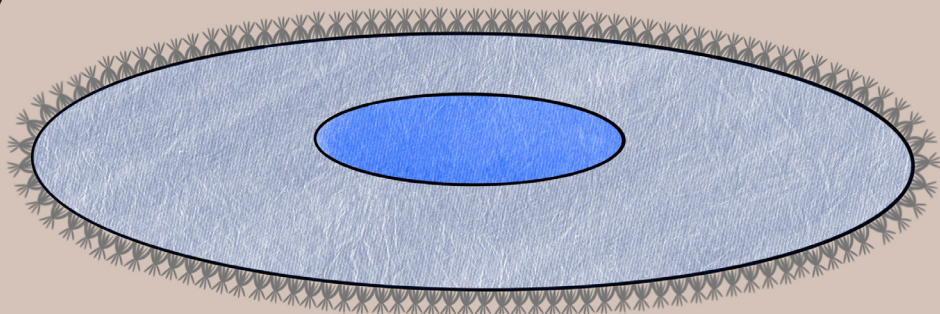


SHABBAT IS THE JEWISH DAY OF REST. SHABBAT IS CELEBRATED EVERY WEEK FROM FRIDAY NIGHT AT SUNDOWN UNTIL SATURDAY NIGHT AT SUNDOWN. JEWISH PEOPLE CELEBRATE SHABBAT IN MANY WAYS. BUT IN OUR COMMUNITY, WE CELEBRATE SHABBAT BY GATHERING TOGETHER IN THE SYNAGOGUE ON FRIDAY NIGHTS AND SATURDAY MORNINGS.

it to our collection. She even told me that I could tell Mir that I had made it, but there was no way that Mir would believe me if I decided to say that. Even though my yarmulkes were getting pretty good, my grandma's are just so much smoother and more professional looking.



CHAPTER 8:
BACK TO (HEBREW)
SCHOOL



I arrived home from summer camp yesterday. My dad and I went out for dinner with Mir and her mom when I got back, and my dad let Mir sleep over at my house because he knew that I would be jet lagged and stay up really late. He said he didn't want me to keep him up, and that it would be better if Mir was there to keep me company. We decided to work on crocheting yarmulkes together until we finally got tired and fell asleep. I noticed Mir looking at me as I crocheted. I wondered if she noticed how much slower I was at crocheting than her, but she seemed to be smiling. Then she said, "I'm really glad you ended up learning how to crochet yarmulkes at camp."

"Yeah," I said, "me too. I don't know what I would have done otherwise."

"Soooo, how many did you actually

end up making while you were there?" she asked.

"Well, I actually only managed to make four, but my grandma also made one for me, so I brought home five." Mir looked a little worried. I know that five doesn't seem like so many, especially given that I was away for seven weeks, but there are so many other things to do at camp. Also, I spent a good part of the summer just learning how to crochet, so it wasn't until the last few weeks that I was even able to make any yarmulkes at all.

"Don't worry," I said, "we still have lots of time, and now I know how to make them so I can really help."

"Yeah I know," Mir said. "I see you making them now, and you're doing a great job. I'm just worried. If we pull this off, it will be really cool,

and everyone will remember my B'nai Mitzvah as the source of the fun yarmulke trend at our synagogue. But if we don't make it in time, I don't know what people will think. Probably that we're just kids who can't do anything right."

"Mir it is way too early for you to be worrying like this. We have so many months ahead of us that we can fill with yarmulke making. It's gonna be fine." We still have almost a year to make all these yarmulkes, and we're working together. I'm sure she was just feeling extra nervous because I kept her up until 4:00 in the morning. I know I always get anxious when I stay up that late. That being said, I do think we are really going to have to step it up to get all the way to 133 yarmulkes. Especially because we will have way less time to

crochet once the school year starts.

Tomorrow is our first day back at Hebrew school after summer break, and Mir will present the special element of her B'nai Mitzvah to Rabbi and the class. I am curious what she has prepared, but I didn't want to ask her yesterday since I saw how worried she was about the whole yarmulke situation. Giving a presentation in Hebrew school is always a little weird because you have to make the presentation serious enough to make Rabbi think you did a good job but basic enough that the six and seven year olds can still follow it and pay attention. Luckily, Rabbi is pretty good at encouraging them to sit still.

I hope that Mir at least mentions me in her presentation since I helped her come up with the idea and am

helping her make the yarmulkes. I want Rabbi to know I am also involved. I would wish for him to give me some kind of extra credit for helping, but I know he doesn't give grades in Hebrew school.



I just got home from Hebrew school a few minutes ago. I had the feeling that Mir was a little nervous during her presentation, but Rabbi seemed to like it and have some faith in us that we would be able to pull it off in time. I think that made Mir feel a little calmer about the whole thing. Although, come to think of it, I don't think she specifically mentioned that we wanted to make 133 yarmulkes. Hopefully Rabbi assumed that this would be around the right number. Mir also mentioned that I was helping, and Rabbi said that was good since my

B'nai Mitzvah will be coming up next, so I should try to get as much experience as I can. A lot of the kids in class were enthusiastic about the idea too. Many of them even made requests for yarmulke colors and designs. I don't think either of us is going to be advanced enough to make dinosaurs anytime soon, but we could probably manage some of the simple requested color combos. I love that even the clueless little Hebrew school kids were excited about this idea. Hopefully this means that the adults will be even more excited.

Rabbi told Mir that her next assignment was to design an invitation and that her yarmulke crocheting plan should be a central part of it. I have no idea how a person centers yarmulke crocheting in a B'nai Mitzvah invitation. But then Rabbi went on to explain that

Mir was supposed to educate herself on her topic, yarmulkes, and then figure out how to work her abundance of crocheted yarmulkes into the theme of the invitation whether that be through the art, the title, or something else. This sounds like a tricky task, I hope she can figure it out. Our yarmulke project is cool, but it's not exactly the most thrilling party theme, so she'll have to figure out a way to make it look super inviting.

CHAPTER 9:

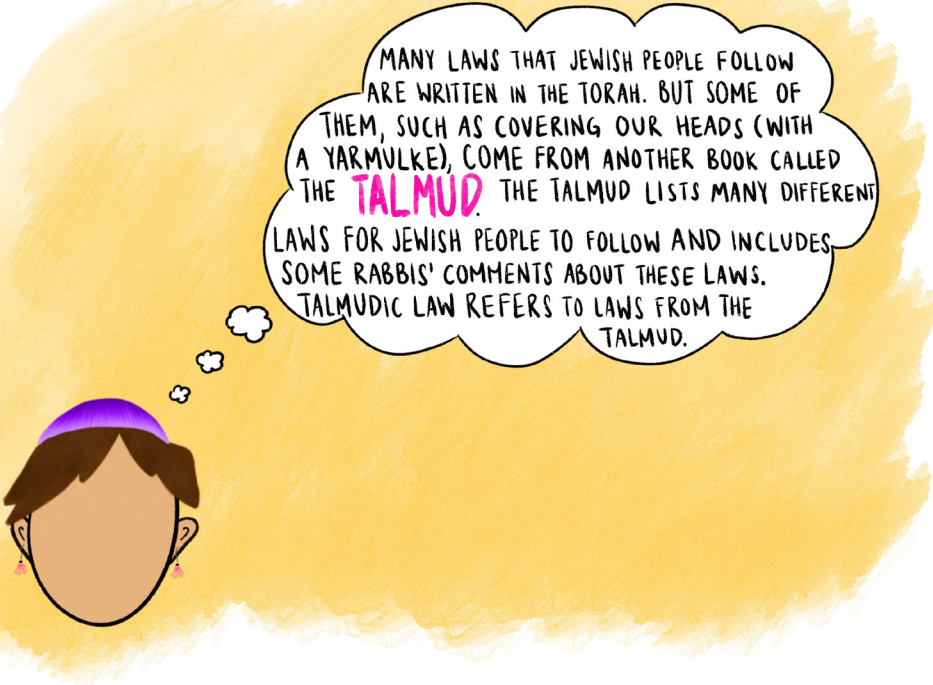
THE INVITATION



Rabbi told Mir that she had a month to draft her invitation. So far two weeks have gone by and she has not asked me for help. Of course this is fine because it is literally her project and not mine. Also, I have been very busy now that the school year is in full swing again, and I have school, homework, and swim club to worry about. I haven't even seen Mir outside of Hebrew school and Shabbat services. Today, however, I finally have some free time and decided that, whether or not she wants help, I will do some brainstorming in case she ends up needing it later.

I started out by researching yarmulkes to see if I could find any cool facts or traditions associated with them that could help me out, but I was not inspired by what I read. Different

websites stated different reasons that people wear yarmulkes ranging from Talmudic law to reverence to God to community belonging. I have never really been one for Talmudic law or God. They are both concepts that feel far removed from my life. I don't wear a yarmulke because some Rabbi wrote down that I had to however many thousand years ago, and I also don't



MANY LAWS THAT JEWISH PEOPLE FOLLOW ARE WRITTEN IN THE TORAH. BUT SOME OF THEM, SUCH AS COVERING OUR HEADS (WITH A YARMULKE), COME FROM ANOTHER BOOK CALLED THE **TALMUD**. THE TALMUD LISTS MANY DIFFERENT LAWS FOR JEWISH PEOPLE TO FOLLOW AND INCLUDES SOME RABBIS' COMMENTS ABOUT THESE LAWS. TALMUDIC LAW REFERS TO LAWS FROM THE TALMUD.

wear a yarmulke to say that I love a possibly make-believe spirit that I have never even met.

I think Mir believes in God. I've heard her talk about it a few times in Hebrew school. She usually says that she chooses to believe in God because she likes the feeling of having a greater being out there protecting her. She said it makes her feel less vulnerable and alone. I could see how that would be a nice feeling, but since I have no proof that God exists, I don't think believing in God would make me feel very good. So I have just decided my life makes more sense without believing in God. Luckily our synagogue has space for people like me and people like Mir. I know lots of other people there who do and don't believe in God for various reasons of their own, and Rabbi always says that

we are all equally Jewish.

Even though Mir might relate to some of the stuff I found about wearing a yarmulke to show reverence to God, I decided to leave it aside because I don't understand it, and I'm not sure which things she would relate to.

After all my research, I only found one quote that really stuck with me. There was a website that said that "the primary function of a yarmulke today is to act as a sign of belonging to a certain group of people and of commitment to a certain way of life." That's what it is! That's why we wear them. I don't wear them to associate with something from a long time ago, or something that might not be real. I wear them to actively participate in a community that has always been an important part of my life. Plus,

everyone loves a yarmulke. It is simply the best accessory. We wear them because they are a fun way to add a little color to an outfit or show off a piece of personality. We have a tradition in my synagogue that every student who enters Hebrew school (so usually the 5 year olds, or sometimes kids who have moved here) gets a yarmulke with something they like on it. When I was five, my favorite food was strawberries, so I got a strawberry one. We usually wear them every week at the synagogue until we grow out of them and become too embarrassed.

Some orthodox people wear yarmulkes everywhere they go. I would never do this, not because I don't like wearing them, but because of the weird stares I always get. Sometimes my dad and I wear our yarmulkes



ORTHODOX JEWISH COMMUNITIES BELONG TO A DIFFERENT BRANCH OF JUDAISM THAN WE DO. THEY OFTEN FOLLOW ALL THE LAWS OF JUDAISM VERY STRICTLY. THIS MEANS THAT THEY OFTEN WEAR TRADITIONAL JEWISH CLOTHING EVERYWHERE THEY GO. WHILE THE CHILDREN FROM OUR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNITY USUALLY GO TO VIENNESE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, MANY ORTHODOX JEWISH KIDS ATTEND JEWISH SCHOOLS WHERE THEY LEARN ALONGSIDE MEMBERS OF THEIR COMMUNITY.

on the u-bahn on the way to the synagogue, but this always makes me uncomfortable because people look at me weirdly. They are always staring at me and making odd facial expressions, and I don't appreciate this type of attention from strangers.

I've also heard stories of people who were wearing yarmulkes being attacked on the streets. I know this is rare, and it has thankfully never

happened to anyone I know. But better safe than sorry I guess. I think if people weren't so weird I would wear one all the time, always in a different color to match my mood. But for now there's not really anything I can do about that. I need to focus on what's important: how do I work any of this information about yarmulkes into a fun invitation for Mir's B'nai Mitzvah?

Almost none of the friends that Mir will invite will be Jewish because I don't think there are any Jewish people at her school or any of the other places she makes her friends outside of Hebrew school. I read somewhere that the reason that yarmulkes are always offered to non-Jewish guests at events is twofold: so that they can show respect to the Jewish community and so that they don't feel left out.

I have heard that attending Jewish events can be intimidating for gentiles because they don't know how to read Hebrew or the words and tunes of the songs. I can always tell when someone's non-Jewish friend is visiting the synagogue because they wear those really ugly yarmulkes that the synagogue gives out to people who don't have their own. At Mir's B'nai Mitzvah no one will



be able to tell the difference between who is Jewish and who is not because they will all be wearing our crocheted yarmulkes. Maybe this will allow her gentile friends to discover the joy of wearing a fun yarmulke, and who knows maybe this joy could spread. I think people would look at me less weirdly if they understood how much fun wearing a yarmulke can be.

Maybe the invitation could somehow be about how yarmulke equality makes everyone feel like they belong at the celebration? I think it would also be fun to teach people to crochet yarmulkes during the party, but I now know better than to think people could learn that in a day. But maybe we could decorate the whole synagogue with string, so that people are in some type of string forest. Then

THE YARMULKE

(AS I UNDERSTAND IT THUS FAR)

When you wear one out in public, it's a symbol that shows that you are Jewish.

I made this one and I know it's not perfect, but I think it looks pretty good.

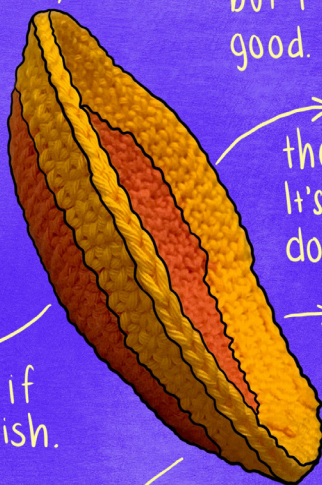
We only wear them at synagogue. It's a special thing we do there.

Everyone wears one at the synagogue, even if they are not Jewish.

People stare at you when you wear one around the city — BUT WHY?

Absolutely the best accessory to add to any outfit — especially if the color matches your clothes.

They can come in so many different patterns, colors, and styles.



they would become part of the forest when they put their yarmulkes on. Or maybe we create some type of yarmulke trees?! we could twist lots of brown yarn together into branches and hang the yarmulkes from them like fruit. Then we could ask everyone to "pick a yarmulke" and put it on. We would also need to make sure that no member of the synagogue is allowed to bring their own yarmulke, so that we can't tell who is who. That would be so fun! The only thing is that I still don't know how to put all this on an invitation. Hopefully Mir will have some good insights. Maybe I'll make a few sketches to show her the vibe I am thinking of and she can tell me what she thinks is missing or what she wants to do differently. I'm usually super direct and literal, but she's all poetic and mysterious, so she'll want to

change the vibe for sure. At this point I have done a lot of work even though Mir hasn't technically asked for my help yet, but maybe she will need it anyways, and it won't have all been for nothing.



Yesterday at Hebrew school I asked Mir if she had made any progress on the invitation and she told me that she had neither thought about her B'nai Mitzvah nor crocheted any yarmulkes in almost a month. I was too embarrassed to admit that I also haven't crocheted anything since the summer, but we still have so much time. I'm sure it will be fine. She told me that she was willing to hear my ideas for the invitation so we went to my house after class to discuss.

She seemed a little underwhelmed by my tree idea at first, but I think she

eventually grew to like it. She thought Rabbi would like the fruit symbolism because so many Jewish holidays involve fruit. I also know Mir loves fruit because she always eats all the fruit they serve during holidays at the synagogue.

Mir said she would also go home and do her own research to see if there's anything she should add to the invitation. I think she might have felt bad that I did so much for her already, but I am happy to help. I know she's capable of coming up with an invitation on her own, but the hard thing isn't the work itself. It's the pressure to do everything right and blow all the synagogue members away. This not being my B'nai Mitzvah takes the pressure off and gives me a clear head to be able to work on it in a way that Mir might not be able to. Thus I think there is no

shame in me helping Mir out, since I have the advantage of being more removed from the pressure of having the first B'nai Mitzvah in so long. After all, we are supposed to be learning to commit to this community right? The returned generation sticking together and helping each other fulfill our community roles should reflect well on us and show how ready we are to keep this community alive as adults.

I am curious to see what Mir comes up with, and I am excited for the invitation to be finished because after she makes the invitation, she can finally invite people! I feel like this is the exciting part because you can invite everyone you know to your B'nai Mitzvah. I love the idea of this because I think it's a good way to check in with your life and see how many people

out there really love you, but Mir (and any sane person) probably don't think about it like that.



I think Mir might have procrastinated a little too long on her invitation. We only discussed the tree idea for the first time last week, and during Hebrew school today she already had to present the final invitation. This made my expectations low. Mir hadn't discussed the invitation with me since the short conversation we had about it last week. This meant I had no idea what it was going to look like or if she even decided to stick to my idea about the tree. Part of me was a little worried that the time pressure got to her and she wasn't able to think of anything. Luckily that did not end up being the case.

When Mir unveiled her invitation to the class, I realized I had underestimated her and was wrong to worry. I don't think of Mir as being someone who has the most striking visual art capabilities but this invitation really was incredible. She did exactly what I was hoping she would do and put a little Mir spirit into it so it no longer looked cartoonish and silly like when I drew it, but was elegant and posh like an invitation should be. I can't wait to see how excited her friends will be to receive these invitations.

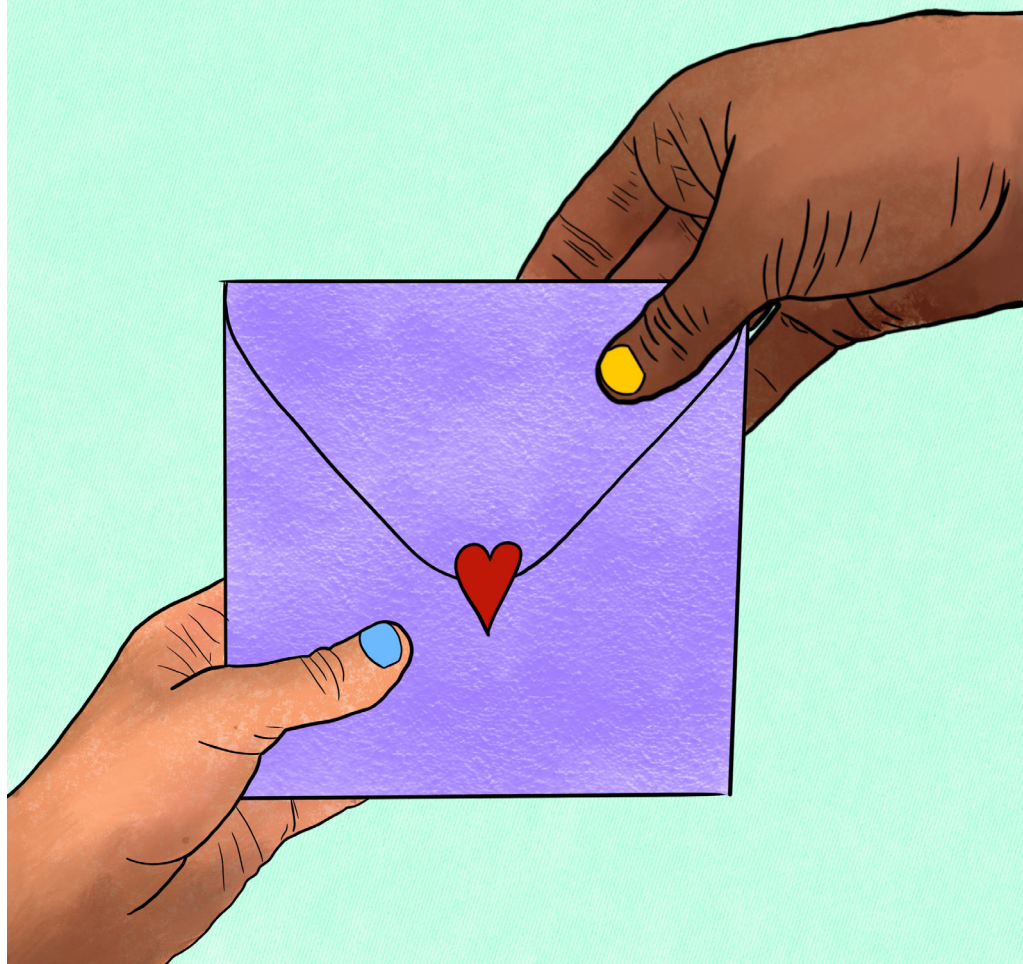


MIR'S B'NAI MITZVAH

22 MAY • 11:00 • CHAVERIM SYNAGOGUE

CHAPTER 10:

THE ACTUAL INVITING



Mir's B'nai Mitzvah is only a few months away now. Together we have made about 50 yarmulkes which means that we have 83 to go. That sounds like a lot, but it will hopefully be fine because we finally know how to make them quickly. I can even make multi-colored ones now, which is great because what kind of boring person wears a single-colored yarmulke?

Now that Mir has made the invitation, she can start inviting people. Rabbi said it's important to know how many people are coming so that we can prepare the food for the party and know how many chairs to put in the synagogue. Our synagogue is very small compared to the one my family in Philadelphia goes to. We usually have about 30 people on shabbat and maybe 50 during big holidays like Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur. If we squish, the synagogue could hold a lot more than that though. This is why Rabbi said that Mir could invite up to 200 people, assuming that (hopefully) only about 133 of them would show up so that it is not too crowded and we don't run out of yarmulkes.

Mir told me how excited she was to be able to invite 200 people, which I thought was ridiculous because I don't

ROSH HASHANAH IS THE JEWISH NEW YEAR. THERE IS A JEWISH CALENDAR WITH ITS OWN SYSTEM OF MONTHS AND YEARS, AND OUR NEW YEAR IS IN THE FALL. TEN DAYS AFTER ROSH HASHANAH IS ANOTHER JEWISH HOLIDAY CALLED **YOM KIPPUR**. ON YOM KIPPUR, WE THINK

ABOUT ALL THE THINGS WE HAVE DONE WRONG IN THE PAST YEAR AND HOW WE CAN DO BETTER IN THE YEAR TO COME. ROSH HASHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR ARE BOTH IMPORTANT HOLIDAYS AND COMMON DAYS FOR JEWISH PEOPLE TO GO TO SYNAGOGUE.



even think I know 200 people. Rabbi did say that she had to invite all the members of the synagogue though, which is about 100 people already. I bet only half of the members will come because I have never seen all of them gather together at one event before. All the regulars will be there, our Hebrew school classmates and their parents will probably all come, and then some members who rarely go to services, but have known Mir since she was a baby are sure to show up as well. Other than that, a few extra members will come because they're excited that we are holding a B'nai Mitzvah for the first time in so long. Mir also told me that she has to reserve 20 spots for her grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, family friends, etc. who will fly out from the US to come see her, just like

how I did with my cousin.

After subtracting the 100 synagogue members and the 20 family members, Mir still has 80 people she can invite. She seemed to have no worries that this would be too many. I aspire to have as much confidence and as many friends as Mir someday. She told me that she wanted to invite everyone from her school in her year, plus some friends that she has in the years above and below her. I think this is about 50 people in total since she goes to a pretty small school, not like mine where everyone in my year is already more than 100 people. But I wouldn't want to invite all my classmates to my B'nai Mitzvah anyways because I barely know some of them.

For the last 30 people she explained to me that some of them

come from her orchestra, and some of them are from her old primary school. She also wants to invite five people from my school that she knows through me and really likes. She gave me their invitations yesterday during Hebrew school and told me to give them out next week on Monday, which I will of course do.



Today I went to school in a good mood, ready to hand out Mir's B'nai Mitzvah invitations to my friends. But then my friends kind of crushed my mood. I am very close with the people Mir chose to invite, but I guess I have only been friends with them for about six months, or maybe a little more. I'm only in the second grade of secondary school, which means I've only been at

this school for a little over a year. So these people were strangers to me less than a year and a half ago. usually I don't really think about that, and I treat them as true friends. But today I started to realize that maybe you can't learn everything about someone in such a short amount of time.

The first person I gave the invitation to was my very best friend Simon. He has met Mir numerous times and was really excited to go to her B'nai Mitzvah. After that I gave them to Nina and Gabriel, and that was when it got weird. Gabriel apparently didn't know I was Jewish, which I suppose isn't that surprising because it's not like I talk about it all the time. when I gave him the invitation, he asked me what a B'nai Mitzvah was. when I explained that it was a Jewish coming of age

tradition where Mir will show off her killer Hebrew-reading skills and throw a fun party, he told me he also didn't realize Mir was Jewish. After I explained that Mir and I are both Jewish and we actually know each other from going to the same synagogue he asked me, "But, if you're Jewish, where are your special clothes? Don't you get in trouble if you don't wear those special clothes?" This question was so out of the blue. I don't know why he thought that I was supposed to wear special clothes.

I think only ultra-orthodox people wear religious clothing in everyday life. It's not something that any Jewish people that I have ever known do, so why would I get in trouble for not doing it? What kind of trouble? Does he think that God will punish me? He probably doesn't know that many Jewish people,

myself included, don't even believe in God. Even people who do believe in God, like Mir, probably don't think God will punish them based on what clothes they wear. I wasn't quite sure what to do about this but I ended up sounding very calm and saying that "some ultra-Orthodox people do wear traditional clothing in daily life, but lots of Jewish people, like Mir and I, are not Orthodox and don't wear any type of specific clothing, unless we are in the synagogue or celebrating something special. Usually Jewish people just wear the same things that everyone else in their communities wears. That's why you never know when someone might be Jewish." Of course sometimes I can tell when people are Jewish, but the average Austrian gentile would never know.

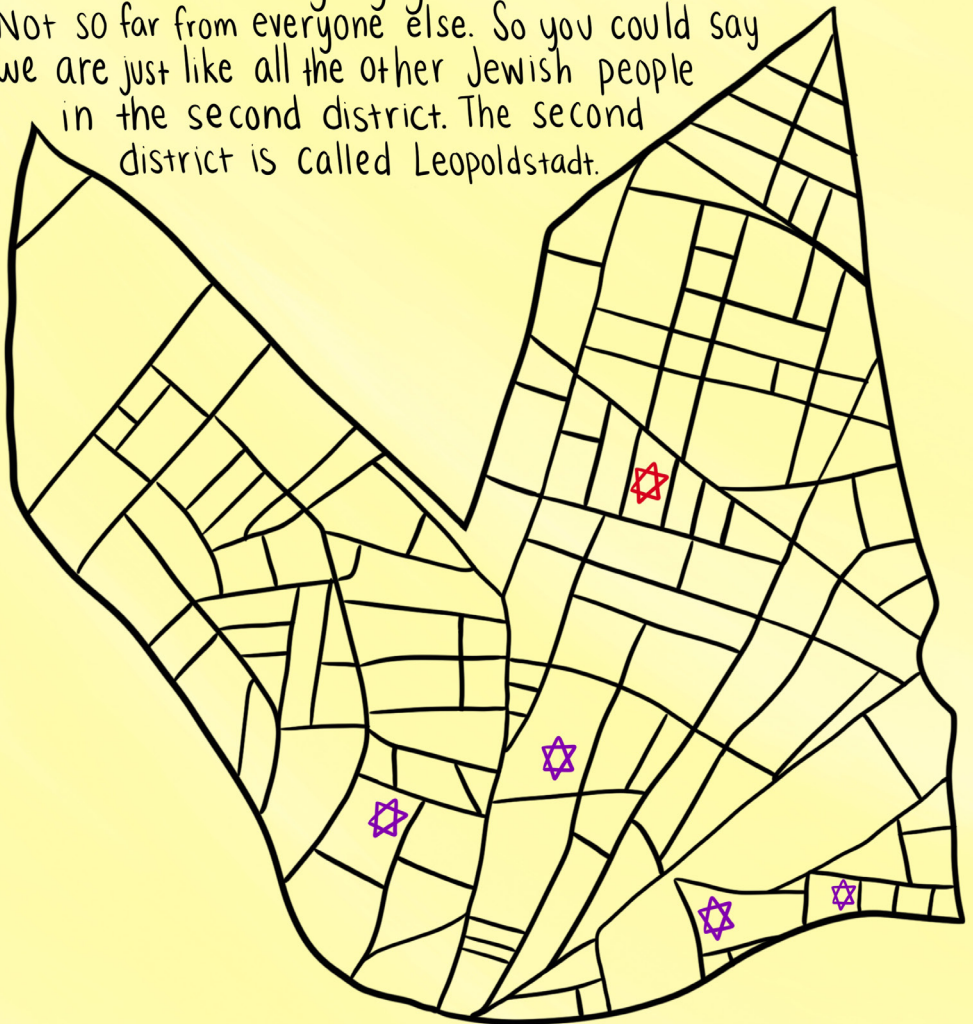
I thought Gabriel would be

interested in my enlightening words about Jewish culture, since he clearly knows nothing about it, but instead he just responded by saying "so you guys are not like those religious Jews that walk around the second district?" I felt a little attacked by this, since I thought that our synagogue was religious, which means that going there probably makes us religious. But I guess we're not the type of religious to strictly enforce all the laws and that's what he meant? Our synagogue also happens to be in the second district since that's where all the Jewish stuff is, so we technically do walk around the second district to go to services. But since he seemed so relieved by the possibility that we weren't like these other religious Jews that he pictured in his head, I decided to just tell him "no we are not like them," even

LEOPOLDSTADT



This is where the synagogues are. We are in red.
Not so far from everyone else. So you could say
we are just like all the other Jewish people
in the second district. The second
district is called Leopoldstadt.



though we kind of are.

After I assured Gabriel that we weren't too religious, he said he would be happy to come to the party, as long as it was only a party, and not a religious gathering. I decided not to say anything and just tell him I would be excited to see him there. I hope he's not disappointed when he gets there and realizes that he has to watch Mir read Torah because I think a lot of people consider reading the Torah to be religious. I know that Gabriel likes Mir and would want to be there for her so hopefully he will be totally fine. He also wears lots of sweaters and hats that his dad crochets for him, so once he gets there he'll have to love the yarmulke display.

I put a yes next to Gabriel's name but then I realized that Nina was just

kind of standing there the whole time and didn't say anything so I have no idea if she's coming or not. I guess I will have to ask her later.

In the afternoon, I gave invitations to Alex and Annika. They were very nice about it and told me to tell Mir that they would both be coming. I explained to them that everyone was going to get a yarmulke that had been crocheted by either Mir or I. Annika asked if they would be allowed to wear them if they weren't Jewish, and I said of course that's the whole point! I explained how we are partly making them so that all the non-Jewish people feel welcome and like they are a true part of the celebration. That made them really excited, so I even asked them if they had any requests for yarmulke colors. Annika wanted black

and dark blue, and Alex wanted yellow and orange. I told them I would make those but that they would have to find them on the tree and be the first to pick them if they wanted to end up wearing them. They promised they would get there early and try their best.



Mir seemed a bit weird at Hebrew school today. I wonder if she was just exhausted from inviting so many people to her B'nai Mitzvah all week. I told her that Simon, Annika, Alex, and Gabriel were coming, and that Nina was a maybe and I would ask again. I didn't tell her about the weird thing with Gabriel because she seemed a little down already and I didn't want her to worry, plus I'm sure it will be totally fine with him once he gets there and

sees how cool Mir's B'nai Mitzvah is. When I asked her how the invitations were going she just shrugged and said "good." That was basically the only exchange we had the whole day.

I told my dad that Mir had seemed off today and he said that she probably just has a lot to do with her B'nai Mitzvah coming up and is feeling stressed. He told me to give her some space, which I know is a good idea even though it makes me a little sad. Hopefully she gets less stressed soon.



Today I asked Nina if she was coming to Mir's B'nai Mitzvah and she got very quiet. She started to look a little afraid and almost whispered, "I won't be able to make it." I didn't really mind since it's not my B'nai Mitzvah,

and I totally understand if she can't make it. I didn't expect her to give an excuse for not coming because I assumed that she was just busy. We don't even have enough seats for everyone who was invited to come, so really it's all good. But after she told me that she wasn't coming, she continued to act all quiet and strange until she finally said, "I actually hate religion so I would feel really uncomfortable being there supporting it." I was confused about this because it's yet another person who thinks that a B'nai Mitzvah is some kind of creepy ritual when it's literally just a party and Mir showing everyone how hard she has worked learning to read Hebrew.

I don't understand why people can't just accept this as what it is - a birthday party invitation. I asked Nina,

"But why do you feel so uncomfortable coming to Mir's B'nai Mitzvah and why do you specifically think this counts as supporting religion?"

She said it was "because religion forces people to follow meaningless rules and makes them feel bad about themselves." I know this can sometimes be true, but I've never experienced this in my Jewish community. I know for a fact that Nina loves celebrating Christmas. So I asked her, "if you don't support religious things, how can you support celebrating Christmas when it comes from religion?"

"Because," she said, "Christmas is no longer a religious holiday in Austria, it's a cultural tradition. When I celebrate Christmas, I only celebrate it culturally and for fun, so it doesn't count as supporting religion."

I told her, "yes! That is exactly the idea behind Mir's B'nai Mitzvah. This is an important cultural tradition for us. We don't celebrate it because it's a rule or because of God, we celebrate it because it's a fun thing that we do in our community."

"But it's in a synagogue," said Nina. "And a synagogue is literally a religious place where you go to pray." Clearly she has never been to a synagogue because I've never heard anyone at our synagogue say that they go there to pray. I go to synagogue for many things: to meet new friends, to get good food, to connect with my culture, and to celebrate my favorite holidays with our community. But never in my life have I gone to the synagogue to pray. Why would I do that? Although I guess I do enjoy the prayers sometimes, especially

since we always sing them to music.

I wasn't sure how to explain all of these thoughts to Nina so I just sighed and said, "well that's not really why we go there. But you obviously don't have to come if it makes you uncomfortable." Then I left. I saw her again later and everything seemed normal, so it seems like we can still be friends. It really is her loss if she doesn't want to go because it's gonna be great!



I have finally been making serious progress on the yarmulkes. Before I gave out the invitations, I was crocheting them at school during breaks. But now that Gabriel said that weird thing about Jewish clothing, and Nina told me she hates religion, I decided that at home is a better place to work

on them. I haven't talked to Mir in a while, she keeps leaving Hebrew school without talking to me afterwards. It's ok because I'm sure she'll be pleased that I've made about 25 yarmulkes in the past month. Hopefully she has made a lot more though because time is running out. I hope that if I really speed up I can make two yarmulkes per day and we can finish in time.



Today at Hebrew school Mir finally asked me if we could hang out afterwards, and I of course said yes. Usually I have swim club and Mir has orchestra. So Hebrew school days are the only days we can hang out spontaneously. We went to my house as usual. My dad brought us chocolate covered pretzels and let Mir and I

eat them while we hung out in my room. I asked her if she knew the final number of guests so that we could see if we needed to make more than 133 yarmulkes or not. She said she didn't know yet and that we should just proceed with that number. We only have about three weeks left, so it seems a little suspicious that she doesn't have the entire guest list settled yet. I asked her if she had asked everyone yet and she said that she had, but that some people were still unsure and needed more time. I decided not to ask her more about the guest list because it is not really my problem. Instead I decided to ask her about our yarmulke deficiency, which is really my problem.

Mir's B'nai Mitzvah is coming closer and we are quite a few yarmulkes short. I still don't understand how the

time went by so quickly. I feel like we had so much time left, and now all of a sudden we have so little time left and so few yarmulkes made. I have a school trip next week, so I won't be able to make any yarmulkes until I come back. Mir is also busy practicing her Torah portion, which I know is going well. I heard her practice the other day and it sounded amazing. I told Mir that, in the worst case scenario, I could ask my dad to skip swim club and make a few extras during the days leading up to the ceremony. My dad actually hates it when I skip swim club, but I am sure he would understand the situation if it came to that. After all, he gave us the idea for this yarmulke project. I have no idea how he and his friends made 400. But he did tell me that there were 30 kids having B'nai Mitzvahs in

his year who helped out, so I guess that would have made a difference because that's literally 15 times more people than we have.



OVERHEARD AT

HEBREW

SCHOOLS

CHAPTER III

I just got back from my school trip. It was super fun because we were hiking, camping, and learning about nature which I love. I also think I was good at lots of the skills we learned because I have spent so much time in the forest at summer camp over the years. Even though the Viennese are very different from the Pennsylvanians, a forest is a forest and I know how to pitch a tent and protect myself from wild animals.

I had to skip a week of Hebrew school for the trip, but I couldn't care less. Rabbi never makes me do any make-up work. Either way, I like to be on his good side so I decided to arrive at Hebrew school on time today, but I accidentally tried too hard to be on time and got here way too early. Usually when I am early to Hebrew school I take

a walk until it is time for class to start so that I don't have to sit awkwardly in the empty room by myself. But today, I noticed that Mir's scooter was already parked out front, meaning that she must have been inside already. This was odd given that Mir is chronically late to Hebrew school.

When I came into the synagogue and left my backpack in the coat room, I noticed that the door to the meeting room was closed, and I could hear Rabbi and Mir talking from inside. At this point I turned left into the kitchen and sat on the floor and whipped out my journal, and here I am now I guess. No one ever enters the kitchen on weekdays so I know no one will find me here. I want to hear all the secret B'nai Mitzvah stuff Rabbi is teaching Mir. I didn't even know that she came in early

for extra classes, although I suppose they had to be working on it at some point.

I don't think they are talking about the Torah portion right now. Something weird is happening. I think I can hear Mir crying?! This is crazy because I don't think I've ever seen Mir cry. The crying makes it hard to tell what she is saying, but I think she's talking about the invitations. That would make sense since she's acted so weird every time I bring them up. I scoot closer to the wall and press my ear up against it. Then I can hear her saying "but why don't they just want to come and celebrate with me? They've come to all my other birthday parties in the past. This one will be just like those but better because it's my B'nai Mitzvah!" She's really screaming and crying at this point. She

is barely able to speak, but she still has more to say. "Veronika asked me if we were gonna wear those cliché hats there, and this was even before I told her about the yarmulke project. What would possess her to say that? Davi and I worked so hard to come up with this idea and I've been crocheting in every moment of free time for months. I didn't do all that for someone to call yarmulkes cliché hats! Veronika even told me that she couldn't picture me wearing a yarmulke and that she would find it weird to think of me like that. But she's known me for years and I've been wearing one every week all this time!"

This is terrible. Mir must have had weird experiences with Veronika and the others just like I did with Gabriel and Nina. It must have been really bad

to make Mir this upset. I wonder why everyone decided to all of a sudden have so much against a B'nai Mitzvah? People here go to their relatives' baptisms and first communions all the time, even if they're not religious. Sometimes they just want to celebrate the tradition, especially with their older relatives. I have even been invited to some before, and it never would have occurred to me to object to going, even though I am not Christian. I always just went so that I could enjoy the event with my friends. I wonder if people are receiving it weirdly because it's a Jewish thing? Most Viennese people don't know anything about Jewish people, but you would think they would want to learn instead of just saying it's a weird religious thing that they would feel uncomfortable attending.

Hopefully at least some of Mir's friends were nice about it, but Veronika is her absolute best friend so that must hurt. She must have known Mir was Jewish though because she's been to her house. They have Mezuzahs that Mir crafted during Hebrew school on every door, and they have Shabbat candles in the kitchen. But maybe she didn't know what those were.

Now I hear Rabbi starting to speak,



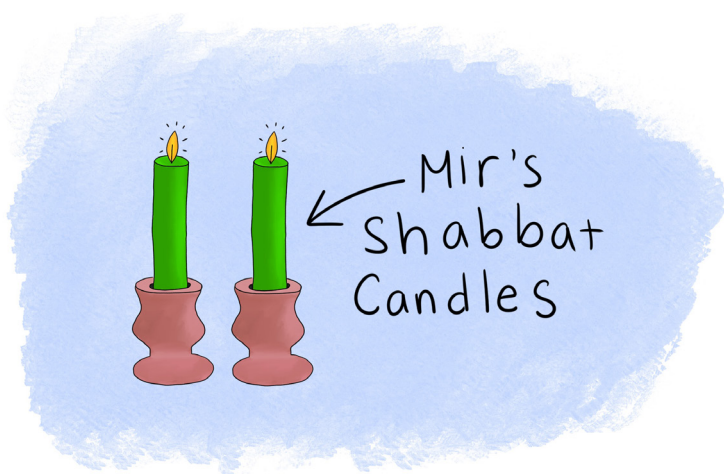
A **MEZUZAH** IS A CONTAINER HOLDING A SMALL SCROLL WITH SPECIFIC PASSAGES FROM THE TORAH WRITTEN ON IT. A MEZUZAH IS OFTEN ATTACHED TO EACH DOOR-POST IN A JEWISH HOME. THE CONTAINER THAT HOLDS THE SCROLL CAN BE MADE OF METAL, WOOD, CERAMICS, OR ANY OTHER MATERIAL AND CAN COME IN A WIDE VARIETY OF DESIGNS AND COLORS.



RIGHT BEFORE SUNDOWN ON FRIDAY NIGHT, WE LIGHT **SHABBAT CANDLES** TO SHOW THAT SHABBAT IS STARTING. SHABBAT CANDLES MAKE OUR SHABBAT SPECIAL AND FULL OF LIGHT.

"I'm so sorry Mir, I never wanted it to turn out like this for you. I was so focused on making your B'nai Mitzvah a joyous occasion that I didn't properly prepare you for the more challenging parts of becoming a B'nai Mitzvah. This is a coming of age ceremony where you become a mature member of the Jewish community, and that's a beautiful thing. But there are some really difficult things about being a Jewish adult that

you're also starting to experience. People in Vienna have never really wanted to understand us, they only look at us from the outside and make assumptions about us. Back when our ancestors were living here, people made assumptions about them and decided that they were evil and needed to be killed. If they had made any effort to understand us and view us the same way they view everyone else, they would have seen that there is nothing to be afraid of, and that we are just people,



not so different from them.

Nowadays the people here say they want to understand us, but we know they still don't. They think they already know everything about us because they learned about the Holocaust in school, but you and I know that they don't learn anything about our culture or our community. So it is still foreign to them, and they don't know how to interact with us. What you are experiencing is your friends feeling uncomfortable and expressing it in hurtful ways. They don't know what to say because all they are taught about us are stereotypes. Of course this doesn't excuse their actions, but sometimes it helps to lessen our pain if we think about it like that.

The most important thing that you need to remember is that you are allowed to be here, and you are

allowed to be Jewish. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. There have always been people who say that our culture is wrong and that we have evil thoughts, but those people don't know what they are talking about and are simply hating Jewish people; that is never okay. You will need to ignore some people in order to continue practicing your Jewish life with pride, but do you think that will be worth it so that you can continue being our best Torah reader and our best Hebrew school student like you have always been?"

"Mhm" Mir mutters tearfully. It's a bit of a burn that Rabbi says Mir is the best Hebrew school student because I also work hard in Hebrew school, but maybe he was just trying to make her feel better. Rabbi continues. "The other important thing you can always

do, is rely on the Jewish community around you. I know that we are a small community, but we are quite close and you know that you always have people here that you can come to when someone makes you feel bad about being Jewish or celebrating Jewish traditions. We even have a group that meets once a week to talk about how hard it is to live in Vienna as a Jewish person. After your B'nai Mitzvah, you could check out a session if you are interested." Mir starts crying loudly again and says, "But the people in the community are also part of the problem! I told them about my project, and lots of people said they didn't want to wear a childish crocheted yarmulke. They said they only like wearing black ones or traditional looking ones or something stupid like that! why don't

they want to have any fun?? Everyone here is so old and crusty except for you and the kids." Rabbi sighs and even gives a little chuckle if I'm not mistaken. Then he says, "that I can fix. Let me have a talk with them soon, okay. Don't worry about the synagogue members." Mir snuffles, "okay."

There are few things I love more than overhearing a conversation, but I have to admit that I probably shouldn't have listened to everything that just went down, and I kind of wish I could unhear it. That was some deep stuff that I don't really know how to handle. First of all, I don't think I have ever heard Mir express emotion like that. She always seems to go through life with indifference. Two years ago, during an orchestra concert, she messed up big time in the middle of her solo, and

another cello player had to jump in for her mid-concert. After the concert, I ran backstage to ask her how she felt, and she just shrugged and said, "I guess it wasn't my best work, but I feel fine." She must have been sad on the inside, but that's the thing about Mir, the sadness never reaches the outside, until now apparently.

I can't believe that her best friend Veronika would say something bad about yarmulkes. What did they ever do to hurt her? They are just tiny pieces of fabric, it's honestly embarrassing that it's so difficult for Veronika to picture Mir occasionally wearing a small hat. I know that the B'nai Mitzvah invitation process didn't go as I expected it to, and it clearly went even worse for Mir, probably because she did the bulk of the inviting. Even though I'm surprised

about how Mir's friends acted, I guess I have always known that being Jewish in Vienna is a little weird. From what I overheard, Rabbi didn't seem surprised about the situation at all, so maybe I shouldn't be either?

I guess I do remember sometimes thinking that being Jewish in Vienna reminds me of the ending of an apocalyptic sci-fi movie. There are all kinds of movies and books where the Earth becomes uninhabitable for various reasons, then some of the people have to leave on a spaceship and go far away for several generations. In the end, they often get to return to Earth. But by then it has been a long time, the Earth has been reclaimed by nature, and the people have no idea what to do there. That's basically my people in Vienna.

Even though I sometimes get confused about what to do as a Jewish person in Vienna, I always assumed that the adults knew what they were doing since they are the ones who lead our synagogue and our community. But if even the adults need a whole support group just to talk about being Jewish in Vienna, maybe being Jewish here is even more complicated than I thought.

I think all of this must be especially hard for Mir because she hates being different. She dresses to fit in exactly with her friends, and she even straightens her curly hair to wear the same hairstyles as them. For me it's a little better because I am used to being different. I have never completely fit in anywhere, so being Jewish is only one thing out of a long list of things that make me different. But for Mir it's

the only major thing, and maybe that makes it difficult for her to embrace her Jewishness.

I wonder if Mir really will take Rabbi's advice. How could she possibly ignore the people who say mean things if she already spends so much of her life worrying about what people think? I'm a little worried that Mir will ultimately decide that the hardships are not worth it and just give up on her B'nai Mitzvah. That would honestly be even more heartbreaking than when her mom dropped the Torah. I hope she can find it in herself to continue because I think the Jewish community means a lot to her deep down. Even if she is a little embarrassed to be a part of it. I guess I'll just have to wait and see how the rest of this unfolds.

Now I can hear Mir leaving the

Hebrew school room to go to the bathroom. Class is supposed to start in five minutes. I will wait until I am one minute late and everyone is already inside so that no one, especially not Mir, knows that I was here in the kitchen the whole time. I know I already heard too much, but I can't help wondering what they were talking about before I arrived. They must have been meeting for a while already if Mir was already crying so heavily. Maybe Mir will want to talk about it with me later.



After Hebrew school ended I tried my very best to approach Mir and pretend that I hadn't heard anything earlier. I decided to just act normal and ask her how she was doing without directly mentioning her B'nai Mitzvah,

even though there are only one and a half weeks left, so surely my asking about it is implied in the how are you question. She replied to me with the classic Mir "good." Then she asked how many Yarmulkes I had made in total, and I told her 55. She said she had made 60. So we agreed that we have to make 18 this week, which is kind of a lot given that it's a school week, but you gotta do what you gotta do when Mir's B'nai Mitzvah is coming up. She also made sure I remembered that I was supposed to make the final three, which I did. We have to finish them by Thursday because that's when Mir sets up the yarmulke tree and has the full dress rehearsal.

We didn't talk about anything else, but I guess I expected that. If I was feeling worried about my B'nai Mitzvah

I would also tell Rabbi about it and not Mir. I would also tell my dad, but Mir's mom is so different from my dad, and I'm not really sure how she would respond to this type of situation. So discussing this with her might not really be a great option for Mir.

I think it's good that she's proceeding with the B'nai Mitzvah plan and not losing motivation with the yarmulkes. I know she had some issues with it, but I'm sure that it will all turn out fine in the end. At least the synagogue members will hopefully not be able to resist picking a yarmulke from the tree and putting it on their head once they see how cool they look.

CHAPTER 12:



THE FINAL
YARMULKES

It is currently almost midnight on Monday night. I need to go to bed, but I still have seven more yarmulkes to crochet. These ones are going to be from my fruit series. I originally wanted to learn how to make pink grapefruit yarmulkes because I thought that would be a fun design. But when I searched for tutorials on the internet, I could only find patterns for watermelon yarmulkes. Apparently a watermelon yarmulke is a lot easier to crochet than a grapefruit yarmulke because you just need to crochet a yarmulke with watermelon colored rings around it and then add seeds in at the end with a needle and black thread. I tried making one a few days ago, and even though it wasn't as cool as a grapefruit would have been, it still looked pretty good. I'm gonna make some more tomorrow.

The unfortunate thing is that tomorrow I am in school until 14:00, then I have swim club from 15:00 to 17:00, and then I will have to study for the math exam I have tomorrow. I haven't studied for it at all yet because I've been so busy crocheting yarmulkes, and I know my dad will be upset if I get a bad grade. So, what I really need to do is skip swim club and use that time to crochet the remaining yarmulkes, but my dad won't like that either. I will have to ask him anyway.



This morning I asked my dad if I could skip swim club just this once so that I could finish the last few yarmulkes before Mir has to set up the yarmulke tree. I thought he would give me an immediate no and tell me that

I chose to go to swim club and that I need to remain committed to it. He would have a fair point about that because I did beg him to sign me up, but this is a very special circumstance.

He surprisingly didn't give me an immediate no when I asked, but instead inquired how it was possible that we still had yarmulkes to crochet. I told him we were almost done but I just had a few more to make and I could really use the extra time. Then he got all irritated and said: "how many are you guys planning on making anyways?" I told him that we are making 133 and we are almost done. I also explained that if he would just let me skip swim club today, that I could finish without a problem. But before I could even finish, he started yelling at me.

"YOU MADE 133??"

YOU
MADE
133?!



"Well, not yet," I interjected shyly. Being wise with my dad is always the best way to cheer him up.

"How on Earth did you think that 133 people would come to Mir's B'nai Mitzvah?? We only have 100 members of the synagogue and most of them don't even come every week."

I don't understand why he thinks this number is so off. I reminded him that this isn't every week, this is Mir's B'nai Mitzvah and it's the first B'nai Mitzvah we've had since I can remember. Plus, Mir invited all her friends and family. He asked me if I had talked to Mir recently and I told him that I talked to her last week at Hebrew school, and she told me to make sure I finished making all the yarmulkes to give to her tomorrow after Hebrew school so that she could hang them up on

Thursday.

My dad seemed shocked to hear this for some reason. I wonder if Rabbi told my dad about what he and Mir talked about last week. I know Rabbi wouldn't have told him if Mir didn't say he could. I wonder why Mir would be okay with my dad knowing but not want to tell me. I asked my dad what was wrong with making 133 yarmulkes. He made 400 for his B'nai Mitzvah and we lowered the number by a lot, exactly like he said to. Then he apologized for yelling, and said that he had expected us to make something like 30 or 40. I told him that wouldn't be enough for everyone and he said that it wasn't realistic for us to expect that many people to come or for everyone to want to wear one.

I asked him if everyone had worn one of the homemade ones at his B'nai

Mitzvah and he said yes, but that it was a different situation. Jewish adults who grew up in the US are always saying that. "But it was a different situation." I know it's true but I'm so sick of hearing it. Why can't we do fun stuff here too? He asked me if I knew how many people had accepted the invitation to Mir's B'nai Mitzvah and I said that I had no idea. He told me that it was only 70, and that Rabbi apparently called him and Mir's mom about this weeks ago because he was worried that we may eventually be disappointed that so few people were going to be there.

This is when I became furious and even started crying a little bit. "You've known for weeks that only 70 people were going to come? And you didn't say anything?" My dad said that he

thought Mir had already told me, but she of course hadn't. This must be what she and Rabbi were discussing before I arrived. Poor Mir. So many people must have said no to her, and who knows what kind of weird reasons they gave. If I only asked five people and got two weird responses. I can only imagine what kind of crazy stuff she had to put up with if she asked 195 people.

The worst part is that she probably can't even talk to her friend Veronika about it now because she was one of the people being weird. I have to go make sure she's okay. But I won't see her until tomorrow. I think my dad pities me now, since I was clearly acting with naive confidence throughout this whole process. I told my dad that Mir had told me just a week ago that I should keep going and make the rest so that was

what I was going to do. She must have told me to keep going for a reason. My dad said, "Fine, you can make however many yarmulkes you want, but you can't skip swim club so you are going to have to find another time to do it." I guess I can live with that. Especially if no one is apparently going to want to wear these yarmulkes that I worked so hard to make anyways.



I've made a decision. I am going to skip swim club without telling my dad. It's not going to be the best thing I've ever done, but I think it will be easy to get away with. I know I originally wanted this time to finish the yarmulkes, but I think I need to talk to Mir. I texted her and asked her if she could meet me at my house after school and she said

yes. I know my dad works until 18:00 today which means that he won't be home until 18:30, and I always get home from swim club an hour before that, so my dad will never know that I was home the whole time. Mir knows my dad thinks I'm at swim club and that she has to be long gone before he gets home. What she doesn't know is how much I know about what she's been going through.



Mir just left my house, and I should still have half an hour before my dad gets home. I can't say I know exactly what is going on with Mir. Either she is feeling way better than she was on that day when she was crying in front of Rabbi, or she is still sad but has, for whatever reason, decided to hide it from me. My initial plan was

to come clean to Mir and tell her that I overheard the conversation between her and Rabbi, but when she actually got to my house everything seemed so normal. Nothing seemed off about her like before, and the dynamic between us was like it always is. Since she seemed to be doing so well, I thought it might be a bit of a downer to tell her that I overheard her crying loudly in the synagogue. Maybe that's a memory she would rather forget, or maybe she would be mad that I not only eavesdropped on her but also meticulously transcribed the conversation in my journal. I wouldn't have told her about the journal part though.

I decided that the best way to proceed would be to act normal, but try my best to see if I could get her

to tell me about her concerns without my bringing it up. I told her I was going to take this time to crochet the last few yarmulkes that we need before Thursday. She said that was great and that she was happy to keep me company as I did it. I even went on about how upset my dad would be if he knew I was skipping swim club, but that it was worth it to me to make sure we had all 133 yarmulkes. I thought all this talk about me working my butt off for the number of yarmulkes might prompt her to tell me that we don't actually need 133 yarmulkes because so many people said they either don't like yarmulkes, don't want to wear fun ones, or don't want to come to her B'nai Mitzvah at all. But she mentioned no such thing. All she said was how grateful she was that I was committed

to the project until the end.

Finally I decided to (very casually) ask her how the inviting went and if she thought 133 would be the right number of yarmulkes. She said that, as we had expected, not all 200 people accepted the invitation, and that some people were being difficult because they didn't tell her whether or not they were going to come. She told me that because of that, she doesn't have an accurate guest count and 133 might as well be the right number. She also said that she has a secret plan of how to use the extras so they won't go to waste.

She seemed overly optimistic, given that my dad said only 70 people are confirmed to be coming. I wonder if she is waiting for people like Veronika to come around. I hope they all decide to come and wear the yarmulkes after

all, but I'm not sure if we should expect that at this point. I was intrigued by Mir's secret plan of what to do with the extra yarmulkes. I can't possibly imagine what Mir would plan to do with a whole bunch of leftover yarmulkes because the synagogue is pretty much the only place where they have use. I guess I will just have to wait and see because no matter how much I inquired, she wouldn't tell me what the plan was.

Based on what I've heard, it seems unlikely that everything will go as planned, but for some reason I still feel inclined to trust Mir that everything will turn out okay in the end. This is because I am generally the one who hopes for the best, and Mir is the pessimistic one. So if she is feeling optimistic, then I can be too. The good news is that I did finish all the yarmulkes before Mir left,

and I gave them to her so she has them for the set up and dress rehearsal on Thursday. Unfortunately this yarmulke victory was clouded by so many different happenings and emotions that we forgot to be proud of ourselves for accomplishing our goal. We actually did it, we made 133 yarmulkes just the two of us. Neither of us had any idea how to crochet a year ago, and especially for me it was pretty hard to learn. There were several months where I thought I might never get the hang of crocheting and have to let Mir down. I practiced so much at summer camp until I finally gradually figured it out and now I feel like I could almost do it with my eyes closed. It is a shame that we couldn't celebrate this properly. Even though Mir claimed to be totally fine, she still didn't express any pride in our newly gained

skill. Maybe that was a sign that she's not doing great on the inside.

After Mir left, I took a shower like I always do after I get home from swim club and before my dad gets home. This time I wore my swimsuit in the shower so that it would get wet and then I hung it up to dry. This way there is no way he'll know that I wasn't at swim club. Usually when I hang my swimsuit up after swim club, the whole bathroom smells like chlorine. I was worried that this wouldn't be the case this time since I only got it wet with shower water, but thankfully, I wash my swimsuit so seldomly that it has an almost permanent chlorine smell and the wet swimsuit still made the whole bathroom smell like chlorine. At least one good thing came from me never washing it.

CHAPTER 13:



MIR'S
B'NAI
MITZVAH

The illustration features two stylized candles with pointed flames, each mounted on a circular base. A scroll is draped across the middle of the candles, held in place by the candle holders. The scroll is unrolled in the center, revealing the text. The background is a solid dark red color.

The day is finally here! Mir's B'nai Mitzvah is today. I'm so excited to see how Mir decorated the synagogue and what it's going to look like. I know exactly which yarmulke I want to pick from the tree. My favorite fruit is a kiwi, so I made one kiwi patterned yarmulke. I wanted to make more, but it wasn't until recently that my skills were good enough to make a kiwi yarmulke so I only got around to making one. The difficult thing is that Mir is the one who built the tree and hung the yarmulkes, so I have no idea where the kiwi one will be hanging, and if someone else takes it first then there's nothing I can do. Kiwi yarmulke or not I am very excited.



Mir's B'nai Mitzvah may not have

been the grand affair she always imagined, but since she was so worried about it, the expectations right beforehand were low. So it was at least able to exceed those expectations, even if it didn't fulfill the childhood fantasies we used to dream up together. When I first arrived I was really taken aback by the decor. Mir put purple filters on all the lights so the synagogue was lit only by warm purple lighting. She decided to make the tree trunk and branches not out of yarn like I suggested, but out of cardboard, paper, or maybe even papier mache? I couldn't tell exactly what it was but it looked amazing. I have no idea how she pulled that off.

All the yarmulkes were hung nicely from the tree branches along with some crochet leaves. I didn't even know Mir

was crocheting leaves, but they really helped make the tree look full and healthy. The leaves also contrasted with the yarmulkes and made them look more like fruit. Rabbi was standing at the door greeting people, which was weird because he never does that. He always lurks in the back until it's time for the service to start. But then I saw Adam, one of the grumpier more traditional members of our synagogue, walk in wearing his own usual plain black yarmulke. Rabbi greeted him with a smile and then held out his hand. Adam gave him an annoyed look and said "I didn't really think you were going to be serious about that." But then he sighed and said "well, if it's for the kids then I guess there's no way I can get out of it." Adam took his own yarmulke off, handed it to Rabbi and walked in. Then

he proceeded to pick an exceedingly boring single colored dark blue yarmulke that I made at summer camp back when I barely knew how to crochet.

I can't comprehend why someone would want to wear their same old boring yarmulke instead of receiving a handmade fancy new one for a special occasion. Maybe I will understand when I become a stubborn adult, but hopefully not. I would like to stay interesting.

I guess this is what Rabbi meant when he said that Mir shouldn't worry about the stubborn members of the synagogue not wanting to participate. He must have given them a talk and told them to wear the fun yarmulkes so the Hebrew school kids (and mostly Mir) wouldn't be sad. But he must have known that not all of them would behave, and that's why he's standing

guard at the door. I wonder how he gets them to listen to him.

I remember one time when Mir was sick, I was texting her all through services telling her if she missed anything exciting, and Adam told me not to text because it was "irritating." I explained to him that I was paying attention and doing it for Mir, but he said he didn't care and I had to put my phone away. I didn't want to make him more angry than he already was so I decided to just put my phone away. How does Rabbi manage not only to not be intimidated by people like Adam (of which there are many at our synagogue) but also to even intimidate them? I hope I will be authoritative and Unafraid like Rabbi one day.

All the younger Hebrew school kids were jumping up and down to reach

their preferred yarmulke from the tree branches. The room was also full of little toddlers, who are still too young to start Hebrew school, being lifted up by their parents so that they could reach the yarmulkes. Mir set up about 80 chairs, so she must have known that 133 people were not going to come. At least this way there were not too many empty chairs, just a few groups of them here and there. It would have looked very sad if most of the chairs were empty. The good news is that at a typical shabbat service we only get about 30 people, so the room felt way fuller than usual. There were lots of unworn yarmulkes hanging from the tree, even after everyone arrived and put them on. Partly because some of Mir's non-Jewish friends didn't wear them, even though I think that made

it less fun for them because they were not able to enjoy the best of the celebration. The ones who didn't pick a yarmulke were the ones who seemed most uncomfortable being in the synagogue, and everyone could immediately tell since they were not wearing yarmulkes.

At first I was a little nervous about what we were going to do with all the leftover yarmulkes, but then I remembered that Mir told me she had a plan for them. So I decided to wait and find out what the plan was before worrying. I told myself I would be allowed to worry later if her plan ended up being stupid, but in the end it didn't. Unfortunately I wasn't able to get the kiwi yarmulke. It took me a while to find it in the tree, and by the time I did, someone was already grabbing it.

So I decided to go with a blue and green striped yarmulke instead. I guess I could always make myself another kiwi one later since I know how to make them now.

There were many cool parts of Mir's B'nai Mitzvah, besides the fantastic yarmulke tree. My favorite part of the two B'nai Mitzvahs I had been to before was always throwing candy at the B'nai Mitzvah after their Haftarah reading. There is nothing more surreal than seeing so many pieces of candy fly through the air. Even though the candy throwing was fun, I wouldn't say it was the best part of Mir's B'nai Mitzvah because so many other great things happened too.

I already knew Mir was unusually good at reading Torah, but I was afraid that she would start thinking

about her mom and slip up. Luckily she ended up reading perfectly. It was very impressive. I hope she keeps reading Torah at services in the future so she doesn't forget how to do it. I already know that I won't be that good when the time comes for my B'nai Mitzvah. I know how to read Hebrew already, but the letters get all jumbled when I look at them on the scroll. Sometimes I wonder if I have dyslexia, but maybe I'm just bad at reading.

The scariest part was when she had to carry the Torah around the synagogue. Dropping the Torah during her actual B'nai Mitzvah would be even worse than Mir's mom dropping it during rehearsals. Especially in front of the synagogue members who came just to finally see a B'nai Mitzvah at our synagogue. It would be such an

embarrassment for Mir. I think I even saw Mir's mom holding her breath and looking down at the floor while Mir was holding the Torah. When Mir walked the Torah back up to the front and handed it to the Rabbi to put back, I breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

Anyways, I have been rambling on about candy and the Torah when the best part of the service was Mir's speech. I already knew it was going to be something that I would want to remember forever, so I took a voice recording of it. Now I can write it in my journal word for word. I could tell Mir was nervous at first, but she gathered confidence as she kept going.

So here it is: Mir's speech

MIR'S SPEECH



"Hello everyone, and thank you for coming. I remember the first time I ever learned what a B'nai Mitzvah was. I must have been about three or four years old. We always had lots of Jewish children's books at my house, and one of my favorite ones featured a little girl who had a big sister that was preparing for her B'nai Mitzvah. The book is about how jealous the little girl is of her older sister, and how hard it is to be the little one left behind and not yet old enough to get all the attention of this special event. Even though I have no siblings and was always the oldest one in Hebrew school, I have always related with that little girl. My Hebrew school friends and I have spent years dreaming of what our B'nai Mitzvahs will be like, how we will celebrate them, and how amazing it will be to have a

whole day dedicated to us. A whole day where we can have everything just the way we want it.

Now my time has finally come to be the center of attention and have this special celebration. And to all my Hebrew school classmates out there, don't worry. The time will fly by and you will feel like your moment has come soon enough. In Jewish tradition, I think this ceremony is supposed to mean that I am an adult now. In our modern society that is obviously not true, but I can at least say that I have grown a lot throughout the process of preparing for my B'nai Mitzvah, and I might have a slightly better idea of what it will be like to be an adult someday. Spoiler alert, it's hard.

I was at Davi's house when I first came up with the idea of making 133

yarmulkes for my B'nai Mitzvah, and I was partly inspired by Davi's dad, who made 400 yarmulkes for his B'nai Mitzvah. We toned the number down at his suggestion, partly because we knew that 400 people wouldn't physically fit in our little synagogue, and partly because we knew that there would never be 400 people who would come to my B'nai Mitzvah. Little did we know, not even 100 people would come to my B'nai Mitzvah.

While I am so grateful for all of you who are here today making my B'nai Mitzvah incredibly special, it should be said that I invited 200 people in total. That means that I myself handed out my beautiful invitation to 200 individual people. It also meant that I had the pleasure of hearing 130 excuses from those who could not

come. I had, of course, expected a fair number of excuses ranging from too much homework to family obligations. But I learned that there was a whole new genre of excuses I should have been expecting: the "uncomfortable with Jewish people" excuses.

To put this in context for my non-Jewish friends and the overwhelmingly US-born adult synagogue members, most Jewish kids in Vienna don't go around talking about being Jewish all the time because it's not usually relevant. Jewish holidays, occasions, and festivals are not usually talked about here, meaning that we can blend in quite easily. We are also Austrians, so we of course take part in Christmas and Easter celebrations with our classmates, because celebrating holidays, no matter whether they are from your culture or

not, is fun - or so I thought.

After living my whole life fitting in like any other Austrian kid, it came as a shock to me that inviting my friends to my B'nai Mitzvah caused them to see me so differently. I had at least 20 people tell me weird things about my being Jewish. Some people were offended that I didn't tell them I was Jewish for so long, as if they felt like it was a crucial piece of information they needed to know before deciding whether or not to become friends with me. Other people told me that they couldn't imagine me wearing traditional Jewish clothing, like a yarmulke or a tallit. Others told me that they didn't think I was the type to be religious, but I think this stems from the fact that they don't know what it looks like to be a religious Jew, and what they mean is

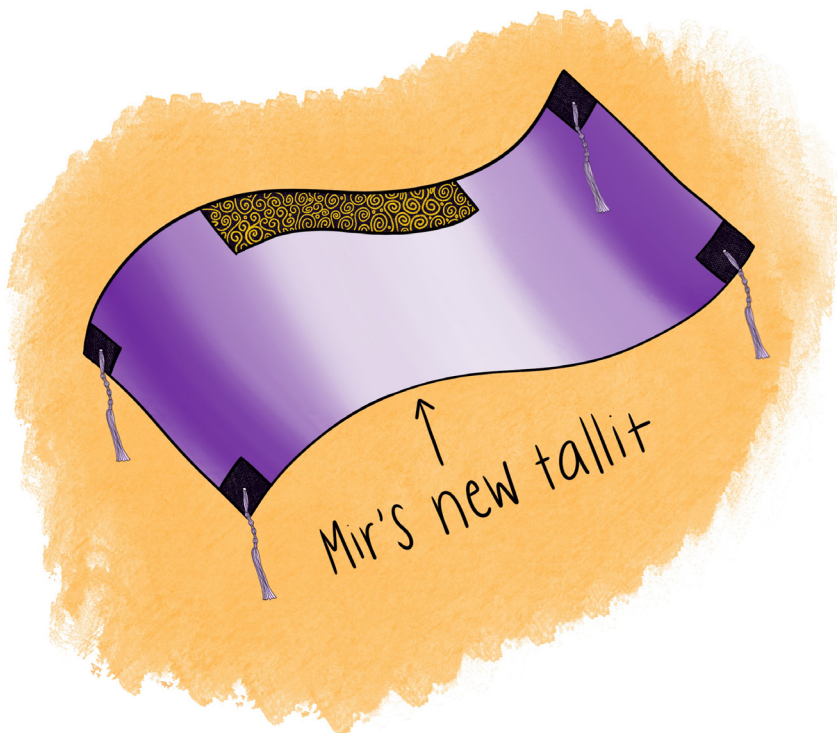


A **TALLIT** IS A RECTANGULAR JEWISH PRAYER SHAWL WITH SPECIAL STRINGS HANGING FROM EACH OF ITS FOUR CORNERS. MOST PEOPLE IN OUR SYNAGOGUE WEAR A TALLIT ON SATURDAY MORNINGS AND HOLIDAYS WHEN THE TORAH IS READ ALOUD.

that they don't see me as the type to be a religious christian, which I am not. Over the weeks that I handed out my invitations, these comments, the worst of which I have chosen not to share in this speech, began to wear me down.

I found myself wondering what I was actually doing being such an active member of the Jewish community. I considered whether I had not shared the extent of my involvement in Hebrew

school with my friends because I was ashamed, and whether or not I am, or should be, the type of person to get excited about a religious tradition, such as a B'nai Mitzvah. But at the end of the day, even if it makes other people feel uncomfortable or see me differently, I can't help but be connected to the Jewish community I was raised in because it has given me so much. Being a member of this

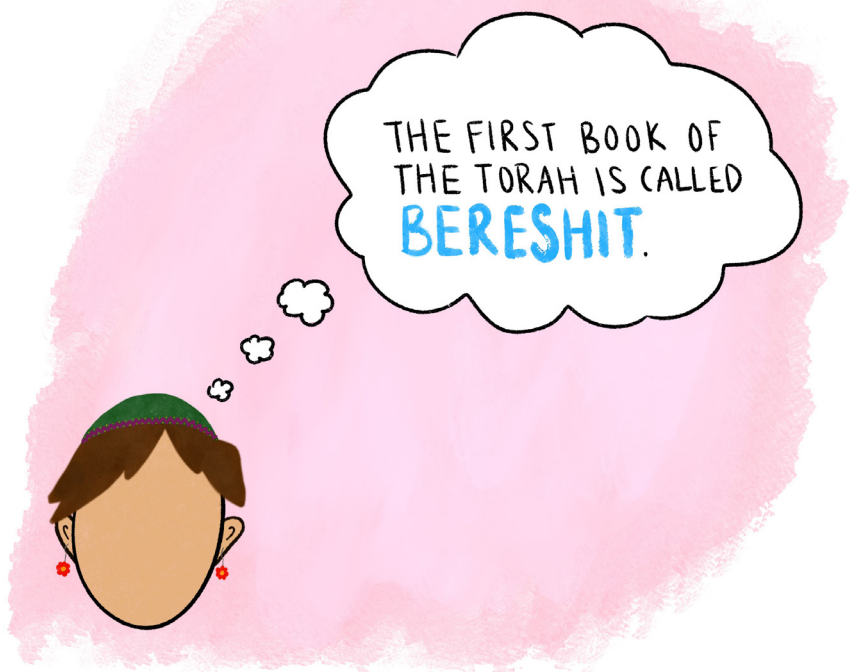


synagogue and a student of this Hebrew school have given me some of my best memories, and I know that many Jewish people over the centuries have felt the same way about their communities. So I have decided, no longer lightly, to accept my role as a mature person in the Jewish community. Not only because I have to since my mom would never let me drop out of Hebrew school, but because I want to, even though I know that I won't want to every day.

I have decided that it's time for me not to be afraid of being religious, and thus I would like to mention a Torah story. I have always been fascinated by the Torah because it was a book of such great importance to my ancestors. I, as a Jewish person, and especially as a member of the returned generation, was always raised to feel

very connected to my ancestors. So when I learn about the Torah, I try to think of why my ancestors found this book inspirational or useful. I know people often relate to parts of the Torah and connect them to their real life, and I wanted to do the same thing. I immediately thought of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in Bereshit, mostly because I thought there would be an obvious connection with my tree of yarmulkes. At first I was frustrated because I came up with no connection, but the invitation process really changed something.

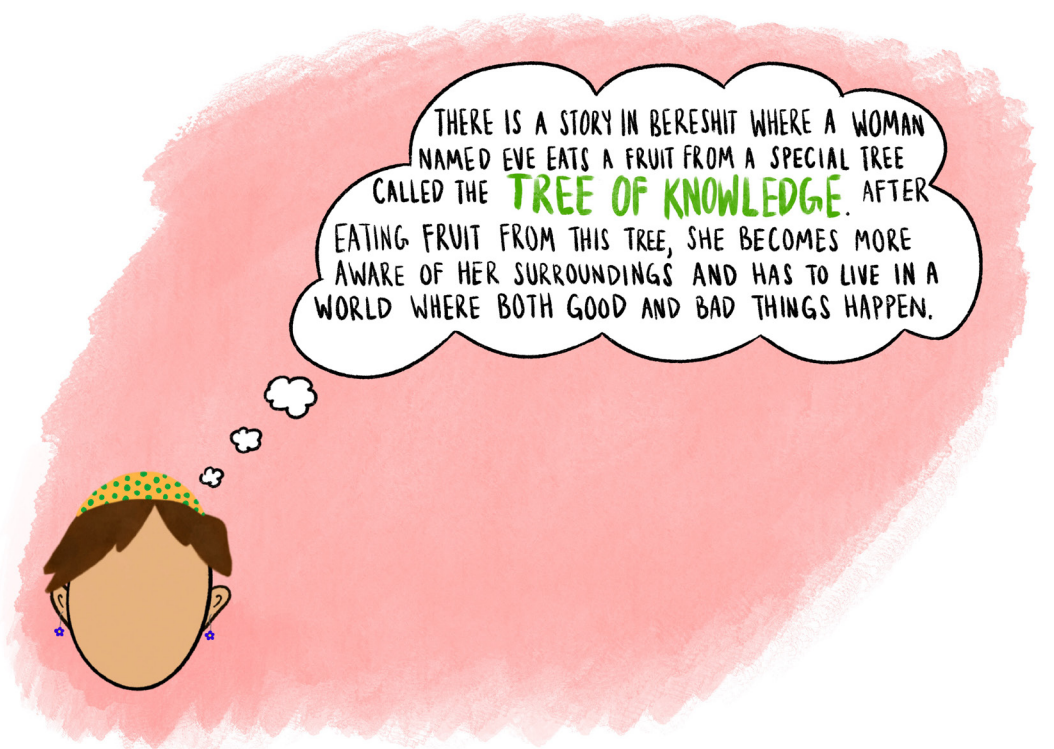
The process of planning my B'nai Mitzvah began to reveal to me how Austrians actually feel about my returned generation of Jewish people living amongst them. People here always say they feel bad about what their



ancestors did to my ancestors. But they never express how happy they are that we have decided to return, probably because they found life easier without us. They are just too embarrassed to admit it, usually. This is of course not true of everyone here, so if you are a supportive friend of mine sitting in the audience I swear I'm not talking about you. But many Austrians do have

these feelings and sometimes make them known to us.

I never thought about any of these things before my B'nai Mitzvah. I never analyzed our Jewish community this deeply. I knew it was smaller than the US Jewish community my mom grew up in, and I knew that was because so few Jewish people live in Vienna because of the Holocaust. But I never consciously experienced the lasting effects of the



THERE IS A STORY IN BERESHIT WHERE A WOMAN NAMED EVE EATS A FRUIT FROM A SPECIAL TREE CALLED THE **TREE OF KNOWLEDGE**. AFTER EATING FRUIT FROM THIS TREE, SHE BECOMES MORE AWARE OF HER SURROUNDINGS AND HAS TO LIVE IN A WORLD WHERE BOTH GOOD AND BAD THINGS HAPPEN.

Holocaust until now. In preparing for my B'nai Mitzvah, I (metaphorically) ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Now that you have all come here, worn a yarmulke from the tree, and listened to this speech, you have eaten from the tree too.

In the Torah, God was not exactly thrilled that Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but I honestly believe that this was a good decision on Eve's part and that it needed to happen. Even if it leads to some amount of pain and suffering, we need to know the difference between good and evil and we need to know what is going on in the world around us. It may be burdensome to live with this knowledge, but it is also the only way that we can protect ourselves.

I did not initially intend to make my

B'nai Mitzvah speech so deep. After all, I only wanted to have an extra special birthday party with cool decorations, all my friends, and all my favorite foods. Thankfully I still got all those things. But I think it was inevitable that I would eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil at some point, and for me this B'nai Mitzvah preparation year was apparently that point. That was hard to accept at first, but now I think I can be proud of it.

So that was my speech. (There was a huge round of applause here)

But one last thing! Or two last things actually. First of all, I would like to give an extra extra special thanks to Rabbi for not only helping me write this speech, but also helping me get through everything I went through this year with your kindness, understanding,

and rabbinical wisdom. This speech would have probably just been two sentences long if he hadn't helped me come up with all these ideas. Secondly, as everyone can see, there are a lot of leftover yarmulkes, partly because not everyone who I expected to come came and not everyone who is here ended up wanting to wear one. Thus, I hereby donate the rest of the yarmulkes to our next B'nai Mitzvah, which will be Davi's B'nai Mitzvah, in a little less than a year. For those of you who don't know, Davi made about half of the yarmulkes for today, so I would say this donation is more than deserved.

Once again thank you all for coming and I hope you enjoyed the service."

This may have been the most intense thing I have ever heard in

my life. Mir was really acting like a grownup. Watching her make this speech was weird and incredible at the same time. I am jealous but also not jealous. I think I have always known that it is harder for Viennese Jews than for Jews in the US, but now I'm worried about what kind of challenges might come with my B'nai Mitzvah. But I guess I just have to hold my head up high and keep going on like I always do, and just like I overheard Rabbi telling Mir to do.

I am excited that I will have some of the yarmulkes to give away during my B'nai Mitzvah. I will of course have a different theme and everything, but I can still put them in a box at the entrance so that everyone has a nice one to wear and take home. Because I will have a different theme, the pressure will also be off about whether

people wear them or not. I also think it was especially touching that Mir mentioned how I helped make them, even though some of her snobby friends were in the audience, so I guess she can't be that embarrassed to be friends with me.

I saw Mir's mom cry during the speech. I assume this was because she did such a good job. I have heard grownups talk about crying tears of happiness before, so maybe this is what was happening. Or maybe they were sad that Mir had such a hard time getting people to come to her B'nai Mitzvah. I never thought much about what goes on in Mir's mom's head, but I know I overheard Rabbi at Hebrew school telling Mir that he knew her struggles well. So maybe Mir's mom has had experiences like this too and was sad that her daughter also had to

experience them.

After the B'nai Mitzvah we all ate challah, sushi, and chocolate cake at the synagogue. Challah because it is traditional, and sushi and chocolate cake because they are Mir's two favorite foods. There was lots of music and dancing, and eventually all the old people went home and it was just Mir, me, the other kids, Rabbi and our parents. Then, Rabbi set up a projector and showed us a movie about a girl and the problems she had with her B'nai Mitzvah. I think it was a bit of an old movie, but it was still fun. After that we all had one more slice of cake and went home.

Today was a long day, to say the least. I feel like a lot of intense emotions spilled out of a lot of people, and it wasn't just joy, but also some

fear or sadness because of Mir's complicated speech. I honestly don't know how to feel about all of it. But I think it somehow made me even more excited for my B'nai Mitzvah. Even though I, or the world, might not be ready for it yet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



LEO D. OLSON-URY is a Jewish writer, illustrator, and educator. He was born in Los Angeles in 2001 and now lives and works in Vienna.