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SCRABBLE/Sam Orbaum

ZARF TIME

The ragged waif faced the crusty old newspaper editor, begging for a job. Editor: “Can you spell ‘cat,’ kid?” Kid: “Can you spell ‘anthropomorphology?’” The kid was thrown out, dragged back in, and a few pages later becomes America’s biggest newspaper magnate, as Gail Wynand in Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*.

Were the kid a Scrabble player, he could have saved the sass and gotten away with being wrong: KAT is listed in the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary (the OSPD) as an ever-green shrub, and for good measure, KHAT is permitted as a variant spelling.

Beyond the working vocabulary of the average intellect is a cache of obscure and rarely used gems that, rescued from utter anonymity as thoroughly useless words for conversation, reign as high-status Scrabble plays: **KEX, JUGUM, ARVO, ZARF**.

There are thousands of them, absurd little words, deftly arranged letters formed into pronounceable units that look as if they were invented on the spot in order to reach the triple. You challenge, of course, and you’re wrong. Of course.

Learning these scandalous transmogrifications of the King’s English is not easy. Without the association of a definition, **URAEI, AUREI, AURAE, OURIE** and **AERIE** are just eerie arrays of vowels with an R stirred in. Further afield, try sifting through **OURARI, OORALI, ROULEAU, AREOLAE, AUREOLE, AUREOLAE**: there are a lot of vowel-heavy menaces such as these that look like typographical errors.

You may never learn to pronounce them, but you *can* learn to spell them, if you use your imagination. Mnemonics — memorization by association — is a valuable tool for the serious Scrabble student. To wit: **OURARI = O U R A Real Israeli**; **OOORALI = Only Overly Rich Americans Love Israel**. Anyway, that’s the idea.

A side-effect of mnemonics is the muttering. You attract attention when you speak to your rack, uttering: “**U R An Elegant Idiot** to invoke **URAEI** from the mishmash of tiles facing you.

Less dotty, but just as effective, is a form of mnemonics used by Jerusalem Scrabble player and mutterer, Barry Chamish. He compiles lists of thematically compatible odd words, such as his “four-letter Hebrew names” list. As mnemonics is probably the most liberal of all sciences, some entries are justified purely by imaginative rationalization.

Thus unfettered by exactitude, Chamish pays homage to Members of Knesset listed in the OSPD: **ABBE EBON**; he opens the Bible to the story of **CAIN** (or **KAIN** or **KANE**) and **ABELE** (not a four-letter word, but we're being liberal, remember), and then points out where **CHAM** is mentioned. He recalls his days as a member of **BENE KIVA** with friends **BETH, GADI, OOZY, GABY, ANNA, RAMI, RANI, RAYA** (or **RAIA**), **AMIE** and **MIRI**.

Chamish's list includes a bit of Jerusalem geography (**SIMA**, a famous *steakia*, and **ALBA**, the drugstore where you go afterward), and Israeli military figures: **YONI**, the hero of Entebbe, **DADO**, who accepted blame for setbacks in the Yom Kippur War, and **ARIL/ARYL**, who didn't, for the Lebanon War.

Expanding on this theme, the capital's memsahib of restaurateurs, Flower Silliman, formulated her own "bait list" of acceptable proper names that sound phony.

Many of them are memorable by the definitions the OSPD attributes to them: **JUDAS** (a peephole), **JEZEBEL** (a scheming, wicked woman), **JOSEPH** (a woman's long cloak), **ESTER** (a chemical compound), **DAHLIA** (a flowering plant), **DAVY** (a safety lamp), **BENJAMIN** (a benzoin), **HENRY** (a unit of inductance), **JENNY** (a female donkey), **GILL** (a unit of liquid measure), **LAURA** (a type of monastery), **MARIA** (a plural of mare; a dark area on the surface of the moon or Mars).

The OSPD, compiled from five dictionaries, and the Israel telephone books, make an eclectic reference library.