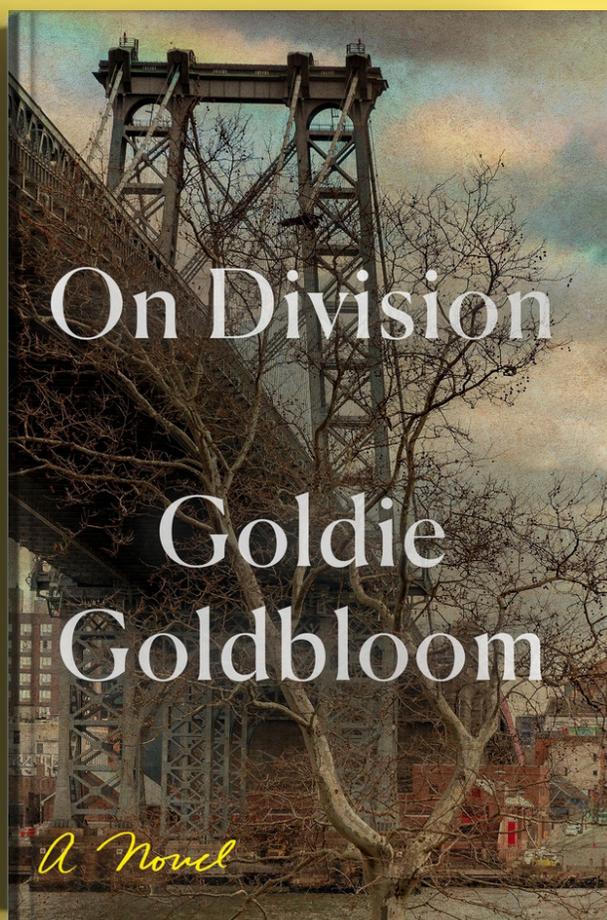


JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

Created in partnership with Farrar, Straus &
Giroux



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Glossary of Terms

On Division is set in a very Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The spoken language of the community is Yiddish, and for the Eckstein family, it is a Hungarian-inflected Yiddish. While the author gives many of the Yiddish words some context within the story, there may still be some that are unfamiliar. This glossary is meant to accompany the reader as they go through the novel, so the words are listed in order of appearance, along with the page number on which the word first appears. The words are Yiddish unless noted.

bikur cholim Hebrew meaning “visiting the sick”. It is a mitzvah to visit and support those who are not well, and many communities have set up volunteer organizations to provide these services. (p. 5)

shtreimel a round fur hat worn by married men on Shabbat and holidays. (p. 7)

nachas pride and joy, often in one’s children or grandchildren (p. 7)

kabbolas ponim or kabbalat panim. Hebrew, literally means “receiving of faces,” this refers to a reception that is held before the ceremony at a traditional Jewish wedding. The bride and groom receive guests in separate rooms. (p. 7)

chuppah Hebrew, this is the traditional wedding canopy, a covering with four open sides. The chuppah symbolizes many things, among them the home that the couple is forming, Abraham’s tent, God’s presence. The term has come to refer to the wedding ceremony itself. (p. 7)

Chas vecholila Hebrew, an idiom meaning, “God forbid!” (p. 12)

Der Oibershter Yiddish, referring to God, “the Almighty” (p. 13)

bashert meant to be, destined (p. 13)

sofer - Hebrew, a scribe who writes ritual texts, like the Torah, a mezuzah, etc. (p. 14)

klei kodesh Hebrew, “holy vessels,” often refers to religious leaders (p. 16)

ponzhelo a housecoat (p. 18)

sheva brachos Hebrew, seven blessings that are part of the Jewish wedding ceremony. Also refers to the seven nights after a wedding when a festive meal is hosted in honor of the new couple and the seven blessings are recited again. (p. 18)

blech Yiddish for tin, refers to a metal sheet or plate that covers the stovetop over Shabbat or holidays to warm up food and prevent any accidental use of the stove. (p. 18)

chulent a meat stew that is a traditional Ashkenazi dish for Shabbat (p. 18)

kigel alternative pronunciation of kugel, a baked pudding or casserole (p. 18)

bekishe the dark coat worn by Hasidic men (p. 18)

tallis prayer shawl (p. 18)

bilkelach challah rolls (p. 19)

Zaidy grandfather (p. 21)

Dead Opa/Onyu Hungarian for great grandfather/grandmother (p. 24)

Tshebiner yeshiva the name of a particular yeshiva (p. 27)

shil alternative pronunciation for shul, a Yiddish word for synagogue (p. 29)

cheder Jewish religious school for elementary age, literally means “room” (p. 30)

mefunek one who is fastidious, finicky or fussy (p. 30)

Gets redeemed this refers to a *pidyon ha-ben*, the ceremony by which a father symbolically redeems a first born son from working in the Temple by giving a few coins to a Kohen (a representative of the priestly class). This ritual continues despite no longer having a Temple in Jerusalem. (p. 35)

einiklach grandchildren (p. 37)

yontiff a Jewish holiday when work is prohibited (p. 50)

yarzheit anniversary of a death, marked by lighting a 24 hour candle and saying the mourner's prayer (p. 55)

payos sidelocks (of hair). Due to a restriction in Leviticus on cutting hair, many Orthodox men do not shave and do not trim their sideburns (p. 60)

mikva Hebrew, the Jewish ritual bath that renders one ritually pure. A mikva is used by women before their wedding, after childbirth, and after menstruation, and often by Hasidic men before their wedding and before Shabbat and holidays. (p. 62)

Ruv a rabbi or teacher who serves as one's personal authority on Jewish law (p. 63)

kollel Hebrew, an academy of higher learning for Orthodox men, where Talmud and rabbinic literature are studied full-time (p. 65)

goyishe kop "gentile head," someone who thinks or acts like a non-Jew (p. 68)

Hashmonaim Hebrew for Hasmonean (p. 73)

Yom-tov Hebrew, see yontiff (p. 73)

baleboste a good housewife (p. 86)

Tishrei Hebrew, the first Jewish month of the year, usually falls around September, and includes the holidays of Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah (p. 88)

shviger mother-in-law (p. 114)

Purim Hebrew, a holiday that celebrates the Jews of Persia being saved from death at the hands of Haman, the king's advisor. It is not considered a yontiff day, but is a day of festive meals, dressing in costume, drinking, and fun (p. 114)

shuluch muh-nes baskets of food or drinks that you give to friends and family on the holiday of Purim. Also called by the Hebrew name, mishloach manot (p. 116)

geduld patience (p. 118)

megillah Hebrew, scroll or volume. In this instance, it refers to the Megillat Esther, the scroll that is read on Purim which tells the story of Queen Esther saving the Jews from Haman's evil plan. (p. 119)

zeit shtil! be quiet! (p. 119)

tzitzis the specially knotted fringes that are affixed to the corner of a tallis and are also worn on a daily basis on a mini tallis. Tzitzis are worn as a daily reminder of God's commandments (p. 127).

Nissan Hebrew month that falls around March or April. Passover is in the month of Nissan (p. 127).

yeshivos plural of yeshiva, a Jewish educational institution (p. 127)

mesivta Orthodox Jewish secondary school (p. 127)

Tzeina U'Reina a collection of 17th century rabbinic material, primarily folkloric. It was known as the "women's Bible," and was one of the most popular Yiddish books until World War 2 (p. 129).

Erev Pesach Hebrew, eve of Passover. Since Jewish days begin at sundown, this refers to the day of the first night of Passover (p. 145).

Pesach'dik kosher for Passover (p. 147)

Gottenyu exclamation, "dear God" (p. 158)

"oy, loz mich tsu ru" "oy, leave me in peace" or "leave me alone" (p. 166)

s'firah Hebrew, this is the time of counting days between Passover and Shavuot. This counting is commanded in the book of Leviticus, starting from the second day of Passover, when the new barley offering (*omer* is a measurement of sheaths) was brought to the Temple. The counting mirrors the journey from the exodus out of Egypt to receiving the Torah. *S'firah* or *S'firat Ha-Omer* is, as described in *On Division*, the forty-nine days of mourning when nothing new could be purchased and no weddings celebrated." This mourning period is to commemorate the 24,000 students of Rabbi Hillel who died during the omer period (p. 167)

treif not kosher (p. 174)

shidduch a match, an arranged marriage (p. 175)

Lag B'Omer Hebrew, the thirty-third day of S'firat Ha-Omer, when the state of mourning is lifted, and weddings, celebrations, and haircuts are permitted. The day is celebrated with festivities and often with bonfires (p. 179).

s'chach Hebrew, the branches or plants that are used as the roof of a sukkah during the holiday of Sukkot (p. 179)

gonef thief (p. 180)

atoros Hebrew, plural of atarah, meaning crown. Refers to the crowns used to ornament a Torah scroll (p. 180)

talleisim plural for tallis (p. 180)

shomrim Hebrew, guards or police. Orthodox communities often have their own policing body (p. 180).

apikorsim Hebrew, plural for apikoros. An apostate or heretic, one who denies rabbinic Judaism and will not have a place in the world to come (p. 181).

parsha Hebrew, the weekly portion of the Torah. In this instance in the book, it is referring to a boy learning the weekly portion for his Bar Mitzvah (p. 187).

shaygetz non-Jewish boy or young man (p. 188)

bris Hebrew, the circumcision ceremony held on the eighth day of a baby boy's life, which reaffirms the covenant with God (p. 192)

Noam Elimelech a book of Torah commentary written by Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum of Lizhensk, who was one of the founders of the Hasidic movement (p. 192).

esrog Hebrew, the citron fruit that is used, along with the lulav, as part of the holiday of Sukkot. Among other things, it is said to represent the womb (p. 192)

Shavios alternate pronunciation for the holiday of Shavuot, a harvest holiday, which falls seven weeks after Passover, when the Torah was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It is traditional to stay up all night studying texts on the first night of Shavuot. (p. 193)

Tatie Daddy (p. 201)

Hatzolah Hebrew, a volunteer EMS service for a Jewish community (p. 201)

Chevra Kadisha Hebrew, the volunteer group who prepares a boy for burial according to Jewish law (p. 203)

levaya Hebrew for funeral, literally means "accompanying" A Jewish body is accompanied to the burial, which is done by the mourners and anyone else present. (p. 204)

chosson groom (p. 204)

bucher boy (p. 204)

ir einiklach her grandchildren (p. 204)

di alte chelka the old section in the cemetery (p. 204)

maidel a young girl (p. 204)

dayan Hebrew, Jewish religious judge (p. 204)

Yiddishe shtib literally a Jewish house. Meaning a good Jewish home and family (p. 204)

kittel a white robe that is worn to symbolize purity during High Holiday services. Also often worn by a

groom, on some other holidays, and at the time of burial. (p. 217)

kigelach a game, “[Jewish jacks](#)” (p. 221)

shlimazel one with consistently bad luck, one who fails at everything (p. 242)

zal literally, hall. Referring to the more independent study of older students (p. 250)

yichud Hebrew, a period of seclusion after a couple is married where they spend time together. The laws of yichud prevent a man and a woman from being alone in private before marriage, so being in yichud after the wedding is the first time the bride and groom are alone together. (p. 255)

shochet Hebrew, ritual slaughterer required for kosher meat (p. 256)

farshloffener sleepy, or sluggish (p. 261)

“**Farvos hot zi nakete fis?**” “why are her feet bare?” (p. 261)

Religious Observances

The Eckstein family is part of an Orthodox Jewish community that follows Jewish law, *Halacha*, strictly, as well as the rulings of the community rabbis. Every aspect of their lives is inflected by their observance, and their day-to-day practices reflect the omnipresence of their religious beliefs. These practices below are some of the basic observances that shape the daily life of Surie and her family in the novel.

Keeping a kosher home

Keeping kosher means following the laws of *kashrut*. The laws of *kashrut* outline which animals are permitted to be eaten and how they must be killed, require separation of milk and meat (including separate utensils), and designate which foods must be supervised to ensure kosher standards and which do not require supervision.

Observing Shabbat and Holidays

Someone who is Sabbath observant refrains from doing any work on Shabbat. This goes beyond professional work, and encompasses a list of actions that are considered to be work. Below is a list of basic activities that is not permitted on Shabbat:

- writing, erasing, and tearing;
- business transactions;
- driving or riding in cars or other vehicles;
- shopping;
- using the telephone;
- turning on or off anything which uses electricity, including lights, radios, television, computer, air-conditioners and alarm clocks;
- cooking, baking or kindling a fire;
- gardening and grass-mowing;
- doing laundry

These restrictions apply to most holidays (those designated as *yontiff* or *yom-tov*), though cooking is usually allowed under certain conditions. It is due to these restrictions that Surie has to prepare in advance for Shabbat and holidays, that they have timers on their lights (and are left in the dark p. 218), that Yidel doesn't adjust his hearing aids when he remembers that is Shabbat (p. 19).

Laws of Family Purity

In the book of Leviticus, the Torah forbids physical relationships between a man and woman when a woman is a *niddah*, meaning at a time when she is menstruating or otherwise bleeding (after childbirth, for example). The laws surrounding marital relations are known as *taharat hamishpacha* (ritual purity of the family).

For a couple practicing the laws of *niddah*, a man and woman may not have sexual intercourse for the days that the woman is menstruating, and for seven days after bleeding stops. During this time, many Orthodox couples refrain from any physical contact and sleep in separate beds. On the seventh day, the woman immerses herself in the mikva to restore ritual purity, and they may return to a physical relationship. This is the reason that Surie and Yidel have beds that can be separated or pushed together, and why Surie tells Yidel he isn't allowed to touch her after the twins' birth (p 237, 263).

Source: https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/95907/jewish/The-Shabbat-Laws.htm

Modesty

The concept of modesty, or *tzniut*, is a defining concept of Jewish life. While this does apply to dress, it also pertains to behaving with dignity and decorum.

When it comes to dress, religious men and women cover their bodies, refrain from wearing very form-fitting attire, and keep their heads covered in some way. Different communities have different customs about the specifics of clothing and headcoverings, but all are based in the idea of modesty and tradition.

This emphasis on modesty extends to how people interact with each other, what is spoken of and shared, and how they move in the world. The goal is to create a private, dignified space that is appropriate for children of God.

Because God is believed to be omnipresent, the idea of living a modest life is not just for public spaces, but private as well.

Family Life

It is very common for traditional Jewish families to have many children. The most basic reason for this is the biblical commandment from the book of Genesis to “be fruitful and multiply.” While this commandment can technically be fulfilled by having a son and a daughter, there is a Rabbinic commandment to have children as long as one is able, because, as the famous rabbi Maimonides writes, “For anyone who adds a soul to the Jewish people is considered as if he built an entire world” (Rambam, Hilchot Ishut, 15:16), a sentiment that is echoed by Surie on the very first page of the book. Every child is an entire world,

a blessing, and the will of God. As Surie tells Val, “It [Jewish children] is all that we live for” (p 51).

More on Ultra Orthodox Jews:

[Blog post on why Orthodox Jews have so many children](#)

[A portrait of American Orthodox Jews \(Pew\)](#)

[17 Facts Everyone Should Know About Hassidic Jews](#)

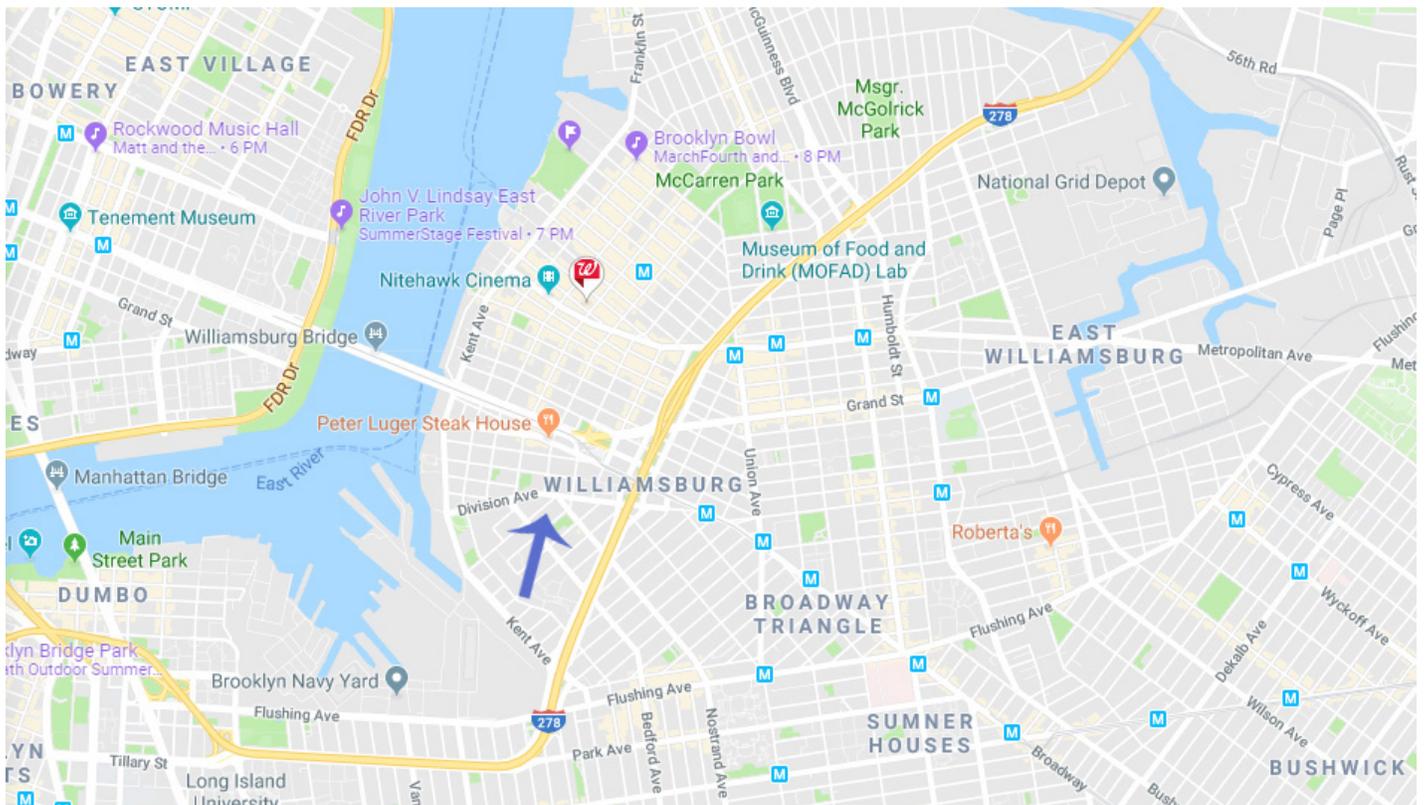
Article, [New York’s Hot New Tour Is Visiting Ultra-Orthodox Jews](#)

Map of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NY

Williamsburg is a neighborhood in Brooklyn, and it is an eclectic mix of demographics, with different ethnic groups forming pockets throughout the area.

In addition to enclaves of Italians, Puerto Ricans, Poles, and Dominicans, there is a large population of Hasidic Jews (over 75,000), including the headquarters of one faction of the Satmar Hasidic group. The Hasidic Jews live mainly in the area south of Division Avenue.

In the past 30 years, Williamsburg has undergone gentrification, and it has become known for its art scene and hipster culture. With so many cultures inhabiting a small area, it's not a surprise that there are occasional clashes (like Surie's reference on p. 180).



Discussion Questions from FSG

These questions were created by Farrar, Straus & Giroux for their *On Division* Reading Group Guide. For more information, contact readinggroup@macmillanusa.com or visit www.readinggroupgold.com

1. *On Division* begins the day after a wedding and ends in the days following a funeral, spanning the months of Surie Eckstein's pregnancy. In the course of the story, Surie and her family observe several Jewish holidays. What do these rituals and customs reveal about Surie and her Chassidic community? How do the practices of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism both enrich and constrict the lives of Surie and her extended family?
2. Surie is fifty-seven years old, a grandmother, and about to become a great-grandmother. As the book opens, she has just learned she is pregnant with twins. What is Surie's reaction to the midwife's news, "Your due date will be the thirteenth of July"? What are her concerns about the pregnancy? Why is she worried that she will bring shame on her family?
3. What are your first impressions of Surie and her husband Yidel, who is sixty-three and about to retire? What kind of husband and father is Yidel? Do he and Surie have what would be considered a typical marriage in their community? When do you think Yidel realizes Surie is pregnant? Why then?
4. Secrets are a recurring theme in *On Division*. What are the big secrets, past and present, in the Eckstein family? What other secrets do the characters keep from each other? In the end, does Surie come to believe it is better to have secrets or bring the truth out into the open?
5. How is Surie's behavior during her pregnancy linked to her feelings about her gay son Lipa and her grief over his death? Besides Surie's loss of Lipa, what are other instances of bereavement and grief in the story? How do various characters respond? What are the grieving rituals within the community? Do individuals express grief differently in private than they do in public?
6. Surie knows her pregnancy is high-risk. What is the quality of the care she receives at the clinic? Why does she choose to forgo prenatal testing and ignore most of the clinic staff's advice? How do her religious beliefs, her past experiences and her relationship to her family and to her community affect the outcome of the pregnancy?
7. Val, the midwife at the clinic, is older than Surie and has delivered all ten of her children. What does she think about this eleventh, high-risk pregnancy? How does she try to help Surie? What are her strengths and her shortcomings in her work with her Chassidic patients? As a kind of friendship develops between the two women, what does each learn about the other?
8. Why does the community protect the therapist who has impregnated a twelve-year-old girl? What is the girl's mother's response to her daughter's pregnancy? Does Surie succeed in her efforts to help? How does the experience change her?
9. Chapter 6 recounts a conference among the members of Surie's medical team. How do the doctors and other clinic staff view the Chassidic women and girls who are their patients? What does their conversation reveal about the lives of Chassidic women? What are Surie's beliefs about the world outside her community? Do her caregivers' perceptions validate her fears?

Discussion Questions from FSG

10. What does Yidel mean when he says to Surie, “What would have become of us if there hadn’t been a Holocaust?” What happened to the Eckstein and Ashkenazy families who were in Europe during that time? Why is Surie surprised when her granddaughter Miryam Chiena talks about it?

11. What are the “divisions” in *On Division*? Who are the people Surie is close to? Who does she hold at a distance? What other fractures are felt in her family and community? Do these come from within or outside?

12. What are examples of interactions between Yidel and Surie that give us insight into their marriage? Why is Yidel not able to support Surie in her yearning to remember Lipa or to encourage her studies? Does she blame him, or is she able to reconcile her feelings with his and forgive him? How might Surie’s life change after her pregnancy?

13. When Miryam Chiena says, “It’s good to be us,” what does she mean? Do you agree? What is good about Miryam’s present life and life to come? What is troubling? Is there a chance Miryam will have the life her grandmother catches a brief glimpse of as she reads textbooks and works at the clinic?

14. *On Division* introduces us to four generations of the Eckstein family. What is Surie’s place in the family? How does she interact with her in-laws, her children, and grandchildren? How are the members of each generation different in their adherence to ultra-Orthodox custom and ritual? How are men’s roles different from women’s in marriage, family, and community?

15. Goldie Goldbloom is a member of the Lubavitch Chassidic community and an LGBTQ activist. She began her writing career after giving birth to eight children. In *On Division*, how does she use her characters’ strengths, weaknesses, and relationships with each other to both celebrate and interrogate Chassidic attitudes, beliefs and practices?

16. In what ways is Surie’s family similar to a non-Chassidic American family? In what ways are they different? How do these differences affect them on a day-to-day level?

17. How might Surie’s beliefs about loving a gay child change the ways in which the Chassidic community responds to issues of identity? Will her personal beliefs have any impact on the larger community? As more children within the community identify as LGBTQ, will more parents respond like Surie, or is she an unusual case?

JBC Book Clubs Discussion Questions

These questions were created by JBC Book Clubs as a supplement to the Farrar, Straus & Giroux reading group guide above. They may also contain spoilers.

1. Is this book a critique of the Ultra Orthodox community or a celebration of it? Are the aspects that seem backward or cruel to Val or to a reader with a secular perspective softened or more understandable when seen through Surie's eyes?
2. Reputation, both personal and collective, is a central concern of the novel. How is reputation protected? Should a reputation be maintained at any cost? How does one's personal reputation affect a communal reputation? Is it a matter of shame or of pride to protect a reputation? What about a communal reputation?
3. On a search for pictures of Lipa, Tzila Ruchel tells Surie, "what we don't talk about ceases to exist" (p. 107). In what ways is that true? Is that why Surie keeps the pregnancy a secret? What else isn't talked about?
4. Val likes to "introduce these Chassidic women to modern culture, to an appreciation for their bodies... even though it never seemed to stick" (p. 78). Is Val educating the women or imposing her own beliefs? What is Val's role in the novel and in Surie's life?
5. Though she is lacking in much of a formal education, is Surie ignorant? Why are textbooks and the public library so threatening for people who put so much emphasis on education? Think about the conversation that Surie has with Dead Onyu on page 189. Is isolation from the secular world the only way to maintain tradition and the community's way of life?
6. Val accuses Surie and the Hassidic community of only giving conditional love (p. 125). Do you agree with her? Why do you think a community that believes that every child is precious and a whole world and that every person is created in God's image requires strict adherence to a particular way of life? Is it really "sameness" (p.120) that is valued? Why does the community "spit [someone] out" (p. 125), if they don't fit in, like Surie describes on page 210?
7. In what ways is this novel about motherhood? Do you feel that you get to know Surie as a mother? While her role in the family, and in much of her life, is to be a caretaker, is that the side of Surie that you experience as a reader?
8. When Surie takes Yidel's hand and they begin to walk home, what choices has Surie made? Is she returning to her old life? How do you think she has changed over the course of the novel?
9. Does reading about an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community feel similar to reading about any other insular group with unfamiliar practices? Why or why not?

Pretzel Challah Rolls

This is a fun twist on traditional challah rolls, the bilkelach, that Surie mentions for Shabbat (p. 19)

courtesy of Amy Kritzer, [What Jew Wanna Eat](#)



Ingredients

1 packet of instant yeast

3 3/4 cups bread flour

3/4 cup warm water (about 100 degrees F)

2 large eggs plus one for egg wash

1/2 cup vegetable or canola oil

1 teaspoon salt

1/4 cup sugar

12 cups water

1/2 cup baking soda

coarse salt for sprinkling

1. In a large bowl or the bowl of a stand mixer, make a slurry combining 3/4 cup of flour, yeast and 3/4 cup warm water.

2. Let the slurry sit for 10 minutes until it puffs up. Then whisk in the two eggs, salt, sugar and oil until incorporated.

3. Add the rest of the flour and mix with a dough hook (or knead by hand!) until smooth, about 5-10 minutes.

4. Place the dough in a warm, clean bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let the dough ferment in a warm place until it has doubled in size, about 1.5 hours.

5. Divide the ball into 12 equal pieces.

6. Roll each of these balls into a strand. If you have trouble stretching them out, let the strands rest and roll out again until each strand is about 10 inches long.

7. Tie each strand into a knot, and then tuck the other ends under. Place the rolls on a pan.

8. Cover the rolls with plastic wrap and let them rise for another 45 minutes or so until they are light and fluffy looking (exact proofing timing for challah will depend on environmental conditions).

9. Bring water and baking soda to a boil, making sure all the baking soda is dissolved.

10. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F.

11. Put six rolls in the pot at a time, and let boil for about 30 seconds. Flip and boil for 30 more seconds.

12. Remove rolls with a slotted spoon and dab off any excess water. Place the rolls on baking sheets lined with parchment paper.

13. Whisk up one egg and egg wash the rolls. Then sprinkle with a coarse salt.

14. Bake for 20 minutes.

Kokosh Cake

Recipe by Leah Nagel of Truffles and Trends and can be found here: www.trufflesandtrends.com/home/2017/3/15/better-than-babka-kokosh-cake-with-video

Kokosh cake is a filled, yeasted cake, similar to babka, but flatter, denser, more gooey, and richer. It's a traditional Hungarian pastry—the name comes from the Hungarian word for cocoa—and one that Surie mentions making.

Ingredients

Dough:

1 packet (2 1/4 teaspoons) instant dry yeast

1 teaspoon granulated sugar

1/4 cup warm water

1/4 cup granulated sugar

2 eggs

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1/3 cup orange juice

1 1/2 sticks (6 oz.) butter, softened

3 cups packed flour

1/4 teaspoon salt

- Canola or vegetable oil, for spreading

- 1 egg, for brushing

Chocolate Filling:

1 stick butter, melted and slightly cooled

1 cup cocoa powder

2 1/4 cups granulated sugar

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Pinch salt

3 egg whites

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F, and line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

2. In the bowl of your stand mixer, pour in yeast and teaspoon sugar. Pour warm water on top and let mixture foam for 5-10 minutes.

3. Add in rest of dough ingredients and knead on medium speed for a couple minutes. If dough is too sticky, add a bit more flour. The dough is now ready - no need to rise!

4. To make the chocolate filling, mix cocoa powder and melted butter in a medium bowl. Add in rest of filling ingredients and stir till mostly smooth.

5. Assemble the kokosh cakes. Flour your work surface and rolling pin. Divide dough into as many logs as you'd like to make (2 large, 3 medium, 4 smaller).

6. Roll out first piece of dough into a very thin rectangle. Spread a light coating of oil on top of dough. Then, spread a generous layer of chocolate filling over dough, leaving about an inch of dough bare on all the edges.

7. Roll up dough from shorter side, flattening the dough slightly between each roll, forming a flattish log. Brush top of log generously with a beaten egg. Repeat process with rest of dough.

8. Place logs onto prepared baking sheets and bake for about 25-32 minutes (depending on size of loaf), or until tops and bottoms are a deep golden brown.

Chocolate Cake

Surie brings chocolate cake with her to the hospital most weeks. This chocolate cake recipe is very easy, can be made in one bowl, and is both pareve and vegan.

Ingredients

- 1 1/2 cup flour
- 1/3 cup cocoa
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup oil
- 1 cup cold water (or cold coffee)
- 2 tsp. vanilla
- 2 tbl. vinegar
- 1/2-1 cup chocolate chips



1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Grease a 8x8 square pan or 9 in. round pan.
2. Combine the dry ingredients in a bowl and stir until the mixture is uniform in color.
3. Add the oil, water (or coffee), and vanilla. Stir until the batter is smooth.
4. Mix in the chocolate chips.
5. Pour the batter into the pan.
6. Add the vinegar to the batter, and mix it in thoroughly. Make sure there are no pockets of vinegar, especially in the corners.
7. Put the cake in the oven immediately, and bake it for 25-30 minutes.
8. Allow to cool before icing or dusting with powdered sugar, if desired.

Photo credit: [Wikimedia Commons/Varaine](#)

Q&A with Author Goldie Goldbloom

How was writing this novel different than writing *The Paperbark Shoe*? Did *On Division* feel more personal?

Goldie Goldbloom: I initially began writing *The Paperbark Shoe* as a nonfiction work investigating the lives of my grandparents and the POWs they had on their farm during World War Two. I did a ton of research before discovering that I am terrible at writing nonfiction.

When I wrote *On Division*, it was entirely different. I had told one of my sons that we should do a ten day creative challenge: I would write (part of!) a novel, and he would record a CD of his music. Knowing I only had ten days, I chose a subject I knew well and wouldn't have to research extensively. So yes, *On Division* is heavily drawn from my life and my experience of the Chassidic community. It's a far more personal work than *The Paperbark Shoe*. I cried as I wrote the entire last section of the book.

Is the community that the Ecksteins live in one that you consider to be like your own? Will people in your community read this book?

GG: There are many flavours of practice in the Chassidic world. In a lot of fundamental ways, the Eckstein's community is very similar to my own. But then, in some extremely visible ways, it's also quite different. For example, in my community, it's common for women to attend synagogue and go to the cemetery. It's also a little bit more common for women to have a secular education.

I'm very pleased that a lot of women in my community and in Surie Eckstein's have already read *On Division* and recommended it to their friends. I worked hard to try to create a book that could be comfortably read both by the larger world and also, unusually, by my community. It was my goal to create an accurate and fair representation of a community that is rarely portrayed either fairly or accurately.

Is the story based on anything in particular? Where did the idea of helping as a midwife come from? Has that happened?

GG: There are a number of autobiographical elements in *On Division*. One of the most obvious is my familiarity with a 57 year old woman giving birth, long after she thinks she has "shut up shop." I'm still not 57, but that happened to someone I know well. As a writer, I like to add complications to something I already have questions about: What if she doesn't tell her husband? What if she starts keeping more secrets?

Helping the midwife is not a huge stretch because many pregnant Chassidic women have an older woman from the community accompany them to their births. I wanted to choose something that was surprising but still within the realm of (just barely) possible.

Did the story come to you all at once or did it build on itself in pieces? What was the jumping off point for you in writing the novel?

GG: I think the story came to me whole, but I have edited it over time with the assistance of Fred Shafer in Chicago, and Jenna Johnson at Farrar, Straus & Giroux. I was curious about the way secrets can disturb even the most secure family dynamics. And from that simple idea, I began to think about the impact of truly challenging secrets when there are increased external pressures, such as can be found in the most insular communities. In particular, I thought about the twinned impacts effected by leaving the community (something that happens for many reasons, including being LGBTQ): the impact on the leaver, and the impact on those who are left behind.

What decisions did you have to make about the language and grammar that you used in writing *On Division*?

GG: Oh, good question! When I wrote *On Division*, I imagined Surie dictating the story to me in Yiddish. I wrote a sentence, translated it into Yiddish, and then retranslated it back into a much more constrained English. It was very important to me to demonstrate the limits of Surie's natural language, because we don't usually think (in English) that there simply isn't language for something. That lack of language is one of the many boundaries around Surie.

In English, we have the multi-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*, containing hundreds of thousands, probably millions of words. Yiddish has far fewer words, fewer than 100,000. An example would be the word "foos" in Yiddish, which literally means "foot" but is often also used for ankle, calf, leg, thigh, shin, inner leg, instep.

I regularly removed words for which there was no reliable, commonly used Yiddish translation, but with very few exceptions, I did not insert Yiddish grammar in my English sentences, because in Surie's mind, in her dictation to me, her grammar would

have been perfect.

Surie isn't stupid or ignorant. She's one of the best educated women in her community, highly regarded as knowledgeable in the complex household laws and eloquent in her own language.

How has your work with Eshel influenced your writing?

GG: Even before working with Eshel, I was aware of and communicating with LGBTQ individuals within Chassidic communities around the world. One of the most challenging aspects of being queer in a religious community (this is true also for many Muslims, Amish people, Mormons, and other traditional religious groups) is coming out to one's parents, because of the (often accurate) perception that there will be no acceptance. Coming out doesn't "just" mean coming out. It often means a complete rejection from family, friends and community. These terrible losses often cause further terrible losses, one of which is discussed in *On Division*.

I did not want to gloss over the possible consequences of coming out in the Chassidic community because far too often, people's lives are destroyed, physically, emotionally, spiritually. While Eshel and some other organizations have done remarkable work assisting LGBTQ individuals who come from within Orthodoxy, the Chassidic world has unique pressures that cannot fully be addressed by organizations outside the community. Working with Eshel increased my understanding of what was and was not possible.

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