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# The Minyan

*Gabriel Oppenheim*

**F**or a long time no one knew about the Minyan's greatest blunder. Some would argue it was better that way.

The little gaffes they had all noticed, overlooked usually, when they gathered on Friday nights in the assigned living room, in the assigned four-bedroom colonial, at 15 minutes past the assigned hour. They could recall, for instance, occasions on which afternoon had slid imperceptibly into dusk, snatching with it the chance to recite Mincha before night. This was a common sin, though one they managed to avert on occasion. Blue would dim grey, the tenth man would creak open the door, and – WHOOOOOSH! – the Dentist had already swathed himself in the prayer shawl's itchy wool, twirling the tallis like a Romanian ribbon dancer. He'd then mumble-race the 12 page service, in two nasal minutes and with bulging cheeks, and neglect not a single syllable. The Mourners' Kaddish would drone the conclusion of the service. And in the glimmer of twilight, they'd make it – just in time to begin the next prayer service, the reception of the Sabbath. Then they'd sing "L'cha Dodi," in which God intones the double commandment to safeguard and remember the seventh day in a single instance. A trick involving all the speed of a Dentist, though our Dentist never said as much, probably not out of modesty but because he had never thought about it. He was a far more practical sort.

"I grew up in the Bronx," he'd say with a shrug. "This is the way I know."

When he davened, he looked like Dizzy Gillespie with chestnuts in his mouth, though Dizzy didn't wear Cole Haan loafers with built-in Nike Air bubbles. "If I go slow," he'd add, "I'll stumble like a man in a dark hotel room." Almost no one complained (I felt he was *too* swift). He helped them

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finish in time, and, besides, the Minyan's unspoken rule was: the faster, the better – so long as the bow-tied Southerner believes every word's being recited. The Southerner, tall and precise, said every word out loud, enunciating the letter "ayin" so it sounded distinct from "alef." He stood during "L'cha Dodi" and looked you dead in the eye. He sometimes intimidated me. But purple hamsters hopped along the perimeter of his yarmulke, and once every couple of months, he'd lead the service, floating us down a river of clouds.

No, they all could remember small mistakes. That time, for instance, when they skipped "Vayechulu" or the time when the Canadian Doctor used the Rosh Hashanah melody for the Shabbos "Barchu." The time the blonde boy began to lead the congregation without shoes, and we spied his bare, vulnerable socks dragging against the dusty wooden floor like mourner's rags. These were improprieties, yes – little actions that countervailed all-encompassing Jewish Law. But in the larger scheme of things, in the weekly schedule to which they trudged, these bumps passed as Interstate potholes. One every 100 or so miles, and only a concern at first, tires in question, until the car rolled along and the open road expanded and the thud sank below a murky mind, which drifted instead to what's for dinner. It was only a quorum of 10 they needed, 10 men to stand (though they were also supposed to answer "Amen"), and if they had that, their characters were girded. They could continue through the next week unburdened by identity's nag, clear of thoughts about meaning and God and choice. They could pray, thanking God for not having to deal with his being. Or, for the lucky ones, just the opposite.

This was the Minyan, and it rotated through their suburban dens week by week, according to a schedule emailed by the Gastroenterologist, on an infrequent basis and only to a handful of its attendees.<sup>1</sup> They weren't a lonely outpost of Jews, stranded by business, or novelistic indulgence, in the wilds of

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, he was asked how he compiled his list, since it seemed haphazard and incomplete. He surmised that it was an old list, comprised of those who had attended the Minyan in its infancy, before the whole neighborhood teemed with Orthodox Jews. But somehow this wasn't right either, for most on the list were recent attendees and not the longstanding. My father figured he disliked us.

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Alaska. They weren't, in fact, an outpost at all. They lived, with maybe 600 or so other Orthodox families, in a Westchester hamlet, north of New York City. Though, in fact, they might have lived to the north of Chicago and Los Angeles, too – I'd have to travel and see. But in Westchester, at least, the custom emerged not to attend synagogue on Friday night but instead to meet up at a local house, on the block, and daven there. Was this out of convenience? One could argue it originally was. But therein linger questions. Our minyan rotated among several blocks, and those closest to the shul were less than a half-mile away. Those farthest from the shul lived 1.5 miles away. For the latter group, then, one could say a local deal made sense. But then one must ask why the near Minyanites traveled a full mile to the far Minyanites instead of simply walking a half-mile to the beautiful synagogue that they lavished thousands of dollars on before Yom Kippur so it could afford new benches for the kids who recite "Aleinu" so they could reach the rostrum on their tippy-toes.

The answer is the Rabbi's Friday night speech.

My family didn't attend the Minyan from its inception, but I always thought a man named Israel was its oldest member. From the time we started going, he was gaunt and drawn, his white hair tufting like pillows. He wore a camel-colored driving cap. He whispered taut phrases, a measured music, and his smile gave the impression he always had something playing, he just streamed it out loud when he pleased. Always grinning, Israel was. And my father and I would walk him home because he lived down our block, and he'd tell stories of the war and then life in Israel and a childhood playing in bomb shelters. He coughed hard sometimes, but it didn't seem to rack him, didn't seem it could, because he was just a wisp, a hair in the wind with little choice but to fly.

The leaves rustled one fall, a shade, a shadow, and I asked my father what happened to Mr. Teitelbaum.

If you were to follow the curve at Israel's house, hanging left, you'd hit the Gastroenterologist's house. His was the small one with the curved driveway and the 15 year-old Acura Legend. The Gastroenterologist was a brilliant man,

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a Dartmouth grad, and the father of four sons who all went to Harvard (except for the second two). Three of the four sons were married, the youngest having just hitched onto his high school sweetheart, a blonde girl with a locker a few over from mine who I think smiled when I saw her but I'm not sure. This left the Gastroenterologist with little parenting to do, although he always had trouble relating to his youngest anyway. I'd go over there and play *Mortal Kombat* with the youngest, who buried himself in a pile of basement cartridges, twitching a joystick about him spastically. He'd beat me. But the father just sort of stood there, and every now and then said something near-silent. In later years I told him I was writing a book. His head picked up, glowing, and he asked what about. "Boxing," I said, and he replied, "Oh."

I might not have appreciated the Gastro, had the Minyan never failed to meet.

The Gastroenterologist now walked to minyan alone, in a white, short-sleeve, button-down shirt, black chinos up to his navel and black sneakers with metal eyelets and chunky soles that thinned out at the edges to resemble a fulcrum. They were designed after the posture-improving sandals of the African Masai tribe, and I figured they probably worked. The Gastroenterologist didn't seem to notice their hideousness.

His closest friend wore pants that just barely scraped his ankles, as if preparing for a recurrence of the Flood. He was an egg-shaped Inventor/Psychologist/Philatelist, and he was always reading about something obscure or excavating bones in Israel or praying at the tomb of a lost Chasidic legend. When minyan was at the Gastro's house, we'd sit in a room with a black leather couch that swallowed you like quicksand. When minyan was at the Inventor's house, we sat on folding chairs in a room of bookshelves, where one wall was devoted to the Holocaust and on the next was Pynchon. The Gastro's youngest son told me the Inventor kept an even larger library upstairs, but I never saw it. Which reminds of one of the funniest stories involving the Inventor and the Minyan. It was a Passover eve on a particularly clement April day, and I walked

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with my father and his college friend to the Inventor's house for davening. En route, my father tried to explain to our guest how idiosyncratic (and perpetually tardy) the Inventor was. He probably won't even show up to minyan at his own house, we joked. When we arrived at his wood and brick place, replete with post-9/11 plastic American flag, his wife let us in. "Where's the Inventor?" we asked. "Oh, I don't even know," she said. "I think he might be across the street."

The Inventor might've struck me as weird – did, in fact, for a long time – had I not later felt his absence.

The rest of the Inventor's story wasn't as funny. He had had two kids – a girl and a boy. The former married a non-Jew and left the fold. Then her husband converted, grew increasingly religious and divorced her. The boy attended Princeton, gravitated toward the Chabad House, took a Yiddish name and, eventually, a Lithuanian accent. He moved to a small Ultra-Orthodox enclave outside Jerusalem. Then one day, the Inventor sent a newspaper clip to the Minyan listserv: his son had been beaten by 20 men who were even more Ultra-Orthodox because his son had defended a man's right to own a television.

Others: the Clothing Exec was nothing like the Gastro or the Inventor. He was divorced and British, with a cook for Shabbos meals. He often began sentences with "did you hear the one about..."

Sometimes these passed for sermons.

The Exec had hosted the Minyan's funniest moment and served as instigator of its second-most embarrassing. The former: one Friday night, sometime right before or after Yom Kipper, 26 people crammed his living room. The room was eclectic in a way that passes for classy, and his children's watercolor paintings hung from the back wall. In the room's far right corner stood a calfskin Indian drum. The chazzan was finishing Kaddish, on his last syllable, and about to begin the Evening Service, when – THUUD! – we all turned to see the Mergers and Acquisition Man in the rear, with an irresistibly

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large mallet and a larger smirk.

The M&A Man usually gabbed during davening; if it hadn't been for the Minyan's greatest mistake, I might've said the Minyan would be better without him.

The second greatest mistake, the fish-brinksmanship affair of 2007, started innocently enough one summer Friday, while the Exec's older son was studying abroad in Asia. Before the afternoon service, the Exec set out double and single malts, aged 12 and 18 years, and beckoned the others to join him in a L'chaim. A pleasant, if not altogether appropriate surprise. The Southerner downed the first shot, the Karate Sensei (who moonlighted at Torah Dojo when not at his law firm) the second. A gurgling liquid fire. They then prayed, and went home to their wives' dinners.

The next week, minyan was at the Law Partner's. They filed in and took their seats. Maybe it was the looks that did it – or maybe it was planned – but the Partner rose, excused himself to the pantry and returned with a bottle of Glenlivet and pastries. They swilled and nibbled.

The week after, the thought crossed my father's mind on the walk to the Southerner's, but he dismissed it – *foolish, given the host* – and exhaled. He and the others sat down on Modernist Plexiglas chairs in the living room. Then the Southerner jabbed his fingers into a hole in the wall and slid it away on a track – *the partition!* – revealing a table of scotches, two platters of herring and a bowl of sour cream.

The Gastro's list had the Sensei next. What did my father know of the Sensei? He's a humble, even meek, man – and kind as can be. He'd serve his guests their hearts' desire up to half his kingdom – were it his choice. But relief, *wonderful relief*, he has a wife. And she has *always* disliked hosting minyan, always feared the guests who come trudging once every six weeks with muddy boots and slippery loafers. She has only been living in the house a few years and she slathers the wooden floor in Pine-Sol and why should *they* be allowed to scuff it?

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My father knew a compromise had been reached whereby the Sensei could host his friends as long a translucent plastic tarp had been laid out underneath their folding chairs. And my father knew: this wife would never allow a bunch of gnawing nosherers to dip herring over her floor.

My father was right: The Minyan had no herring that week, nor sour cream. But the Sensei had bought 64 pieces of sushi and a bowl of nuts (out of parental deference, I ate only a clump of ginger).

And so, with the Sensei fallen, no further bulwark remained. The list had reached my family. We'd be hosting davening (which had continued, if only in lesser proportion to the preceding Kiddush), and my father would have to decide about a snack. Would we buy a whole fish, filet it and serve it with a \$200 Macallan 1876 Replica? Or would my father call off the whole thing, exposing the hospitality as a charade of one-upping with all losers and no end?

My father – never a scotch-drinker and always impatient for my mother's food – bought nothing that week and requested my mother do the same. On Friday night the Minyan assembled late, as usual. When the tenth man arrived, the Dentist launched into the Afternoon Service. No one mentioned food, and afterward, they left as if they had never expected anything more than prayer. Just simply shuffled toward the door and shook our hands. "Gut Shabbos," we said. And the Cold Fish War was ended, if only barely.

But, as I said, such silliness marked only our second lowest point, and this is a story of our greatest error, which for so long, remained unknown – because it's easy to notice the new or unusual – such as the Heiress' Husband's "green" house, with its motion sensor lights that shut off automatically during the "Shmonei Esrei," the prayer of silent, still meditation, and then turn back on when we finish, in violation of the thirty-seventh Sabbath-prohibited category of work – yet it's hard to notice the usual. And the main fact about this minyan, or any, was its very happening. Its usualness. A minyan, by definition, occurs when 10 men gather. Yes, it is the gathering *and* all that springs from the gathering, but really, its essence lies in the former. Each week

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10 men pledged to be in a certain place at a given time (give or take a Jewish delay of 15 minutes) and each week they arrived. Regardless of secret fights – with wives, disease, age – regardless of moods. The most skeptical one came and belted out “L’cha Dodi” with such fervor and joy that even the popped-collar Mergers and Acquisitions Man, who gabbed about renovations and his ugly blue Toyota Solara, had to sing, such was the frisson racing through the room. What was this display of singing, really? Could it even be called prayer? Again, more questions. But, like boxing, it was a fact so powerfully literary – men and boys and sofas, heart and hearth and hunger, each Friday eve after a slog-week of work, just before dinner and the ripping of a warm-kneaded challah – that I’d beg you to leave it alone and not question. It just was.

Except for the week when it wasn’t.

That week, so hidden on a calendar of 52, should have been the first on the Gastro’s new schedule for the three upcoming months. But when the Gastro had compiled it some several weeks earlier – as was his doctorly wont when an old document was set to expire – he had started the rotation seven days too late. That is, he had mistakenly begun the rotation on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, though the old schedule ran only till the 8<sup>th</sup>.

So the week of the 15<sup>th</sup> came, and the listserv went quiet, for there was no assigned host and thus no one to plead (“Ok,” my dad had once emailed in response to the Clothing Exec’s promised attendance. “Who else is coming and on a TIMELY basis??”). And when the emails vanished and the Blackberries stilled, they all sort of hedged and resolved to a break. “My children are visiting,” the Gastro said. “I should spend the time with them.”

“My kids are young,” the Dentist said. “They shouldn’t stay up.”

“You know,” the Clothing Exec said, “I could really use another drum.”

Thus, Thursday faded into Friday and Friday into night, and it was dark and dead and empty. Each for his own reason stayed in his home and each for a moment thought of his missing. But the Minyan was meeting still, they

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said, and somewhere its songs were rising. And one person's absence does not a quorum break, and next week I'll count again.

So no minyan met that night – nowhere and with no one – and it wasn't until, in reviewing old schedules for this piece, I realized it and brought it to the Gastro's attention.

“Let it go,” he said, when I asked how it happened. “It was just one time.”

And I was going to let it slide, into a hole, with Mr. Teitelbaum and televisions and motion sensor lights. But it occurred to me, later, that no one would know whether it had happened before and no one would know if it happened again.

And there might be other minyans not meeting, thousands of them, all over the suburbs, of individuals resolved to be alone, their potential gatherings weekly unrealized.

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