

WHAT I LEARNED IN HEBREW SCHOOL

by Jeff Goldberg

The guys in the office were just screwing around but it was getting out of hand. A bunch of them had bought Nerf guns, little pump action cannons that can fire volleys of rubber-tipped foam darts. A couple of times a day, war would break out and a barrage of darts would fly across the office. The little missiles were supposed to be harmless, but they could sting if they hit you. I was once clipped on the back of the head.

“Hey, watch out!” I yelled. “You’re going to put somebody’s eye out.”

I sounded like my mother, like any parent of little boys who play with sticks and stones—which, though they may not break your bones, can put someone’s eye out—and I knew it. It was one of the lessons I learned in Hebrew School.

When I was in second grade, my parents sent me to *cheder*—a Jewish elementary religious school—to learn Hebrew. A couple of afternoons each week, after I got home from public school, I was picked up by a little yellow school bus to go to *cheder*. The bus was packed with little boys. Only little boys went to *cheder*.

The bus driver’s name was King. I liked him. He had a slick, greasy pompadour and sideburns like Elvis Presley. I wanted to grow sideburns. I wanted to be Elvis Presley. I collected Elvis bubble gum cards and would shuffle through them as the bus rolled along.

Cheder was a nondescript cinderblock building surrounded by a chain-link fence. Construction of some kind was going on and there was a big pile of dirt in back, where the little Hebrew School

bochurs would play King of the Mountain—tugging, tearing, biting, punching, using whatever weapons they could get their tiny hands on to topple whoever scrambled up the mound first.

We weren't supposed to play on the dirt pile. One of the teachers would come out waving his arms and yelling, "Someone's going to get hurt. You're going to put somebody's eye out," as he shewed us inside.

The small, musty classroom had scrolls with the Hebrew alphabet tacked on the wood-paneled walls and stacks of prayer books on the shelves. We all wore little black yarmulkes and sat at little wooden desks with dried gum and snot underneath the arms, reciting the Hebrew alphabet after the teacher, as he whacked each letter on the scroll with his pointer.

"Alef."

"ALEF."

"Bet."

"BET."

"Gimmel."

"GIMMEL."

"Alef, bet, gimmel, dalet, he..."

"ALEF, BET, GIMMEL, DALET, HE..."

Those five Hebrew letters—alef, bet, gimmel, dalet, he—are the only ones I ever learned to repeat from memory.

I didn't like Hebrew School. In public school, I was smart, but I felt stupid struggling with the strange, backwards language and I didn't like the teacher. He was nothing like Miss Tansey, my second-grade teacher in public school. She was blond and pretty and nice and never raised her voice. The teacher at cheder was a sad-looking, middle-aged man, bald, with prodigious amounts of hair coming out of his nose and ears, whose breath smelled like sardines and cigarettes, and who was always slapping his pointer on his desk and yelling at us. "*Sheket! Sheket Bevakashah!*" he'd bellow. In Hebrew that means "Quiet, please," but in his loud voice it came off more like "Shut the fuck up!"

After a tedious hour, we'd get a ten-minute recess. While I lined up to pee in the single grimy bathroom, a bunch of other boys ran straight for the dirt pile.

It must have been drizzling because he was wearing a yellow slicker. He was a little skinny kid.

We were all back, sitting at our desks, when the teacher brought him in and turned him around to face the class.

"See what happens! SEE!"

There was a stream of blood dripping from the little boy's eye down the front of his yellow slicker.

"SEE, WHAT DID I TELL YOU?! YOU COULD PUT SOMEBODY'S EYE OUT!"

The little boy's eye wasn't literally hanging by a thread of ligaments from an empty socket, and I don't know if he was blind afterwards, but it looked bad.

Another teacher drove the little boy to the hospital, while the other ruffians waited in the principal's office for their parents to come and get them. King picked the rest of us up and we went home.

Now, I'm just some poor *schmuck* who barely knows the alef, bet, but at least I learned something in Hebrew School that the *ganse machers* in Israel seem to have forgotten. Fighting over who gets to stand on top of a pile of dirt is stupid—and dangerous. You can put somebody's eye out.

