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## 90 CONSECUTIVE LIFE SENTENCES

*“And G-d said unto Abraham, know of a certainty that thy seed shall be strangers in a land that is not theirs.” —Maxwell House Haggadah, Deluxe Edition, 1962*

The night they buried Grandpa Meyer, Aaron Spitz headed southward through the city where the very first Spitz set up shop some 90 years earlier.

Every Passover, Aaron’s mother Mitzi doled out the same battered blue prayer hymnals, printed and distributed compliments of Maxwell House, from which his father led a service chock full of lukewarm, coffee-based witticisms.

In the beginning, our ancestors were idolaters who dwelled on the other side of the river, and G-d took Abraham to the land of Canaan, and there multiplied his seed; and He gave unto Abraham, Isaac; and gave unto Isaac, Jacob; and gave unto Jacob, twelve children; and they all went down to Egypt and sojourned there, and there became a nation, great, mighty, and numerous, generally curly-haired, bookish, and not too good at sports.

They really came out of the woodwork for his grandfather’s funeral, Aaron thought, surveying the assembly at Mt. Ararat Memorial Park, and it worried him—all those Spitzes in one place spelled trouble.

“In the beginning,” Douglas Spitz would read, after his customary mock blessing over the Sanka, “our ancestors were idolaters who dwelled on the other side of the river,” which, young Aaron believed, was why they never invited the New Jersey contingent to Seder.

Some Spitzes Aaron saw at every holiday, and some he knew mostly by the non-denominational seasons greeting cards his mother displayed on the china hutch.

Vietnam left a lasting imprint on both Mervin Spitz and his right hand: the two ceased owning a middle finger sometime in '72.

An effort to reconnect, was Cousin Gersh's explanation for the black woven yarmulke he began pinning to his skull the day he saw *Yentl*, but everyone took it for what it really was—an inexpensive solution to a freshly forming bald spot.

And the Egyptians afflicted us, laid heavy bondage upon us; and the Eternal heard our cries; and with a strong hand and an outstretched arm brought us forth from the land of Egypt; and, after watching us wander and wander, hither and thither, into and out of a homeland from which we were repeatedly expelled, He spread us to the winds; and we all (well, many) went down to Europe and sojourned there; and there established villages, learned trades, fiddled on rooftops, and multiplied according to the scripture: fruitfully.

Some Spitzes died while Aaron was very young (if not before).

Papa Louie, it was said of the great Spitz forefather, wore cuff-linked shirts and fine wool blazers, removing them only on Sundays to landscape the family burial plot.

Exempted from military service by extreme obesity, Great Uncle Solly spent the War years and a good deal afterward driving a meat truck on Staten Island.

Little was known about Mama Beylke, save a lifelong distrust of American grocery stores and that she washed all her eggs by hand, perennially declaring "you never can tell about those chickens."

Great Uncle Sender contracted fatal salmonella poisoning during the Korean Conflict.

Some Spitzes Aaron saw at the funeral for the first time in years, slugging back Scotch to the old man's memory.

Cousin Delilah had two life ambitions: to shoot a perfect game in Atari bowling, and something she mentioned only as "for

me to know and you to find out, once I shoot a perfect game in Atari bowling."

It's against Jewish law to name a baby Junior, the family told Cousin Mitchie and his wife Elyssa, so they called their son Christian; that was that for them.

Cousin Billy, who many Spitzes regarded as dark, peculiar, and nothing like his older brother Jacob, gained acceptance to a prestigious fashion institute, where with his wiry build and Mediterranean complexion he fast became the toast of Chelsea.

And some Spitzes, Aaron realized as he crossed 72nd Street, he'd probably never see again, because of geography, circumstance, and Cousin Gersh, or perhaps more accurately, Cousin Gersh's cream-colored Buick Le Sabre.

Clinically depressed and ardently thrifty, Cousin Frieda saved thousands on professional therapy by joining the Catholic church, where she worked out her issues free of charge, in confessional.

Great Aunt Miriam suffered from lupus, migraines, and hyperthyroidism; indigestion, arrhythmia, and hysterical blindness; ADD, the DTs, and type one or two diabetes (whichever proved more serious), but her most profound ailment stemmed from excessive free time and a dog-eared copy of the *Physician's Desk Reference*.

And the Europeans afflicted us, laid pogroms upon us (and, later, far worse); and again the Eternal heard our cries; and with a strong hand, an outstretched arm, and a steerage-class steamer ticket brought forth from Lithuania an apprentice tailor named Lyubov Spz

According to Grandpa Meyer, not only was cabbage delicious, it also lengthened your life—would he steer you wrong?

Cousin Mervie had Jacob and Billy run military drills in their backyard, chanting such creatively self-penned cadences as "Push-ups, push-ups, we love push-ups" and "If I die on the VC front, ship me home in a wooden box."

And G-d delivered Lyubov Spz to Ellis Island, where an immigration officer domesticated his first name, crammed a vowel into

his last, and sent him off the newly-christened Jew, Louis Spitz.

In 1964, at a roadside stop en route to Chaim's Catskills Joyland Bungalows, a teen-aged Alter Spitz stumbled upon a G-d-given talent for speed-eating pork chops.

No one dared alienate Douglas Spitz, MD—who else but flesh and blood would hold clinic at every gathering, dropping his chopped liver to inspect the family's abscesses in an upstairs bedroom?

And Louis Spitz went down to the Lower East Side and sojourned there; and G-d gave unto Papa Louie a wife, Beylke, and unto them, seven children: Meyer, Sadie, Solomon, Miriam, Morris, Sender, and Adolf (who for obvious reasons changed his name—to Hymie—immediately following the invasion of Poland).

Potȳncza Rosenkopf eluded Auschwitz beneath a barn in the Czech hinterlands, only to re-surface in Queens as a chain-smoking colorist named Frenchie.

Both because and in spite of her parents—Al and Golda Golden, a devout agnostic and his conciliatory wife—Mitzi Spitz spent her whole life aching for a Bat Mitzvah.

And G-d gave unto Meyer and Frenchie, Douglas, a well-behaved boy who grew into a well-behaved physician; and unto Sadie, who married Abe Spitz (no relation), Mervin and Irving, the latter succumbing to childhood illness; and He gave unto Solomon, Alter and Delilah, both (unfortunately) his veritable likenesses; and unto Miriam, Gersh and Frieda, and they all went out to Teaneck; and He gave unto Maury, Mitchell; and unto Sender, nothing; and unto Hymie, well, Hymie never married, so Hymie never procreated, at least not to anybody's knowledge.

For a brief period during the 1980s, the Douglas Spitzes and Mervin Spitzes saw each other socially, until the night that Cousin Mervie, after refusing to pay for soggy onion rings, threatened their waiter with a plastic-handled steak knife.

Did Uncle Maury ever tell you about the time he invented the triangular steering wheel?

And G-d brought forth some Spitzes to the suburbs and they

sojourned there; and with a strong hand and an outstretched arm brought other Spitzes further, to sojourn there instead; and He gave unto Mervin, Jacob and Billy, whose rivalry their father more or less encouraged; and unto Gersh, a daughter, Ariel, now a kosher vegan chef living in Marin; and unto Mitchie, three sons; and unto Delilah, one more; and He gave unto Douglas, Aaron, who, like it or not, stood in line for a dubious legacy.

“One day this will be yours,” Aaron's father had sighed as the mourners clashed over a shovel to toss dirt on Grandpa Meyer's casket, “but for now, it's all mine.”

When asked what compelled an eighty-year-old man to carry a box-cutter to pinochle games, the cardiologist, and his eldest brother's funeral, Hymie Spitz whipped the blade from its ankle sheath and justified: “Anyone messes with me, I can make my mark.”

For a brief period during the 1980s, the Douglas Spitzes and Mervin Spitzes saw each other socially, remanding custody of their children to Cousin Delilah, an unwed, emotionally-disturbed, whopper of a woman who wore a wig and didn't get cable.

The Infinity Room at Freehold Gardens Hotel and Conference Center was the site of Cousin Ariel's Bat Mitzvah, as well as one of the bloodier Spitz clashes, which began as a debate concerning the greatest Jewish ballplayer of all time.

Whatever you needed—a job, a parking ticket fix, even, so the story went, a healthy White baby from the illicit adoption market—Flaumenbaum was the man to ask, though exactly how a retail sales clerk might swing such rakish miracles remained about as clear as his actual relation to anyone.

According to Grandpa Meyer, the best way to take cabbage was in the form of health salad, which, he explained, was just like cole-slaw but without the mayo—what self-respecting Jew eats mayo?

One morning, upon discovering that his truck had been pillaged by two neighborhood toughs, the DiMarzio brothers, Uncle Solly waddled up to their candy store hangout to invoke the name of a certain brother of his own.

Jacob Spitz went to Princeton a scholar-athlete and nursing home

volunteer, but returned an aspiring financial advisor who, at every family event starting with his own graduation, tried to schmooze the Spitz elders into letting him invest their social security.

Returning laundry to young Mitzi's dresser one afternoon, Golda Golden uncovered unambiguous evidence of her baby's prayerful longing: a forged Hebrew school registration form resting on a pillow of training bras.

Did Uncle Maury ever tell you about the DC-3, the dual propeller fire, and the pilot who lost his nerve over Idlewild, forcing him to land the plane himself?

One day, after years at the console, two young Spitzes sat awe-struck as Cousin Delilah rolled eleven consecutive strikes, called for silence, lit a menthol, hit her twelfth, and then, with the monitor still flashing, laid down her joystick to frame a new plan.

Douglas and Mitzi Spitz were a study of marital harmony, except during the six months preceding Aaron's Bar Mitzvah, when back-and-forth party planning resembled labor negotiations with the teamsters' union.

Sanford "Sandy" Koufax (1935- ): 165-87 (lifetime); 2.76 ERA (lifetime); 0.95 ERA (World Series); 382 strikeouts (1965); perfect game (1965); Hall of Fame (1972); retired, 1966; quit the broadcast booth to pursue a successful career in real estate.

Never flip off a Dac Cong sharpshooter, Cousin Mervie used to say, and then he stopped saying it, just like that.

A week after achieving virtual flawlessness, Cousin Delilah took the boys for celebratory burgers, and there, beside the drive-thru window, confided in them a secret plan involving a little smooth jazz, a lot of cream sherry, and her unwitting paramour, an auto mechanic known to the family as "Andy the Goy."

The Spitzes held grudges the way other families held blue-chip stock portfolios, Aaron thought, cruising below 54th Street, which some, but not all, Spitzes also held (and which birthed some, but not all, the grudges).

To avoid scenes like the one at Freehold Gardens, Douglas Spitz proposed an in-and-out affair, with a seating plan that featured a

hundred tables for two; Mitzi, by contrast, would accept nothing less than the whole *shmeaar*.

An hour later Uncle Solly found his truck restocked, with a note on the seat that read: "Whoever done it didn't know whose brother you was."

Al Golden confronted his daughter as if he'd caught her smoking cigarettes, or growing reefer in the attic, and, tearing the registration form eight ways from Sunday, thundered his pronouncement: "In this house, we do *not* worship G-d."

Standing under the *chupah* on his wedding day, June 18, 1971, Douglas Spitz glanced over at Uncle Hymie, whose powder-blue tuxedo jacket gapped just enough to reveal a shoulder-holstered sidearm, all but substantiating the rumors of said uncle's involvement with the Jewish mafia.

Henry Benjamin "Hank" Greenberg (1911-1986): .313 avg. (lifetime); 331 HR (lifetime); 183 RBI (1937); 58 HR (1938); Hall of Fame (1956); retired, 1947; owned two pennant-winning teams, then sold his interests to pursue a successful career on Wall Street.

Cousin Delilah outlined her stratagem in gruesome anatomical detail, asking ten-year-old Aaron's take on potential contraceptive deceptions and handing eight-year-old Billy a fertility calendar marked toward September's end with five red Xs.

Eventually it was decided: the Aaron Spitz Bar Mitzvah would be held under a tent in the yard and the theme would be "Lost in Space"; the cocktail hour would span two hours and the buffet would feature an omelet station, pasta bar, and sushi chef; yes to inflatable guitars and light-up sunglasses, no to inflatable saxophones and light-up yo-yos; yes to caricaturists, karaoke, and Zoltrax the Breakdancing Robot; all capitulated by Douglas as long as they put Gersh's table in the garage, which they'd call the VIP room.

Papa Louie's children labored after school in the family shop, which was why, despite a long-standing refusal to mop floors, wash dishes, or even fix sandwiches for themselves, every Spitz brother could hem a skirt like nobody's business.

For old-world sweetness with a new-world twist, Batya Spitz boiled beef brisket in a six-pack of Budweiser, but how she achieved its trademark tang caused much speculation, especially when she stopped making it after going on dialysis.

Delilah Spitz went with a perforated diaphragm (Aaron's suggestion) selected days 2, 9, and 18 herself (Billy was horrified speechless), and birthed a son, Jonathan.

While his father's fitness regimen didn't quite achieve its envisioned outcome, the taut physique it gave Cousin Billy served him well, especially once he began wearing tank tops and cutoff jeans shorts.

According to Grandpa Meyer, the only place to go for health salad was the Continental Diner on Boca Larga Avenue, where they brought you as much as you wanted, and if you sat before six, you got soup and salad and coffee and dessert and where in New York did you find a bargain like that?

Down on East 36th, Aaron pictured 50 people in a ten-foot dining room, wielding party plates like polystyrene tournament armor in an all-out joust for the pastrami tray.

Jonathan Spitz inherited an anonymous father, the Spitz surname, and an out-of-date gaming system, but distanced himself from all three by growing up to become an alterna-punk bassist known to the scene as "Johnnie the Goy."

Half the Spitzes were Greenberg men, half for Sandy Koufax, but with Gersh's brisk dismissal of Mervie's candidate—the convert Rod Carew—tensions really escalated as both jumped to their feet and one swiped the yarmulke off the other's gleaming scalp.

"Long hours mean more work, more work means more money, and more money means more freedom," Cousin Jacob said of his newfound corporate ethos, either ignorant of, or simply ignoring, his people's sad history with the concept of "work makes free."

Frenchie Spitz eluded Auschwitz beneath a barn in the Czech hinterlands, only to witness, at the Continental Diner on Boca Larga Avenue, the aneurysm that sent her husband Meyer face-first into a bowl of health salad.

The Battle of Freehold Gardens, as it would later be referred to, ended over coffee and halvah, with an unsteady ceasefire brokered, as always, by Grandpa Meyer, who went not by career statistics, but number of games missed for religious observance.

While the family considered Jacob Spitz its shining star, having earned millions in what he characterized as a nationwide synagogue-building fund, the SEC considered him under investigation for violating Sections 5(a), 5(c), and 17(a) of the Securities Act of 1933, regarding pyramid schemes and fraud.

Did Uncle Maury ever tell you about how Ralph Capone—you know, Snooky's kid brother—visited him in Bayside, and how he'd never tasted such delicious brisket, so your Aunt Batya mailed him one every month until his guts rotted out and he died?

In later years, Al and Golda Golden did not, as Mitzi suggested, retire closer to her on Long Island, choosing Nevada instead, where they passed their final days beneath a "What Would Jesus Drive?" billboard in a Born-Again stronghold near Laughlin.

Disagreements blazed, waned, festered, and flared-up again, though mostly they boiled down to one sentence: who didn't call who about whoever's hospitalization.

Aaron saved Flaumenbaum's Bar Mitzvah gift for last, and it tantalized him through an endless procession of fountain pens, leatherette toiletry cases, and ten-year savings bonds.

Grandpa Meyer's decision: Greenberg's Yom Kippur didn't top Koufax's Yom Kippur *and* Rosh Hashana—and during the World Series, no less, which the Dodgers won, thank G-d, and haven't we suffered enough blame already?

If only once in the years between the Battle of Freehold Gardens and that solemn April morning, thought Aaron as he crossed East 18th, Mervie had telephoned Gersh to ask about his mother's health; if only Gersh had let his wife drive.

To Aaron's devastation, the envelope held only a check, and the signature was missing.

Cousin Billy was satisfied by his older brother's sentence, and that

he'd finally gained an edge in the competition that dictated all aspects of his life, until he received a letter from Federal Prison Camp Otisville, in which Jacob Spitz had penned: "I may be here for 36 years, but you'll always be a faggot."

Dutifully if not wearily, Douglas and Mitzi Spitz hosted every family Seder until that fateful year when, between gefilte fish and soup courses, Cousin Mervie outed Cousin Billy and Cousin Billy outed his father, whose war wound, it turned out, came not from a sniper in Laos, but a bowling alley ball-return at Kaneohe Marine Base, Hawaii.

On Kislev 30 in the Hebrew year 5764, the Spitz family forewent its traditional schedule of movies, Chinese food, and more movies to gather at Temple Beth Shalom for the Bat Mitzvah of Mitzi Spitz, who on Christmas Day 2003 finally became a woman at age 54.

Though congeniality among the Spitzes had been dying since the late 70s—when Uncle Shmulie, Gersh's dad, and Uncle Abie, Mervie's dad, came to blows at Cousin Mitchie's wedding—Gersh himself drove the final nail into the family coffin, when, mere minutes after laying Meyer Spitz to rest, he attempted to run down a hobbling Aunt Sadie in the visitors parking lot at Mt. Ararat Memorial Park.

As Aaron reached the streets of the Lower East Side, where numbers give way to a chaos of names, it dawned on him that while he wasn't the sole surviving Spitz, he would be, nonetheless, the last.

On Kislev 30 in the Hebrew year 5764, the pews at Temple Emmanuel were empty, except for Aaron and his father.

Through every Hebrew's dying lips should pass one final sentence, the *Sh'ma*—Hear O Israel the Lord is G-d, the Lord is One—but Meyer Spitz' mouth was full of cabbage.

And G-d had given unto Aaron's father's generation all the Spitzes He would give, and the fruits of their circumcised loins were either homosexual, female, blackballed, serving prison sentences, or Aaron.

The night they buried Grandpa Meyer, Aaron Spitz headed

southward through the city, finally stopping at the tenement that several lifetimes ago housed the Spitz family tailor shop and, in a modest rear apartment, the family itself.

The Coffees of Maxwell House are privileged to sponsor this Passover hymnal, and wish to express particular appreciation to Rabbi Bernard Levy, under whose supervision Yuban is now certified *kosher l'Pesach*.

The tenement had been transformed into a nightclub.

The night they buried Grandpa Meyer, Aaron flashed the bouncer his ID, parted the silk-shirted crowd, and, in the very room where the very first Spitz planted his seed some 90 years earlier, sat beside a woman in high-riding thong underwear and ordered some drink called a cucumber sakitini.

Amen.