

Errands

by [Jeffrey Burghauser](#) (March 2024)



Two Men with Ouds, from the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, c. 1257–83.

Excerpt from an Epistolary Novella

to Rubab Bazaar

Dear Mr. Kabir,

Surveying different Afghan rubabs on your website, I'm struck by their apparent ... *primitiveness*. The tuning pegs look as though they were whittled with a pocketknife. The headstocks don't even *aspire* to consistency with the necks.

Is my Eurocentrism leading me astray here, or are these instruments, in fact, hastily manufactured for the tourist trade? (These aren't mutually exclusive, of course.) Or do I need to recalibrate my canons of taste so as to recognize a distinctively Afghan aesthetic which discovers beauty in smudged leather and splintering wood?

I thank you in advance for your clarification.

Best,

Isaac Osherovitz



The rubab is known as 'the lion of instruments' and is one of the two national instruments of Afghanistan. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

to Minnie Osherovitz

Dear Love,

What a ridiculous pain in the ass. (Actually, a pain in the ass is—by definition—ridiculous. Otherwise, it graduates to the level of a *struggle*. That's the problem with modernity: not enough struggles, too many pains in the ass.) I mean, bloody hell. The dishwasher can't be *that* old. Have you phoned the insurance people?

Love,

Isaac

to James Fire, Ed.D

Dear James,

I'm writing to express my concerns about Dryden Trier. Now that he's actually (albeit belatedly) producing work, I've had the opportunity to observe his progress in a systematic way. Given what I've seen, the skills we've been cultivating seem to exist in a blind spot for him. Unfortunately, these skills are necessary for success in a broad range of subjects of great academic and professional relevance.

I'm writing to solicit your guidance about how I can serve Dryden best.

Thanks,

Isaac

to Henry Gross, J.D.

Dear Hank,

I saw my brother today, and he gave me the photocopies of those letters you were sweet enough to preserve with such fidelity. The penalty of having grown up before email is the occasional survival of utterly shameful letters.

Obviously, they're your property. However, I'd be grateful if you decided *not* to keep them on your office wall—as I recall you boasting over a decade ago, which is the last time I shuddered with revulsion to be reminded that these letters still exist. Increasingly, I have a reputation to protect. It's a lovely thing. I'm sure you can understand my eagerness to keep documents of this sort private.

I hope life is treating you gently.

Faternally yours,

Isaac

to James Fire, Ed.D

Dear James,

Thanks for your prompt follow-up questions regarding my suggested facilities-upgrade. A bathroom beautification scheme might inspire a greater respect for school property amongst those students otherwise inclined (for instance) to urinate on floors or walls.

While Booker T. Washington was preparing black students for citizenship, he discovered that stressing daily tooth-brushing conditioned them to take pride in their appearance, their work, their conduct, and (in general) stimulated social and academic tendencies that extended well beyond dental hygiene.

I wonder if an emphasis on respect for the bathroom might be similarly stimulating.

Best,

Isaac

P.S.: Dryden Trier has finally submitted his paper. The writing seems somehow willfully bad. And it's smeared with what appears to be blood. When questioned, Dryden smiled proudly, as if some particularly well-crafted piece of wit had perfectly hit its mark.

Should you be interested in seeing the essay, I have stored it in a convenient plastic sleeve.

to Rubab Bazaar

Dear Mr. Kabir,

Two items:

1. Your powers of observation have not failed you: Osherovitz is (indeed) a Jewish name. Since its possessor is himself Jewish, nothing here seems out of order.
2. I can assure you that I had nothing whatsoever to do with the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.

I shall be taking my business elsewhere.

Cordially,

Isaac the Jew

to Tony Rafiq's World of Ouds

Dear Mr. Rafiq:

I wondered if you could recommend a good Syrian oud. Do any higher-end instruments have geared tuners, or do incommodious friction pegs hold the field?

Best,

Isaac



Syrian oud. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

to Rabbi Ari Schwartz

Dear Ari,

It's been decades since our quarrel. All the same, I was sorry to learn of your father's passing. I'm writing to send my condolences. I remember many a Shabbos meal over which he presided with such warmth and humor. I also remember wishing that my own family had anything *like* the intimacy that filled your childhood home. *May you be comforted amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.*

Please send my most affectionate regards to your family.

As ever,

Isaac Osherovitz

—

to Abraham Uziel, M.D.

Dear Abe,

You say your wife is “forgetful, spiteful, sexless & cruel”; it sounds like the motto etched below the heraldic crest of an academy that trains lesbian assassins.

And you're right: mortality sucks. The body never lets one forget who holds the cards. I've grown swinishly fat. When clean-shaven, my face resembles something that belongs behind a delicatessen counter. Although you'd never know it, I haven't eaten carbs or sugars for over a year. And I'm *still* shaped like the sort of municipally-sanctioned paper sack you fill with leaves, and set out at the curb on designated Tuesdays.

The medical profession is stumped. I'm scheduled to visit an “integrative medicine” practice, where, having exhausted every

deposit of genuinely empirical clarity, you can have a down-market Mr. Miyagi give you a diagnostic wrist massage with his right hand, while using the left to lodge some macerated ginger up your anus.

What ever happened to that genus of Jewish male I was surrounded by as a kid: the Fat,-Happy-And-Tolerably-Healthy-Yid? They had hairy chests, stank of garlic and fish, drank slivovitz, and died amiably in their very late 80s. There was a half-blind Romanian who'd walk home from *shul* every Friday night in the middle of Mountain Avenue. Horns would honk; drivers would throw tantrums. Let me tell you just how kind Destiny was to this *schmendrick*: it took him *over twenty years* of doing this before the Inevitable caught up with him, which arrived in the form of a Mack Super-Liner, which launched him into the suburban darkness like a little Yid rocket. He made touchdown just in time to be flattened by a Toyota coming from the opposite direction.

Is it me, or does Destiny seem rather less forgiving nowadays?

Fraternally yours,

Isaac

to SIR Algernon Aire

Dear Sir Algernon:

As a longtime fan of yours (your *lieder* recordings were revelatory to me), I've been seeking an excuse to write you. As compromising and vaguely pathetic as the whole undertaking necessarily is, here we go.

There's a lovely lyric by Israeli poet Udi Ze'ev (1910 – 1970), "Nocturne", which was set to music in the 60s by Misha

Nachman for use in a short-lived musical called *The Hasmoneans*. Ze'ev's estate permitted me to translate it. My approach was to sacrifice a bit of literal meaning in favor of absolute fidelity to the original scansion, so that it might be performed with Nachman's melody.

In case you've been deliriously ransacking the world's musical heritage for a Hebrew lullaby to record, I'd like to put my humble effort at your disposal. I've enclosed:

1. My translation;
2. Sheet music, and;
3. My email exchange with musician Aluf Hass (Ze'ev's grandson and executor) authorizing my translation.

Presuming you're not a recreational Hebraist, I hope that including the email exchange will attest to my seriousness insofar as the bare facts are concerned, namely, that I contacted a Googleable Israeli recording artist, and that he wrote back.

Very sincerely yours,

Isaac Osherovitz

to Abraham Uziel, M.D.

Dear Abe,

Yesterday afternoon, Minnie, cycling home from work, was hit by a car. She was very lucky, having escaped with bruising and superficial lacerations. Paramedics released her after a half-hour. When she phoned me (in understandable distress) to pick her up, the strangest thought formed in my mind. It formed, and then consolidated, and then metastasized. No, it wasn't a thought so much as an elation...an elation that came of the

recognition that:

1. Major Premise: A reckless driver had screwed up;
 2. Minor Premise: I was not the reckless driver.
- ERGO: Someone other than me had screwed up, and screwed up badly, thereby earning for the screwdriver-upper (again, *someone other than me*) a boatload of bona fide, legitimate, sleep-disturbing guilt.

Though I felt no particular sense of resentment (after all, everything had turned out well, and, probability being what it is, I could just as easily have been the reckless driver), I had every right—a right which nobody could deny me—to despise the reckless motorist who had “nearly killed my wife”.

As I drove the mile down Indianola Avenue, I was positively giddy at all the abuse I could propel at the reckless driver. I came close to praying that it was a woman driver—they’re so much easier to wound. And not just a woman, but a childless woman. I wanted her to think:

I’d avoided marriage in an effort to maintain the independence I thought I needed in order to manage my career. Now, I see that my career is hardly worth the sacrifice, that my years of fertility are ebbing away, and that I’m no longer young enough to attract someone like the peerless Putz McPutz, who wanted to marry me when we were both twenty-two, but who I rejected with great self-satisfaction. Perhaps every major decision I’ve made over the past decade wasn’t a calculated heave of confidence and self-definition, but rather the reflection of a bottomless and fundamental cowardice. And here’s this woman—beautiful, athletic, poised—...a woman with real courage, with an impressive career *and* a family *and* a loving husband: and I nearly killed her. I very nearly killed the person I could have been had I known a decade ago what now seems excruciatingly apparent. Woe is me!

Or something to that effect.

The dream is monstrous, I know. Does there exist inside of me, in some rudimentary form, the madness that fuels a man through long nights pasting defaced newspaper articles, purloined evidentiary photographs, and menacingly arbitrary ephemera to the wall with a glue stick?

If that's the direction I'm going in, I'll need to radically retool my work schedule.

Fraternally yours,

Isaac

to CATHOLIC Apologists On-Call

To Whom It May Concern:

What do Catholics mean when referring to "the Church"? Whenever someone deeply enmeshed in Church life behaves disgracefully, we're assured that he was an outlier, or somehow illegitimate as a representative of "the Church". When judged by those standards that the Church applies so blithely to "the culture", however, the Church itself comes out looking fairly loathsome.

And so, is there a sort of Platonic ideal of "the Church" that remains untarnished by the sublunary conduct of actual Catholics? For argument's sake, let's say that the Pope was an opium-smoking bank robber, that every last priest was a gender-fluid carjacker, and that every last church was converted into a gaming parlor. Would some entity that we might denominate "the Church" remain untainted? Is there a point (even theoretically) at which having been founded by Christ becomes insufficient, and "the Church" actually *becomes*

the rottenness occasionally done by its representatives?

If not for difficulties of this sort, I could very nearly imagine myself becoming a Catholic. I'd be grateful if you could direct me toward articles or books that might clarify things. I'm fairly literate, so please suggest something substantial.

Sincerely,

Isaac Osherovitz

to BOSTON PIPES LTD.

To Whom It May Concern:

I'm looking for an instrument in the bagpipe family, and I wondered if any variety is chromatic. Thanks for your time, and I look forward to your reply.

Best,

Isaac Osherovitz



Young Bedouin man blowing (bagpipe) instrument. Image courtesy of the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress

to Abraham Uziel, M.D.

Dear Abe,

You'll recall the recent culture-war dustup over the propriety of yoga pants. I wonder about those men who railed against them. Surely, they must be so thoroughly steeped in Beauty, so joyously aware of the Universe's symmetry, that they find any further reminders (...guileless, elastic-limbed reminders who do deep Oriental stretches on the driveway preparatory to long, arduous excursions in the summer heat; reminders who, although below the age of consent, can be observed—indeed,

scrutinized—in their 80%-to-90% nudity, sweating and panting, their damp, reddened faces set in a rictus of transport; reminders swinging by the supermarket after the gym—just a quick dash to get some alpine water, musky muesli and Edenic plums) to be downright superfluous.

Either that, or they're prudish nitwits.

I've come to feel a certain pity for women. Although they have no idea how they affect men, they're forced to live with the consequences, which must be bewildering. There was even an essay (I forget where) examining such "data" as exists on why, exactly, women elect to wear yoga pants. They wear them for comfort, it turns out. The sheer frivolity of "comfort" when juxtaposed with the volcanic effect on us is almost grotesque.

What are your own feelings regarding the propriety of yoga pants?

Best,

Isaac

to Juliana Shephard

Dear Ms. Shephard:

Assuming that you are the same Juliana Shephard mentioned in yesterday's police report, good morning. My name is Isaac Osherovitz; I'm the husband of the injured cyclist. I wanted to apologize for being foul towards you yesterday. There's no excuse. None whatever. I was completely out of line, and I'm writing to ask for your forgiveness.

Sincerely,

Isaac Osherovitz

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Jeffrey Burghauser is a teacher in Columbus, Ohio. He was educated at SUNY-Buffalo and the University of Leeds. He currently studies the five-string banjo with a focus on pre-WWII picking styles. A former artist-in-residence at the Arad Arts Project (Israel), his poems have appeared (or are forthcoming) in *Appalachian Journal*, *Fearsome Critters*, *Iceview*, *Lehrhaus*, and *New English Review*. Jeffrey's book-length collections are available on [Amazon](#), and his website is www.jeffreyburghauser.com.

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