

# The Netanyahuhs

An Account of a Minor and  
Ultimately Even Negligible Episode  
in the History of a Very Famous Family

JOSHUA COHEN

2021

nyrb

New York Review Books New York

## 9.

THE CORBIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (since renamed the Hussein-Gupta School of Divinity and Comparative Religion) was the first of the College's constituent institutions to be founded and it had churned out ministers in the Puritan/Congregationalist mold for well over a century. Its cluster of sere stone buildings was centered around the Chapel, where weekly attendance was still mandatory for students and faculty alike, though the students were expected to derive spiritual benefit, while the faculty was just required to take roll. Back in those days, each Department had to furnish its most junior member to discharge this duty on a regular rota and I was assigned the Monday/Friday crowds, the surnames W-Z. That year, Mondays began with the usually absent Mr. Wabash (the baseball star) and ended with the usually crapulous Mr. Zych (an agronomy major), and Fridays began with the unbearably chipper Mr. Washburn (who went on to run the Corbin Laundromat), and ended with the pimple-visaged Mr. Zoll (who went on to Vietnam). Given that W-Z was, alphabetically speaking, the lightest load, I'd typically finish with my list before the students had finished their prayers, though I couldn't leave my station pewside or do any schoolwork to pass the time—such were the rules dictated by the Rev. Dr. Huggles, who headed the Seminary and led the worship. Though I initially resented those rules, not to mention the worship itself, I gradually came to

find Chapel Duty soothing. It was the only time I had to evacuate the mind. Or to ponder the paradox contained in the benediction: *Let us go forth to class and pursue the truth, in Jesus's name, Amen.*

We were bound for the Rectory behind the Chapel, for the Bible Studies class that Netanyahu had agreed—he'd had no choice—to teach. If Corbin would decide to offer him a job in the History Department, he'd also have to teach in the Seminary, at least one class per term. This would be his humiliation, which apparently he'd only been informed of the previous week? In a phone conversation with a Dr. Huggins?

"Huggles . . . Dr. Huggles . . ."

"It's absurd," Netanyahu said, as we turned off Evergreen, against the wind. "To have historians teach religion. Why not have priests teach history?"

"It's beyond our control. It has to do with the hiring budgets. We only get you in History if Huggles gets you in the Seminary, or someone gets you somewhere else. It's about getting more mileage. More bang for the buck. Dr. Morse doesn't like it either."

"But he does nothing to stop it?"

"I've been reading your work on the Medieval Jews who opposed the Church, and let me tell you, we here in Corbin History are in a similar predicament: we're at the Church's mercy. I don't even want to think about the fate that awaits us should we have the temerity to oppose the will of the all-powerful Corbin Theological Seminary."

Netanyahu paused at the snowmounded corner of Dexter and Wolcott, an intersection of conflicting winds. "You're making a joke, but now for a moment, be serious: You were angered by this man's presumption—Dr. Morse's—am I correct?"

"By which you mean what exactly?"



"You, an Americanist, were asked to take around a Jew, because you yourself are Jewish. That must have annoyed you. But can you imagine how you would feel if you were asked to guest-teach a class in Bible for the very same reason?"

"But maybe that's not the reason. Maybe you were asked to teach a class in Bible because of your Hebrew."

"You split hairs. Hebrew is the language of the Bible because it is the language of the Jews, whether or not they speak it."

I left that remark hanging in its chalkcloud of breath and led us on toward campus.

Netanyahu huffed behind me, then next to me, and then, as the campus gates swung into view, a step or two ahead, his words blowing back, "What is the Bible? Signs and wonders, pillars and plagues, and I'm qualified for this because why—because I'm a legitimate historian? And even if it were just a linguistic issue, where I'm supposed to impart to the youth delinquents and future sheep breeders of New York State the language of Solomon, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Moses—tell me, would you be qualified to teach a class on Shakespeare or Chaucer solely on the basis of your ability to order a hamburger or read the traffic-signs?"

"Stop . . . Dr. Netanyahu, stop . . . I'm not joking . . ."

But Netanyahu plunged ahead, scorning the sign and stepping high across the piled whitefall and crossing at a run, trying to beat the plow that was making its own lane down the middle. And it wasn't slowing, but bearing down—so that Netanyahu panicked, flung his briefcase, and launched himself atop the soiled matterhorn of the opposite curb.

I waited for the plow to pass and got sprayed mildly. Netanyahu, however, was covered.



I retrieved his briefcase and knocked it free of encrustation against the campus gates. "That driver was a lunatic," he said and snatched it back.

As we entered onto campus, I started babbling the tour, "So over there's the theater for tonight. And over here's the library, where Edith works, and that just past it, is Fredonia Hall, which houses all of History and the humanities."

But Netanyahu's mind was elsewhere. "On the way to teach religion, a famous historian is killed... who's to say that I don't deserve it?"

"You have to understand, Dr. Netanyahu. Corbin's a small college, so we all have to double up. At least the new hires will have to, and I'm sure that'll be the case for the rest soon enough. Take the committee members, for instance. We're all expecting to be asked to pitch in. Dr. Hillard, a historical geographer, is convinced he'll be teaching surveying. Dr. Kimmel and Dr. Galbraith are already preparing to teach elementary German and French. There's even been talk of me teaching double-entry bookkeeping."

"It's a scandal."

We passed on through the Quad; passing hurrying bundles of down and fur that at their overheated cores were students; passing a snowman whose proboscine carrot had become a phallus; passing a snowwoman with freakish breasts and twigs sticking out as nipples; passing the icicle-throned statue of Mather Corbin, industrialist and eugenicist, whose verdigrised and weather-pocked head showed a splotchy phrenology of pigeon droppings.

Netanyahu walked straight past all this impervious.

He stared down at his floppy-treaded bluchers and slapped along the paths, but then somehow missed a turn and walked directly into

Quad-snow and forged his own path through it, cutting corners. He was either scattered or trying to make his earlier frolic in the powder seem purposeful. He must've been freezing.

"I once read this thing about the kibbutzes in Israel."

"The kibbutzim, please. Not kibbutzes. I can't stand these English plurals."

"The kibbutzim, have it your way. I read a thing about how everyone there has their roles. In Minsk you were a violinist, in Pinsk you were a painter, in Lvov a poet, a streetsweeper, or an aeronautical engineer, it doesn't matter; on a kibbutz, you're a laborer. Everyone takes their turn in the fields, hoeing, tilling, whatever. You can't get out of that responsibility. You have to take your shift."

"That's Marxism for you. Shoveling the shit of—what are they called, the tiny horses?"

"Donkeys?"

"No."

"Mules?"

"No."

"Shoveling the shit of tiny horses, the ones that in the Bible talk..." and he stopped and dug in a shoe, "not in the Bible, in Torah..." he dug in between his shoe and sock, or between his sock and skin, and scooped out some hoary clumps.

"Dr. Netanyahu, when we get to a phone, maybe I'll call home and get you something better for your feet? Maybe Edith can run some other shoes over?"

But Netanyahu grunted and plodded on.

"I'm sorry I didn't think of this earlier. But please, I have an extra pair of galoshes. Or even just some rubbers. You must be freezing."



He stopped, heaved around, and spat Yiddish at me: "*Farvas?*" Why? "*Vayl irre kalt, zol ikh tsiter?*" Just because you're cold, should I shiver? "Our people have short legs and small feet and yet still we can walk in the snow better than anyone. You think they have better shoes on a Leftist kibbutz? On a kibbutz, they have only left foot shoes and walk in circles. And in the Nazi camps, where there was more snow than on Mount Hermon, what did they wear but rags? And yet they made do. And some survived. By wrapping rags around the toes that were missing. So just imagine that we're in a Nazi camp in Poland... up there," he mittened at the steeped clocktower of the Chapel, "is the machinegunner and searchlight and over there," he pointed his exposed thumb at the walls of the Seminary complex, "it's all electrified wire and here," and he pointed wildly, but couldn't find anywhere to point, so he just shrugged, "imagine that's our situation and you'll feel better about my feet."

We'd stopped at the entrance to the Seminary complex, a snow-patch as vapid and gray as the sky and he squinted up at the plain personless cross that towered among the trees as if he were considering whether to climb it, if only to escape me.

"Dr. Netanyahu, I was just trying to do you a favor."

"A favor? It's embarrassing. It embarrasses me. Your fixation. This is all you've talked about since you met me, my feet. I walk into your house and it's like God to Moses, take off your shoes, for the ground beneath you is holy."

"It's not holy, it's just a nice rug. But I do sometimes think of Edith as God."

"You think we profane your house, but we are respectful visitors and do what you say, and then you laugh at our socks."

"No one laughed at your socks." I noticed, over Netanyahu's



shoulder, a stumpy figure waddling out toward us in an Eskimo parka. "And anyway, I'm not talking about the desert. Or about my house. I'm talking about how cold it is."

"You don't think it gets cold in the desert?"

"The bush was burning. It was on fire and fire is warm."

"What ho, Dr. Blum?" Dr. Huggles huffed up to greet us, a small round man with a pigsnout face popping out from behind the cinch of small round bifocals. "What theological issue could be so pressing that you have to debate it outside?"

"Dr. Bart Huggles," I said, "meet Dr. Ben-Zion Netanyahu."

"A pleasure," and Netanyahu glared at me and thrust out a frayed-yarn hand. "How foolish of Dr. Blum and I to be having this conversation when a true Bible expert is among us—perhaps, Dr. Huggles, you can come to our aid?"

"I can try."

"I was quoting Dr. Blum some of my favorite passages in the original Hebrew and he asked me the source of one, chapter and verse, and I'm humiliated to admit I don't have the answer," and then he proceeded to pronounce in sly Yiddish a line I knew from the Bronx, "*Mayn fis zenen nas, aber er layd* . . . I think it's Exodus 3, is it not?"

Dr. Huggles approved vigorously, "I believe so, yes. Exodus 3."

"Or is it Exodus 4?"

Dr. Huggles blinked behind his bifocals, utterly lost.

*Mayn fis zenen nas, aber er layd*, meaning: My feet are wet, but he suffers . . . my feet are wet, but he's complaining . . . my feet are wet, but he's the one it bothers . . .

As Dr. Huggles conducted us inside his stoneclad domain, Netanyahu kept nattering in evil Yiddish: "This is the man who teaches

Bible (*Torah*)? This ox (*bulvan*) who thinks Yiddish is Hebrew and pretends to understand me?"

"*Genug*," I said, enough.

"To expect to learn anything from a man like this is to expect to have an egg from a cow... hello, cow, lay one for me..."

"*Shvayg*," I said, shut up.

"Rube, I'll shut up when you tell me: is this man a fool (*narr*) in a college of liars (*ligners*) or a liar in a college of fools?"

And though I was tempted to say, And which would you be, if you ever wound up working here?—instead, I just responded in English, "I'm no Hebrew scholar, unlike Dr. Huggles here, so if you wouldn't mind, let's stick to English."

"*Gewiss*," OK.

"Out of courtesy to my own limitations."

Dr. Huggles smiled and clapped my back. As we entered the classroom, he clutched me, as if holding me back, begging me not to betray him.

There were no empty seats, so we stood, as Netanyahu went to the front. Dr. Huggles, still tugging at me, settled us up against the rear blackboard.

As the two-dozen souls of the Bible class swiveled their heads between us and their guest, I imagined the backs of our coats getting frosted with unerased gospel.

This was perhaps the most mixed class I'd yet been in at Corbin, with about half the attendance women, Sunday schoolmarm-in-training and a forbidding older nun seated ramrod up front in the immaculacy of her habit—the class's lone Catholic, perhaps a commuter from the convent in Dunkirk, and the only student who didn't turn around.



Netanyahu set his briefcase down on the teacher's desk and put his hat and mittens and scarf on the chair. He took off his coat and hung it on the classroom's flagpole, swaddling the stars and stripes in sodden shearling.

Dr. Huggles inclined his head toward me and muttered, "It's mortifying... to put in so much work to bring this great man to campus, only to find out I've been getting his name wrong. All this time, I've been saying it incorrectly. To myself, to the administration. Even to the students. Thank God you said it first, before I could make an ass of myself."

"I'm sure he's used to it," I said. "Mispronouncing."

Netanyahu raised a brow at me. Water from his coat pitpatted to the floor.

"Can you say it again for me?" Dr. Huggles said.

I said it.

He leaned closer. "And again?"

I said it again.

And even closer, "And once more, so I'll retain it?"

I obliged him, and Netanyahu heard.

He lifted his head and yelled, "Present!" and some chuckled.

"As Dr. Blum has so perspicaciously remarked, my name is Dr. Ben-Zion Netanyahu and I am a teacher of history, not of the Bible. But I understand that here at Corbin College, teaching Bible is part of an historian's job. I would like to think that this extra work is expected of me because I possess special skills, the way if you had a botanist on staff who could also pitch like Koufax or hit like Greenberg, you would ask him to coach the Corbin Crows. But the truth is, I possess no special skills in the Biblical; my exegeses tend toward the eisegetical; and in my tradition teaching the Bible means teach-



ing young children and it's typically the work of the last unmarried son of a minor rabbi from the provinces. I try to tell myself that it is honorable work, though it is also grueling, wearying, and frankly unrewarding. Incidentally, this is what is usually told to people in order to convince them to do difficult important jobs that are poorly paid, like trash-collecting, or fighting wars: they say to them, but it is honorable."

He paused and the radiator, which had been clanging throughout, seethed steam.

"So I was thinking: how best to spend this sample class? If any of you besides the sister here were Catholic, we could have ourselves an old-fashioned theological disputation, at the end of which, the loser would be murdered. Though history teaches—again, history, my discipline—that no matter what arguments I'd advance, I'd be the loser and murdered and that would very much interfere with my evening's lecture, which will be engaging, I assure you, and the reception to follow should be ample . . . Can you hear me back there, Dr. Blum?"

"Yes," I said, and then, swallowing phlegm, "loud and clear."

Netanyahu nodded. "Most if not all of you grew up so believing in the Bible's truth that you chose to study it in college, and yet the way it's usually studied in college—especially under historians like myself—almost always undermines that belief by challenging the Bible's veracity. And I don't think that's very fair. Do you, Sister?"

She stammered. "Professor? I'm afraid . . . will you repeat the question?"

"I asked whether you think it's fair that by making a study of your faith, you lose it?"

"I don't know . . . do you have to lose it? Does everyone?"

"Or are you just risking it? Or testing it? Answer her...you, the boy who looks like he does farmwork...the stable-boy with the braces, the suspenders, you...what do you think—is it inevitable that you end up eroding belief by subjecting it to scrutiny?"

"For some people, sir."

"But what about for you?"

"I believe the Bible is the word of God, sir."

"Why? How? Because God said so?"

"Because God said so."

"God told you?"

"Not me. God told someone."

"Yes. Excellent. God told someone. And that someone told someone who told someone else. So once it leaves God's mouth, there's a provenance. God told Moses who told Joshua who told the Elders who told the Prophets who told the Men of the Great Assembly, the Sanhedrin. This is the line of transmission. In other words, God's words were written down in the Torah, which you call the Bible, or the Scriptures, or the Old Testament, which precedes what you call the New Testament in the books you put in the bedside drawers of your inns. The Torah is interpreted in the Mishna. The Mishna is commented upon in the Gemara. The Mishna and the Gemara together make the Talmud. Are you with me? Do you understand what I'm telling you, which my father told me, which his father told him? There is an unbroken line of descent, when the word of God enters history."

He looked out the window, and the students craned their heads in that direction, seeking some manifestation in the burgeoning storm. "From this perspective," he continued, "history seems like something you can believe in, a belief that will not disappoint you."



There is no waiting for revelation, no waiting for a miracle. By contrast with religion, the discipline seems reliable. History makes no promises or covenants beyond telling how something from back there arrives at here. At us in the present. The front of the room, where the teacher is. But history, I have to tell you the bad news, is not always reliable. And Jews, whose life was the communication of God's words from generation to generation, and from faith to faith, knew this better than most. This was because they lived under foreign rulers. Their history in Christian lands was a Christian history; their history in Muslim lands was a Muslim history; written by non-Jews under the patronage of despots who insisted on being flattered, or at least who insisted on the centrality of their roles. It was the Jews who first understood the impossibility of a truth shared by all people. They were the first who understood that all that was possible was a truth shared by the dominant people, the group or subgroup or family in power. Universal truth, if it could exist, could only be found in the Bible, whose claim to divine provenance and authority demanded its accurate preservation. This realization resulted in a firm distinction being made in Jewish culture between preservation and interpretation, which is the psychic adumbration of the trauma that results from a fanaticism of accuracy. Once the Bible had been commended to other faiths, it's the interpretation that interested the Jews. Interpretation was, in many ways, their only freedom. This interpretative capacity allowed them to remain outside history and dwell in myth, which instructed about morals and ethics and structured the calendar and community life. The Jewish preference for the instructive and aesthetic story over the accurately documented history was a direct outgrowth of the circumstances of Diaspora, in which Jews were exiled and oppressed and denied



(memory)

the right of self-rule. In exile, where non-Jews made the history that Jews had to suffer, could the details matter? Why care about the facts, when you can't create them? What would be the point of recording the name and coordinates of every city that kicked you out and the exact specific date of your every misery and slaughter? When it came to chronicling Jewish life, what difference could there be between Rome and Greece and Babylon? Weren't they all just ultimately variations on Egyptian bondage, and all of their rulers essentially incarnations of the Pharaoh? Through this process of repeatedly relating the Bible to the present, history was negated; the more these stories were repeated—every weekly recurrence of the Sabbath, every annual recurrence of a holiday—the more the past was brought into the present, until the past and present were essentially collapsed and each next year was rendered identical to the last, with all occurrences made contemporary. This collapsing of time imparted a certain messianic quality both to the daily lives of individual Jews and to the collective spiritual life of the Jewish people. In other words, through interpretation these preservers of God's word were preserved themselves. Take, for instance, Zion, a historical kingdom that in its destruction was transmuted into myth, becoming in the Diaspora a story and poetic trope that reigned supreme in the Jewish imagination for millennia. The world is full of real events, real things, which have been lost in their destruction and are only remembered as having existed in written history. But Zion, because it was remembered not as written history but as interpretable story, was able to exist again in actuality, with the founding of the modern state of Israel. With the establishment of Israel, the poetic was returned to the practical. This is the first example ever in human civilization in which this happened—in which a story

became real; it became a real country with a real army, real essential services, real treaties and real trade pacts, real supply chains and real sewage. Now that Israel exists, however, the days of the Bible tales are finished and the true history of my people can finally begin and if any Jewish Question still remains to be answered it's whether my people have the ability or appetite to tell the difference."