# My Brother's Face

Bharat Ram

Photo by Bharat Ram/Flickr

**By Jennifer Lang**

"Are you related?" a woman at the wedding asks me. When I tell her the father of the bride's my brother, she says, "You look just like him." As much as we resemble one another physically—deep-set eyes, crinkly smile, and fair, freckled skin—we couldn't be more different emotionally.

My only sibling looks like a stranger, his belly protruding over his pants and a once reddish beard now grey. For his twenty-year-old daughter's wedding, he dresses in black trousers, pressed white shirt, solid tie, and black hat covering short *payot*, or sidelocks, tucked behind his ears. He wears a long, black, silk robe, reserved for special occasions. This modern-day Jerusalem affair could be a Hollywood movie set of a seventeenth-century Polish *shtetl.*

I observe my brother at the *bedecken* ceremony where my niece sits like a queen in a special chair, her upper body pitching forward and back, as she feverishly mumbles words to God and awaits her groom's arrival. The couple hasn't seen one another for a week. In their Ultra-Orthodox community, where males and females eat, dance, and celebrate separately, divided by a makeshift wall, men escort the groom into the women's section so he can verify the bride is the correct woman then lower her veil, a tradition of Jewish males since Jacob wed a veiled Leah in error.

Mike identifies as Haredi: an Orthodox Jewish sect characterized by strict adherence to Jewish law and rejection of modern secular culture and the state of Israel. I'm secular. Tonight, dressed demurely in a long-sleeved dress that hugs my hips and hits my knees, considered sexy and off-limits in his world, I decline to wear a hat for modesty.

We are two California-born Jews living in Israel, but the chasm between us is wider than the Red Sea. Often, over the past thirty years, I've wondered how siblings with the same DNA can be so different. How, after being raised Reform, which emphasizes ethics and behavior over belief, can a brother and sister end up embracing such opposite lifestyles?

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Growing up, I'd beseeched my parents for a baby—someone younger to cuddle and carry, to play dolls and draw with, to love me unconditionally. "Please, I want a little sister!" I pleaded throughout grade school. My brother, three years older, had never sufficed.

Sometimes he and I skied off-trail at Northstar or played Battleship in the basement. Mostly, we occupied our own orbits: me with Barbies and coloring books, him with his rock and comic collections. My friends and I devised dance routines to Captain and Tennille's "Love Will Keep Us Together," while he and his friends fled to the backyard treehouse. I yearned for heart-to-heart conversations and emotional closeness. He communicated through sarcasm and jibes.

In middle school, after reading Judy Blume's *Forever*, my mother delivered the verdict: "My tubes are tied. Our family's complete." Then why, I wanted to scream, did I feel so incomplete?

Mike left for college during my sophomore year. The quiet house hurt my ears. My father worked long hours at his law firm, while my mother's graphic design business dominated her time. They proposed we host a female American Field Service student for a year perhaps to assuage their guilt.

The following August, Lee, a seventeen-year-old South African Jew, arrived. Every night, we stayed up late, analyzing our siblings' deficiencies and confiding our latest infatuations. We shared tee-shirts and sundresses. We had spit fights while brushing teeth in the bathroom sink. We fought about emptying the dishwasher or folding the laundry. We introduced one another as sister. By Thanksgiving, she called my parents Mom and Dad.

I no longer missed my brother or ached for his attention.

The following year, when Lee returned to Cape Town and Mike spent junior year abroad in Jerusalem, I busied myself with college applications, youth group, and a new boyfriend.

"Have you called Mike lately?" my father sometimes asked. His sister lived in New York, my mother's brother in Los Angeles, and while they'd been distant as kids, they became closer as adults, reinforcing their friendship with visits, especially on milestone birthdays, bar and bat mitzvahs.

During my freshman year in college, Mike's senior, I flew from Chicago to Manhattan to see him. He introduced me to friends, showed me the Egyptian Temple of Dendur at the Met, and took me to Gus's Pickles on the Lower East Side. Later, he visited me at Northwestern, where we ate Giordano's deep-dish pizza with friends and strolled through Lincoln Park Zoo. Still, our conversations remained superficial.

That summer, Mike packed his worldly possessions into two large suitcases, boarded a one-way flight to Israel, and immigrated. I cried during our farewell parting outside our parents'

house, my eyes red and swollen with sadness. I felt distraught, like I'd run out of chances to be friends with my brother, losing my only sibling to a far-away land.

The following winter, during my junior year in Paris, my parents and I met in Jerusalem. Mike greeted us at the airport in his khaki green army uniform, an Uzi over his shoulder, a scraggly beard and a colorful, knitted *kippah* on his head. I admired his decision to enlist in the Israeli Defense Forces, but since when had he become a God-fearing Jew? We'd grown up in a culturally rich Jewish family as staunch Israel supporters, but God, his commandments, and ancient customs had never been the focus.

Throughout our visit, my brother mentioned studying the basic tenets of Judaism—the laws of *Shabbat* and *kashrut*—with an American rabbi. Mike began talking in should and should nots, coulds and could nots, Rabbi Eddy said this, Rabbi Eddy said that. His holier-than-thou attitude made me cringe.

A year later, I flew home from Chicago over winter break for my father's fiftieth birthday. I donned my best Parisian blacks—mini skirt, leather bomber jacket, pointy flats, and a paisley scarf. My mother tinkered in the kitchen. My father and I listened to Suzanne Vega's latest album in the living room. The bell rang. We glided to the front door.

"Surprise," boomed a familiar voice. "Surprise," he said again.

My brother stepped into the foyer. My mother snapped a picture of my expression, a mixture of disappointment and resignation. With Mike around, our family's easygoing time together exercising, eating sushi, and watching movies would be overshadowed by his newly acquired religious restrictions.

That night we met my grandparents for dinner at an upscale French-Moroccan restaurant in San Francisco. I hadn't seen them since leaving for school in September. All attention was focused on Mike. "*Oy gevalt*," Boba shrieked when she saw my brother. Zeida embraced his eldest grandson, the Zionist, with pride.

Dressed in one of my father's blazers, a button-down shirt, tie, and trousers, my brother resembled a college professor. In addition to his thick, wavy, reddish head of hair, he sported a moustache and beard. His large, round glasses reminded me of Elton John's. But this time he wore a *kippah* under his hat. He couldn't show the beanie publicly, he said, lest a religious Jew see him and think the restaurant kosher. I'd never seen him wear a *kippah* in America.

As soon as we were seated, Mike said, "I really don't want to eat here. It's not kosher." He'd already harangued us during the car ride over the Bay Bridge. Didn't he understand he was

the party crasher? “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Once out of earshot, my mother hissed. “I wish he’d take that hat off inside.”

A new family dynamic was emerging: Mike said or did something inconsiderate or insolent, my mother overreacted, and my father sided with his son, so my mother spewed her anger toward me, her safest ally. Her disdain for Mike’s new lifestyle fueled my rage and resentment. He didn’t appear to care how we felt, but I digested every word.

Mike returned. One waiter filled our water glasses, then uncorked a bottle of wine. Another delivered a warm, freshly sliced baguette. My father approved the wine. Zeida reached for the bread. My brother, still standing, bent his elbows and flapped his arms like an injured bird trying to fly. My mother and I looked at one another and back at him. Why the pantomiming? Mike sat, snorted, jabbed his finger in the air, furrowed his brow and grunted so loud diners nearby turned.

“What do you want? The bread?” I asked. He nodded. He took the baguette, muttering something under his breath, words I couldn’t decipher, then bit it.

“Finally. Thank you,” he said. “But it’s a problem the bread’s been warmed in a non-kosher oven.”

Mike explained he’d gone to the bathroom to wash his hands and wasn’t permitted to talk until he’d recited the prayer and bitten the bread. If he’d explained that beforehand then maybe we would have understood. Or maybe not. His new ways were alien to all of us. Even to my Eastern European grandparents.

As my brother plunged into Ultra-Orthodoxy, my parents’ friends offered backhanded condolences: “At least it’s Judaism and not some weird sect. Imagine if he’d become a Hare Krishna or joined a crazy cult.” I wanted to say, “But he did join a crazy cult.”

My brother asked for the chef to discuss his order. Was it okay if they wrapped the salmon in aluminum foil before putting it in the oven? Silver cutlery or plastic? China or paper? They spoke quietly, nodding their heads. My mother elbowed me under the table. I heard her snicker.

I thought about how much Mike had changed since he’d left his American life. Now, he refused to eat from my parents’ plates in their non-kosher kitchen. He checked the labels on every food item in the pantry for a kosher symbol. He was loud, judgmental, and

disrespectful. His extreme fanaticism had become the focal point of our family gatherings, causing me to retreat inside, wishing he'd never come.

Upon his return to Israel, Mike probed deeper into the texts, laws, and interpretations of rabbis, scholars, and God. He began sentences with "*Baruch Hashem*" (Thank God). Every day he recited countless prayers and blessings upon waking up; when putting on a *tallit*, a poncho-like garment with a hole for the head and special twined and knotted macramé-like fringes known as *tzitzit* attached to its four corners; when inspecting the *tzitzit*; after wrapping the *tallit* around the body; while laying *tefillin*—a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah—on the arm, on the head, and around the middle finger. He recited blessings during the ritual washing of the hands upon rising in the morning and again before eating bread, before eating grain products, before drinking grape juice or wine, before eating fruit, before eating non-fruit produce, before eating other foods, and after every meal.

Oftentimes, when asked food- or family-related questions, he said, "I have to ask my rabbi." His rabbi, I was convinced, paid no heed to the fifth commandment: Honor thy father and thy mother. Because if he had, the communication about my brother's needs and chosen lifestyle would have been better, perhaps reducing the tension between him and our mother, maybe even him and me.

Despite the emotional strain and geographical distances, my parents, particularly my father, continued to attempt family togetherness. For my mother's fiftieth birthday the following year, he invited us to meet them in Manhattan, to surprise her. Since I was living in Paris, my brother stopped en route to visit. When he called about logistics, I assured him I lived down the street from several kosher restaurants and near a handful of synagogues. He could eat anywhere, pray any time of day, and sightsee.

I agreed to host my brother but felt ill-prepared to face him. I worked as a bilingual assistant for a Jewish non-governmental organization. Since relocating to Europe, my world had opened in unexpected ways. I befriended people from different backgrounds because of my hard-earned fluency. Mike's world had shrunk, making him more close-minded. I fretted about his reaction to my French boyfriend.

On Mike's second day, I broached the conversation. "So I wanted to tell you I'm seeing someone. And he's coming to Manhattan." We faced each other in my sun-drenched studio.

"Okay. Is he Jewish?"

My mouth opened in shock except I wasn't shocked at all. I'd anticipated this question and mustered up my strength to stand up to him. "No, Christophe's Catholic."

He sputtered. "What did Mom and Dad say?"

His forehead creased as if trying to solve a calculus problem, his favorite subject in high school. My floor slanted, and I felt its unevenness.

"They don't know yet. It's still new, not so serious."

"If it's not so serious then why is he—this *goy*—coming? It's Mom's birthday!" He turned his back to me. We fell silent. He spun around and bore his eyes into mine. "I have no intention of meeting whatever his name is, and if you try to introduce me, I won't look him in the eye or shake his hand."

How dare my brother spurn my boyfriend without knowing anything about him? His refusal to acknowledge another human being because he didn't share our religion incensed me. No wonder countries and cultures still fought religious wars in Israel, Ireland, Iraq, and elsewhere. No wonder Eastern and Western Europe remained separate and so unequal. No wonder my brother and I had never been close.

"And what would you say if I really were serious with Christophe, or some other non-Jew? What if we decided to get married?"

"You know you'll never even be *able* to marry a Cohen if you sleep with a *goy*."

"I couldn't care less if I ever marry a Cohen, or any Jew for that matter!"

The next day, we took separate trains to the airport. Once stateside, Mike refused to be in Christophe's presence. My folks blamed me for making them choose sides. Sensing the pressure, Christophe packed his bags, broke up, and bolted. I worried that my brother and I had ruined my mother's birthday, and she might never forgive us. But, perhaps still immature and self-centered, I felt less remorse toward her than rage toward him. I struggled with anger and found forgiveness difficult. I wasn't sure if I'd ever forget Mike's behavior.

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For the next two decades, Mike and his *shtick* dominated our get-togethers. Until, one Thanksgiving weekend, I snapped.

In my early forties, married and a mother now, I stormed out of a three-generation reunion in Manhattan, not far from our house in White Plains. Every year, we divvied up the planning; everyone pitched in except Mike since, he decided, his family lived abroad. My duties involved organizing one field trip and two *Shabbat* meals—ordering, paying, and coordinating food delivery long before Friday sundown. After extensive research, Mike nixed Saturday's lunch from a kosher restaurant, claiming it no longer met his standards, forcing me to cancel last minute. Then, he arrived an hour late to Sunday brunch because of services.

"Why is it okay for Mike to do whatever he wants?" I yelled. "Dad, why are you so silent? Are you afraid to stand up to him, to put him in his place?" My relatives stared, stunned by my outburst; usually I behaved as the accepting, younger child.

"It's okay, honey—we understand why you're upset," said my aunt, a social worker. I left.

I may have sounded like a spoiled, second child clamoring for attention, but what I sought was ease during our inherently tense family gatherings. I despised kowtowing to Mike, eating at ultra-kosher establishments and prohibiting TV in his children's presence. I especially loathed my family of origin's chain reaction. Following my tantrum, I wrote him and my parents a letter proposing we each start therapy and, when visiting one another, we attend together.

Before parting ways, Mike initiated a meeting. We rendezvoused, a week after our Thanksgiving debacle, at a suburban Starbucks, where, according to his rabbi, the tea was kosher. We barely spoke as the baristas concocted our drinks. We carried our tea to a table in the back corner.

"You start," I said. I had one hour before carpool.

"Okay, I know you're angry with me. And I've been thinking about how we grew up. I think Mom and Dad paid more attention to me. Maybe you felt slighted. I think Boba and Zeida did the same with Dad, making Auntie Mona feel second best. It's like a family trend." I wrapped my hands around my cup and inhaled the faint smell of bergamot.

"Sorry, but that's not it," I said. "When someone tells me something that's hard to admit, I get teary. But what you're saying doesn't make me emotional. I don't question or doubt Mom and Dad's love or my relationship with them." I sipped my Earl Grey. "I'm angry because your laws and adopted religious lifestyle make you difficult to deal with. You hide behind Judaism and other arbitrary rules. You use them as excuses, why you can't spend *Shabbat* somewhere or eat something. I'm sick of dealing with you."

Mike remained silent, pensive. He nodded. He listened. He didn't defend himself or cut me down with his usual sarcastic comebacks.

I pointed out our flawed family dynamic. How my mother had pressured us to attend his eldest son's bar mitzvah in Israel, making my eldest miss the first ten days of middle school and my youngest, kindergarten. How, a decade earlier, for our firstborn son's *bris* on Rosh Hashanah, Mike didn't attend due to logistics like finding a *shul* and food for the long holiday in Haifa. My parents never intervened.

"I didn't know Mom pressured you. I would have told her to stop. It's your decision, not hers. She's doing that to make Dad happy. If she does it again, tell me. I'll tell her to back off."

When our hour ended, I faced a difficult truth. One I couldn't admit aloud. While I felt bound to my brother because of our shared gene pool, I didn't like him as a person. I wouldn't want to be trapped alone with him on an island. I wouldn't choose him as my friend. How could I tell him I'd contemplated cutting off our relationship to preserve myself? Each time the thought had crossed my mind, I dismissed it because breaking ties takes just as much energy as maintaining them. I'd also considered my kids. He's their uncle, his children their first cousins. Despite Mike and me, their bonds are strong.

My brother and I bundled up in our winter coats. I accompanied him to the train station. He hugged me.

"I love you," he said, turning my face toward his. "Don't ever forget that. I'm on your side." It reminded me of our curbside goodbye in California when he left for Israel twenty years earlier.

Over winter vacation, my family flew to San Francisco to see my parents. I accompanied my folks to the therapist they'd started seeing upon my suggestion. During a ninety-minute session, we spent seventy-five discussing my brother. After endless conversations starting with "When Mike this" or "Mike that," the therapist interrupted.

"Hold on, please. Mike isn't in this room. Jennifer is. Look at Jennifer and talk to her." It took my parents several tries before they addressed me, without mentioning my brother.

At the end of the session, the therapist drew an unforgettable conclusion. "No one in any one family should have so much power. Mike shouldn't hold this much power," he paused. "And you," he said, looking at my parents, "you gave it to him."

I felt affirmed, validated. As if this man gave me words I hadn't possessed and my parents an opinion they could no longer ignore. But the question became how, forty-five years later, do you reclaim this power?

Maybe Mike and I had never been chummy due to a clash in personality or communication style, and his fervent Judaism only made matters worse, widening our rift. But, I realized during that session, my parents played their part, especially my mother. She hadn't just started whispering in my ear when Mike found *Hashem*, Hebrew for God, in Jerusalem's Old City, immersing himself in the religion of our ancestors. Whenever our sibling strife had struck—whether I was ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years old—she always said, "Your brother reminds me of mine. And we were never friends."

In that room, I faced my mother. "Please, I beg of you. Stop talking to me about my brother, behind his back. My relationship with him is hard enough."

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My brother approaches his daughter, and I attempt to catch his movements and expressions on camera, to try to understand his need for all-encompassing rules and pre-ordained boundaries. Does he cling to *Hashem* to avoid making decisions? Does he cleave to the laws because he felt unmoored as a boy, with too many freedoms? My mother remembers feeling challenged by his wit, as if he outsmarted her, while my father stood on the sidelines, only fueling her indignation.

Mike folds his hands on his stomach. He maintains distance from his second-born as he whispers in her ear. Is he allowed to touch the bride? To kiss her? Or does that aspect of their relationship, in their Haredi circle, disappear as soon as a young girl menstruates or announces her impending marriage? Did he consult his rabbi or did he know the answer?

My niece stops rocking to listen to him. Is he gushing over how beautiful she looks, telling her how proud he is, or how much he loves her? Or is he quoting some scholar's words on marriage, some Jewish proverb about love, or the weekly Torah portion, passing down other people's knowledge to avoid expressing his own emotions?

I stare at my brother's face through my lens and recall the familiar words of friends, telling me he might never change and to stop expecting it. "The only thing that can change is the way you react," they say. One friend whose husband has a huge extended clan shared her trick to surviving family get-togethers: look for the good in each person.

Mike is a devoted father, an uncle who emails my kids jokes and asks about their army service, which his children avoid as Haredi. Would his children think the same of me? Am I a caring, involved aunt or unapproachable, detached? I fear the latter. He might not be the brother I always dreamed of, but I'm probably not his ideal sister either. I remain aloof, removed from him and his offspring. I harshly judge them, their lifestyle, and their decision not to eat in my home. I find them intolerant, but, in fact, I'm equally so.

Yet no matter how challenged I am by our relationship, he remains steadfast—the first to call after recent surgery and on every birthday. He is and will always be the only other person who'll remember and reminisce about our parents' foibles and follies and the household in which we were raised.

Mike knows I write about him, about us. Whenever I ask questions, he answers reluctantly, saying, "I don't want to know why you're asking." He doesn't like digging up the past. I cannot imagine him willingly reading my words, but, if he did, he might surprise me and say, "I'm sorry you feel this way. Because I love you. Remember, I'm on your side." Like he did nine Thanksgivings ago in the New York train station parking lot.

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JENNIFER LANG's essays have been published in Under the Sun, Assay, Ascent, The Coachella Review, Hippocampus Magazine, and *Dumped: Stories of Women Unfriending Women*, among others. Honors include a Pushcart Prize and a Best American Essays nomination and finalist in the Crab Orchard Review's 2017 Literary Contest. Currently, she serves as CNF Editor for the Flexible Persona literary magazine. Since receiving a MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts last summer, she's been obsessing over every word in her first memoir. Look for her in Raanana, Israel, where she teaches writing at **http://israelwritersalon.com/**.

*For privacy reasons, Jennifer's brother's name was changed. —ed.*

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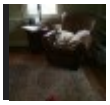
## 12 THOUGHTS ON "MY BROTHER'S FACE"

**RYDER ZIEBARTH**
**July 20, 2017 at 12:13 pm**

Jen, this is a fantastic essay of how fraught and complicated sibling relationships can be. Thanks for sharing this, I know it wasn't easy for you. So WELL done.

**JENNIFER LANG**
**July 21, 2017 at 1:04 pm**

Thank you, Ryder, for your support. Have I told you just how much I appreciate it?



**TERRY BARR**
**July 20, 2017 at 1:15 pm**

Truly incredible writing, a story that commands your attention from the first sentence. And when you got to the therapist's office with your parents, all I could think was "Thank God someone said it." Triangulation runs in many families and I am still trying to extricate myself from mine. Your brother and you are rendered with great complexity, and we see your sides. Not much else to ask for in this wonderful essay.

**JENNIFER LANG**
**July 21, 2017 at 1:05 pm**

Wow, thank you, Terry, for such a beautiful response.

**NERYS COPELOVITZ**
**July 20, 2017 at 1:51 pm**

Oh the bravery: "While I felt bound to my brother because of our shared gene pool, I didn't like him as a person." Not many of us can admit these truths to ourselves, let alone write them down and publish them while our relatives are still breathing.

I loved your honesty in looking at yourself too: “I harshly judge them, their lifestyle, and their decision not to eat in my home. I find them intolerant, but, in fact, I’m equally so.”
And finally, I felt your frustration and longing for a closer sibling, and sat with you and your brother in Starbucks where the truth came out-and my skin prickled.
An informative and thought-provoking read. Thank you.

**JENNIFER LANG**
**July 21, 2017 at 1:06 pm**

Oh the bravery… can keep me up at night, my mind a spinnin… Thank you, Nerys, for sharing what you felt while reading this. I feel it, too.

**AMY ABBOTT**
**July 20, 2017 at 4:34 pm**

Best story about family dynamics I’ve read in a long time. So, so, so relatable. I have one brother and we are very close, except for one big elephant in the room. We differ on politics which over the last year has been terribly difficult (for me, not so much for him).

**JENNIFER LANG**
**July 21, 2017 at 1:07 pm**

Amy, I am moved by your reaction. I am glad it’s relatable on some level. That’s the aim. Thank you for reading.

**MARY THOMAS**
**July 24, 2017 at 3:01 am**

Jennifer: The hardest part for any memoirist is to write about the complicated, imperfect relationships sometimes shared between people who love each other, especially when those subjects are still able to read the written words. You have tackled this very challenging personal topic with grace, respect and honesty. Nicely done.

**JENNIFER LANG**
**July 25, 2017 at 9:25 am**

Thank you for your beautiful response. It only took my 2.5 decades to tackle and to find that grace.

**RAY MARCH**
**July 25, 2017 at 7:42 pm**

What an incredibly sad story, what a waste of energy and resources, though is some form love seems to have survived. This is a stunningly honest and touching story, illustrating the frightening divide between the secular modern world and that of superstition and myth.

**JENNIFER LANG**
**July 26, 2017 at 3:42 pm**

Thank you, Ray, for reading and reacting. I feel the divide and find it disturbing no matter how often I talk or write about it.

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