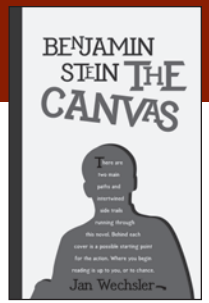
FROM **THE CANVAS**
BENJAMIN STEIN



Normally we don't open the door on Shabbos if someone buzzes our apartment. Family and friends wouldn't ring the doorbell. We'd be expecting them, and around the appointed time, they would wait on the other side of the street, so we could see them from the window and go down to let them into the building.

[. . .]

Of course there are exceptions, like José Molina, a slightly overweight, tremendously friendly musician who lives with his boyfriend in the apartment next door. We've never asked him where he comes from. I've always liked imagining that he's a Chilean exile. Of course that has something to do with his name, the Kiss of the Spiderwoman, and his accent, which is difficult to place geographically. Though I'm not sure where Molina comes from, I do know that he has traveled far and spent some years in New York. He lived in Brooklyn in a predominantly Jewish area. We found that out one Friday, when we had to ask him to accept the delivery of our new washing machine. They were supposed to bring it early in the afternoon, but they still hadn't arrived just before the beginning of Shabbos.

Molina knew just what to do. He gave the delivery men all the necessary paperwork, signed the receipt and even gave them both a tip. We didn't have to explain anything to him. He just laughed and said: I never dreamed that I would come in handy as a Shabbos goy again in Germany!

Neighbors like José Molina are rare. If you want to keep Shabbos in this country, you have to build yourself a fortress. As soon as you step outside your door, you walk into a religious minefield, and it's just as dangerous when someone enters from the outside—by ringing the bell, on Shabbos, at our door.

Thanks to my wife, I no longer feel cornered when this kind of thing happens. Just don't answer, she said one time, when I was trying to get rid of yet another mailman, because I wouldn't have been able to accept the package or sign for it.

How do you explain yourself at a moment like that? It really throws me off. I feel like an idiot. It's embarrassing. And on top of that, I'm ashamed that I'm embarrassed. Embarrassed to explain to a complete stranger what Shabbos is, that it's Shabbos now, and that that's why I can't accept the package, but I can't ask him to take it back, either.

When I feel embarrassed, I become unfriendly. And my rudeness at times like that makes my wife uncomfortable in turn. And so, when the bell rings on Shabbos, the door stays closed.

And it would have stayed closed yesterday, if I hadn't been playing with my kids in the hallway, horsing around and giggling so loudly that we could be heard in the stairwell. The door would have stayed closed if the man who was trying to come up to see us had been standing outside at the building entrance and not right in front of our apartment, knocking and calling out for us to open up. Ignoring him when he knew someone was home just seemed too impolite. And so I opened the door.

The guy waiting in the stairwell was—what else?—a courier. He seemed annoyed. I didn't see a package or a letter. But he had a suitcase and the inevitable clipboard with the receipt list that needed my signature, which I was going to have to withhold once again. I decided not to say anything for the time being, though.

The courier explained that he'd come from the airport. The airline regrets the delay, he told me. But your luggage has finally been found. Here it is, he said. I just needed to sign for it, then he could be on his way. He told me he still had a lot more stops to make.

I exhaled. This time the problem was easy to solve. When you consider the extensive security measures at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, where not only every piece of checked baggage, but even every carry-on bag is tagged with a barcode sticker, it seems impossible that a piece of luggage on a flight in or out of there could get lost and then end up unclaimed somewhere, waiting to be recovered.

I'm not missing a suitcase, I told him.

That can't be right, the courier replied. Wait a minute, here it is: January 7th, TUIfly Tel Aviv-Munich. You reported the loss.

I didn't remember that. There must be some way to verify that I only checked one suitcase, I said.

That's not my department, the courier told me. He only delivered the bags when they'd been found, he said. And as a rule, they turn up even if they've been lost for several weeks. Some bags end up going halfway around the world, he said, because someone mistakenly loaded them onto the wrong plane.

Be that as it may, I assured him, the suitcase is not mine.

You've got to be kidding me!, the courier shouted. I could understand why he was getting angry, because he showed me the address tag, which certainly looked like I had filled it out in my own handwriting.

I gave the bag a closer look. It was a pilot suitcase, black, presumably faux leather with riveted bronze-colored code snap locks.

But the locks are broken, I said.

Yes, the courier conceded, the airline apologizes for that, too. But there are no exceptions, he said. Customs and Border Protection have to inspect all pieces of luggage that are reported lost and then turn up again. All of that's explained in the cover letter, he told me. I'd have to read that later, he said, because right now he really didn't have time to go over everything with me.

I'm only the courier, you know, he continued, now sounding perhaps just a little bit desperate. If you want to file a complaint, call this number here. And he pointed to a number starting with 0180 at the top of the cover letter, which I was just as reluctant to take as I was to take the suitcase itself.