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On discovering and rediscovering Judaism in a time of upheaval

BY MIRIAM ANZOVIN



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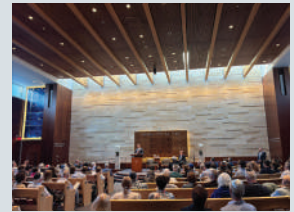


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תשפ"ו - 5786



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A vibrant still life featuring pomegranates, honey, and glass jars on a yellow background. Several whole and open pomegranates are scattered around, with their red seeds spilling out. A wooden honey dipper rests on a pool of honey, and two glass jars filled with honey are positioned below it. The entire scene is set against a bright yellow background with a subtle geometric pattern, framed by a blue border.

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ESSAY

Who Gets to Belong?

On generational change,
TikTok talmud, and
a very Jewish tradition
of reinvention

by MIRIAM ANZOVIN

PHOTOGRAPH BY DOUG LEVY

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On dating, conversion, and sharing tradition with new friends

by MIRIAM LIBICKI

ON THE COVER:

Like the essay that anchors this issue, the many paths on the cover celebrate the idea that “there are countless ways of understanding, connecting to, and interpreting Jewishness.”



ILLUSTRATION BY
MELANIE LAMBRICK

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A New Year's Reflection and Commitment to Purpose

AS WE PREPARE to welcome 5786, the Jewish new year invites us to pause — to reflect on the year that has passed and to look ahead with intention and hope.

Rosh Hashanah is more than a holiday. It's a moment of introspection, of realignment. It reminds us that we are each part of a larger story, one that spans generations, communities, and borders. For us at The CJN, this season is also a time to reflect on the values that shape our work and the purpose that drives us forward.

This past year brought no shortage of challenges in our communities, across Canada, and around the world. Jewish life has been tested, stretched, and, in many ways, strengthened by how we've shown up for one another. Through it all, The CJN has remained committed to delivering journalism that informs, inspires, and connects. We've told the difficult stories. We've celebrated resilience. And we've worked hard to elevate a diverse chorus of voices within the Jewish Canadian landscape.

As we step into the new year, I want to take a moment to thank the

more than 40,000 subscribers, supporters, contributors, readers, and listeners who make our work possible. Your trust fuels our mission.

It is important to note, especially in a climate where truth and partisanship are too often confused, that The CJN is a non-partisan publication. Our role is not to advance political agendas, but to pursue facts, elevate meaningful discourse, and serve as a platform for a broad spectrum of Jewish perspectives. We hold ourselves accountable to integrity, fairness, and journalistic excellence — values that transcend political lines and speak to the core of who we are as an organization.

As the shofar sounds and we begin anew, may this year be one of insight, empathy, and courageous storytelling. May it be a year in which our collective conversations bring understanding — not division — and in which community remains at the heart of all we do.

Wishing you and your loved ones a sweet, peaceful, and healthy new year.

Shana tovah!

MICHAEL WEISDORF
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
THE CANADIAN JEWISH NEWS

Contributors



**MELANIE
LAMBRICK**

COVER

MELANIE Lambrick is an illustrator based in Victoria. Her work strives to make complex ideas feel both accessible and visually striking, and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Chatelaine*, and elsewhere.



DOUG LEVY

WHO GETS TO BELONG?, P.44

DOUG Levy is a Boston-based portrait photographer and former professional baseball umpire. His work has appeared in *Boston* magazine, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes*, among others. He lives outside Boston with his wife, son, and two dogs.



MIRIAM LIBICKI

COMIC, P.80

MIRIAM Libicki has been cartooning since 2003 and screenprinting since 2005. Her primary themes are culture clash and the construction of identity, usually through the prism of her Jewishness and dual American-Israeli citizenship.

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A time to look back, and to look forward

IT IS BUILT INTO our experience of autumn that this is a time for looking back — we take stock, ask forgiveness, complete a cycle of the Torah. It is simultaneously a time for looking forward: like schoolkids clutching crisp notebooks for the year ahead, we make plans, hope for fresh starts, begin a new cycle. It is a period of reckoning.

This has been even more true than usual in recent years. The Jewish world is under enormous pressure, and in a time of enormous change. Many Jews, perhaps more than they often do, are reckoning with their Jewishness: with their understanding of what it means to be Jewish, with their place in the Jewish community, with the obligations and risks that come with being Jewish. It is a reckoning that encompasses politics, generational change, the institutions that have traditionally structured community, and the digital technologies that continue to alter the very structure of society.

This process can be difficult; these are hard questions. But it also, as explored so beautifully by Miriam Anzovin in the essay that anchors this issue, creates opportunities. “There are new forms of Jewish community emerging right now — vibrant, compelling, full of heart, deeply rooted in

our heritage and ancestral wisdom, and in our shared diaspora experiences,” she writes. “Jews are discovering alternate modes of engaging with Jewish identity and finding community, formats that resonate and create meaning in their lives in new ways — or, sometimes, in ancient ways made new again.”

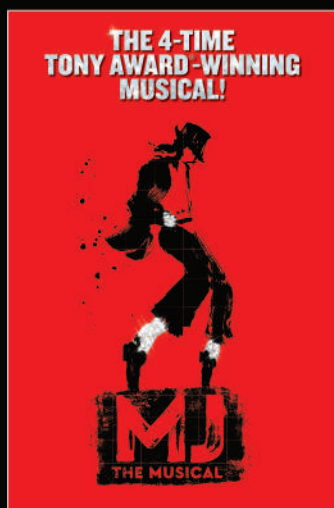
Her piece describes one such path, one such form of engagement. There are many others, and they are a cause for joy and for hope. As we all continue to take stock and to reflect on the future, may we each find this kind of connection and renewal, in whatever form we most need it.

L'shanah tovah,

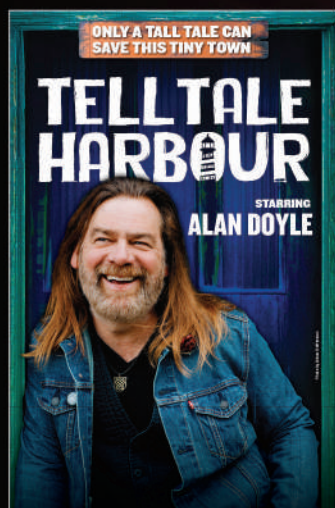
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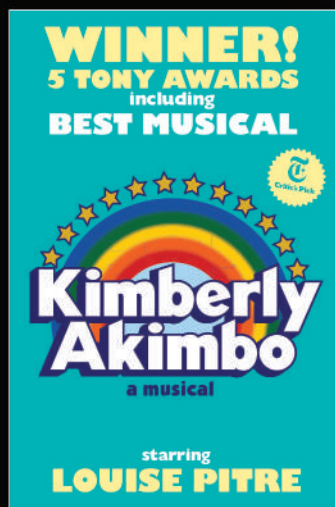
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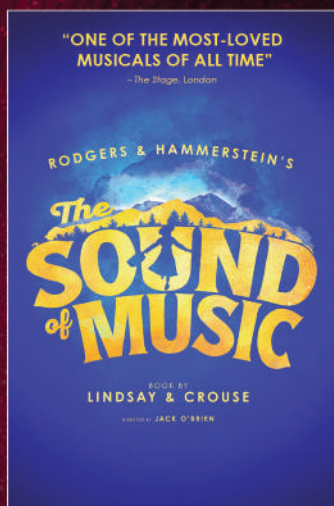
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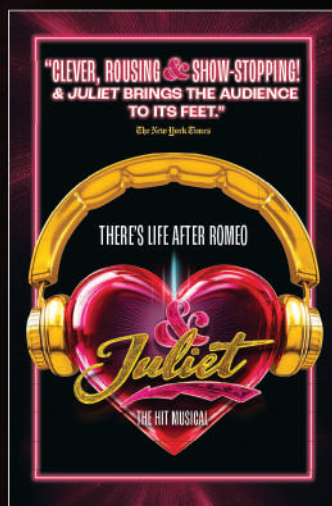
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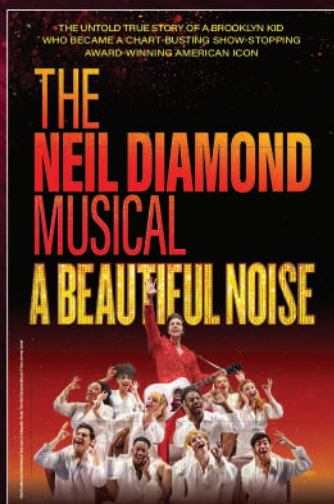
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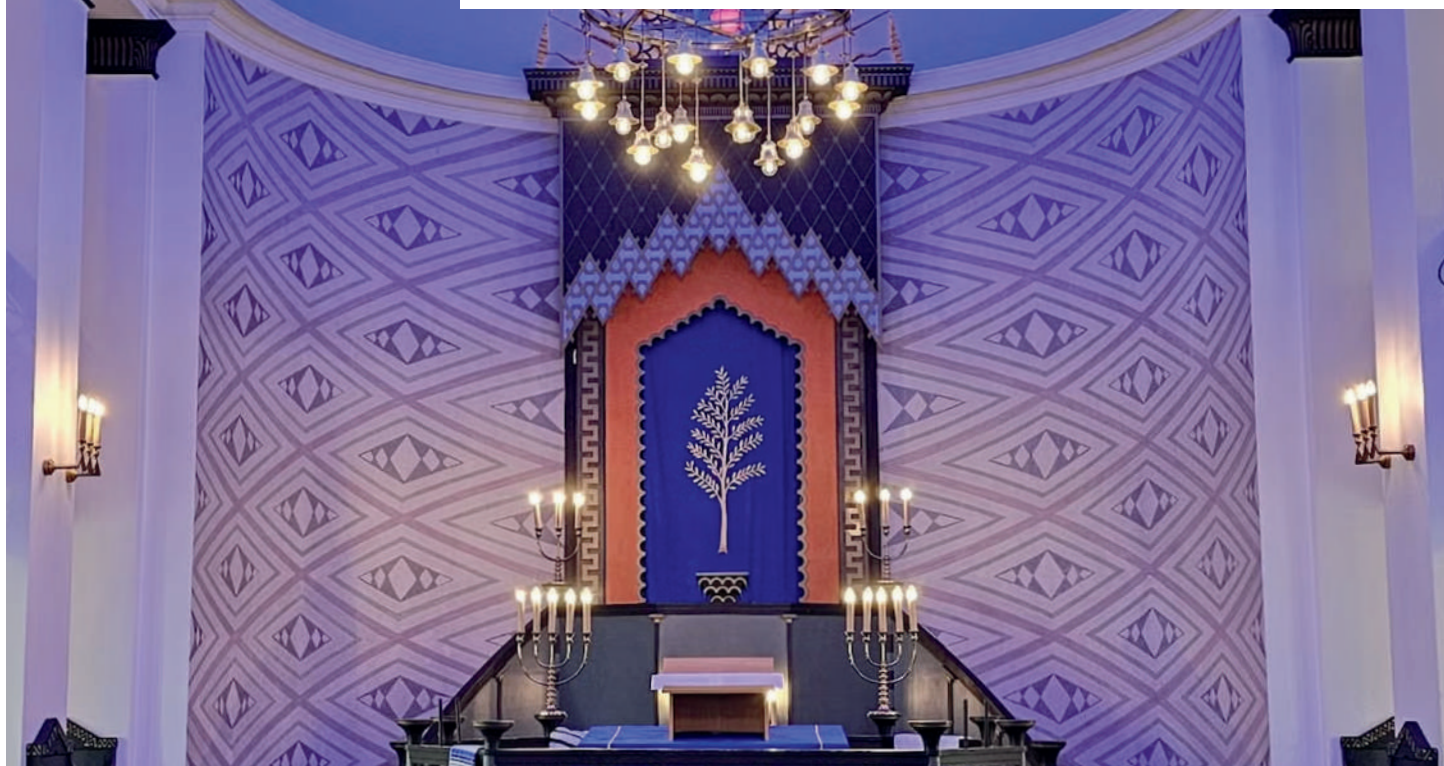
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The Trondheim Synagogue in Norway, which is one of the northernmost in the world.

Jewish Geography

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COMMUNITY

NORWAY CITY'S ONE-OF-A-KIND APPROACH TO OBSERVING SHABBAT

by DAN FELLNER

IF EVER THERE WAS a synagogue that's earned the right to throw itself a birthday shindig, it's the intriguing house of worship in central Norway, about 350 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle. Over the past century, the Trondheim Synagogue has weathered isolation from the rest of the Jewish world; the Holocaust, which wiped out half its community; challenges related to Shabbat observance because of its far northern latitude; and persistent antisemitism.

This fall, the synagogue will be observing its centennial with a three-day celebration, culminating in an October 26 event that members of Norway's royal family, the country's prime minister, the mayor of Trondheim, and other dignitaries are scheduled to attend. "There will be speeches, songs, and, of course, we will tell the history of the community," says John Arne Moen, president of the Trondheim Jewish

Community. “We are on the outskirts of the Jewish world.... You will probably not find a community like ours any other place in the world.”

With a population of about 200,000, Trondheim is Norway’s third-largest city, behind Oslo and Bergen. Located on the shores of a fjord that’s an inlet in the Norwegian Sea, the city was founded in the year 997 and was Norway’s capital during the Viking Age. The unlikely story of Jewish life in Trondheim began in the late nineteenth century, when Jewish immigrants began arriving from Poland and Lithuania, usually because they couldn’t afford to go to America. By 1900, there were more than 100 Jews living in Trondheim and the city’s first synagogue was established. During the next 20 years, the community grew to more than 300 members, prompting the need for a larger synagogue.

In 1923, an old railway station at Arkitekt Christies gate 1 was purchased with the financial support of approximately 200 Jews from Oslo and converted into a synagogue. It was inaugurated in 1925 and remains, along with the synagogue in Oslo, one of only two synagogues in the country.

Germany occupied Norway from 1940 to 1945. The Nazis confiscated the synagogue and used it as a barracks, replacing the Stars of David in the windows with swastikas. It’s believed that 165 local Jews, about half of Trondheim’s Jewish population at the time, died in the Holocaust, fuelled by robust collaboration by local authorities.

Today, Moen estimates there are 200 Jews living in Trondheim; about three-quarters are members of the synagogue. Shabbat services are typically held every other Friday. The chief rabbi of Norway, Michael Melchior, lives in Israel but periodically travels to Oslo and Trondheim to conduct services. (Melchior’s father was the long-time chief rabbi of Denmark.)

When Melchior isn’t in town, services are usually led by Israeli-born Asher Serussi, a religious leader in the community who has lived in Trondheim for 30 years. Serussi describes the Trondheim Synagogue as “Orthodox but very flexible and modern.... Most of the people here are not observant Jews,” he says. “Our members are interested in the Jewish culture and traditions, but they don’t keep kosher and they don’t keep Shabbat. They enjoy very much when we have celebrations for holidays — then it’s a full house”

For the more religious, the question about how to handle Shabbat’s start and end times has been a topic of debate ever since the congregation was founded in 1905. According to halakhah, Shabbat begins a few minutes before sunset and lasts for twenty-five hours, but Trondheim is located so far north that the amount of daylight can vary between twenty hours in the summer to just four hours in the winter.

In a country known as “the land of the midnight sun,” what’s an Orthodox congregation to do? Other communities in far northern latitudes handle the issue in a variety of ways. Some set the

Shabbat clock based on Jerusalem time, while others divide the day equally into two twelve-hour segments. Some start Shabbat at the traditional moment, even if that means lighting candles around midnight. Moen says the Trondheim congregation developed its own approach in its early years: here, Shabbat begins at 5:30 p.m. on Fridays and ends at 6:30 p.m. on Saturdays, regardless of the time of year and whether there’s sunlight or polar darkness. “We have grown up with it,” says Moen. “We are the only Orthodox synagogue in the world doing it this way.”

There is a small museum in the same building as the synagogue, designed in part to combat antisemitism. The Jewish Museum Trondheim opened in 1997 and attracts 7,000 visitors a year, many of them local schoolchildren. They come on field trips to learn about the Holocaust and the history of Jewish life in Trondheim. The basement of the museum has a small mikveh that hasn’t been used since before the German occupation. At the urging of two local Orthodox families, it is now in the process of being restored.

Moen says that despite its many challenges, the Trondheim Jewish community is now on solid footing and looking forward to continuing to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of residents and tourists. “We have a lot of young people and we haven’t seen this much activity in our community since before the war. We have a beautiful shul. If you want a place to pray, the synagogue is open to any Jew that wants to come.” **JTA**



CULTURE

AARON LANSKY BUILT A HOME FOR YIDDISH BOOKS. NOW HE'S HANDING OVER THE KEYS

by **ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL**

STEVEN SPIELBERG had already donated money to the Yiddish Book Center when he asked if the centre's founder, Aaron Lansky, might fly out to Los Angeles and drop by his office. The filmmaker doesn't usually meet with the beneficiaries of his philanthropy, Lansky told me recently, but wanted to explain his support for what is now the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library at the YBC, an online collection of more than 12,000 Yiddish titles.

"You have to understand," he said, "that what I do for a living is I tell stories," Lansky recalls Spielberg telling him. "The idea that you have miles of Jewish stories that have yet to be told, that's just irresistible to someone like me."

Spielberg may not even have been the first supporter of the Yiddish Book Center to find something, well, Spielbergian about an

Reproductions of book and magazine covers hang over the main book room of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts.

institution Lansky founded in 1980 as a then 24-year-old graduate student of Yiddish. More than one visitor to the YBC's campus in Amherst, Massachusetts has compared the shelves and shelves of Yiddish books, rescued from dumpsters and the attics and basements of aging readers, to the colossal government warehouse seen in the closing scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. But Spielberg also seemed to understand what has driven Lansky, who retired in June as the centre's president; his successor is Susan Bronson, the centre's executive director for the past 14 years.

Lansky started amassing the collection by going door to door, asking elderly Jews and their offspring for the books they might otherwise have thrown away. The rescue project could easily have remained a warehouse of old books, dusty treasures mouldering in the dark, occasionally accessed by scholars and hobbyists. Instead, the collection of some 1.5 million volumes is the foundation of an institution that now includes Yiddish classes, academic fellowships, a training program for translators, scholarly conferences, a publisher of books in translation, an oral history archive, a podcast, and that digitized library of both classic and obscure Yiddish books.

The Yiddish Book Center celebrates and commemorates what Lansky calls "one of the most concentrated outpourings of literary creativity in all of Jewish history," lasting roughly from the 1860s to the immediate aftermath of World War

HISTORY

II. As newly emancipated Jews encountered modernity, they created a vast Yiddish literature both high- and low-brow: books, literary journals, newspapers, plays, songs, and films. It was a literature, according to Lansky's mentor, the Yiddish scholar Ruth Wisse, "that, if it suffers from anything, suffers from its youthfulness, from the exaggerated emphasis on innovativeness and on modernity and originality."

Lansky says Yiddish literature asks the essential question, "What does it mean for Jews to live in a modern world?" That question gnawed at him as a student, first at Hampshire College and later at McGill University, and led him to marshal teams of collectors with wheelbarrows and pickup trucks. "The idea that we were going to go reinvent ourselves in a modern world without reference to this vast literature seemed kind of foolish to me," he says.

Lansky is under no illusion that Yiddish will be revived as a spoken language outside of the haredi Orthodox community. But both in the original and in translation, Yiddish literature will continue to offer new possibilities for Jews and non-Jews to understand the "dialectic" of Jewish culture: religious and secular, holy and profane, triumphant and tragic. "What I would put my money on is that Jews, as a people, can't get by with religion alone," says Lansky. "There's also a day-to-day side of Jewish life.... The most profound works of Jewish literature are those works that embrace that dialectic." **JTA**

FRENCH PARLIAMENT UNANIMOUSLY VOTES TO POSTHUMOUSLY PROMOTE ALFRED DREYFUS

by **GRACE GILSON**

A FRENCH PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE unanimously approved a bill this summer to posthumously promote Alfred Dreyfus, more than 130 years after he was framed for treason in one of the defining antisemitic incidents of the nineteenth century.

Dreyfus, a Jewish French army captain, was falsely accused of espionage and convicted of treason in 1894, decades after the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. The trial — playing out in a Western European republic purportedly committed to equal rights — became an international scandal and symbol of enduring antisemitism on the continent.

French writer Émile Zola published a famous open letter titled "J'accuse!" charging the government and army of "treason against humanity" by playing to the public's antisemitism. The trial also reportedly persuaded Theodor Herzl, who covered it as a journalist, to turn to Zionism. He is now considered the chief ideological influence behind Israel's establishment.

Dreyfus was eventually exonerated, returned to the military, and died in 1935, but the incident, widely known as the Dreyfus Affair, is seen as a stain on French history. More than a century later, the French parliament's National Defence and Armed Forces Committee unanimously voted to promote him to the rank of brigadier general, a decision that was supported in a unanimous vote by the full National Assembly a few days later.

"Accused, humiliated and condemned because he was Jewish, Alfred Dreyfus was dismissed from the army, imprisoned and exiled to Devil's Island," wrote former French prime minister Gabriel Attal, who has Jewish ancestry, in a post on X. "More than 130 years later, the national representation honors the values and principles of the Republic. It has come to do justice. It has come to give this man, who fought for France, everything he is due. A French hero."

The French embassy in Israel also praised the vote in a statement on X. "The French Nation is just and does not forget," the statement said. "This rights an injustice, honors a warrior, and clarifies that antisemitism, from history to today, will never have a place in the Republic." **JTA**

A New Chapter— Let's Take Action Together



Dear community members,

As we head into the Jewish New Year, I wanted to take the opportunity to reflect on our community's achievements and look ahead to the incredible impact that we can have as a collective.

Last year alone, we sent 1.2 million messages to our local officials. The results are clear: Safe Access Zones have been instituted in cities in Canada, Hizb ut-Tahrir was prevented from spreading its hateful ideology within our borders, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

Corps (IRGC) was listed as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Our collective action has made a real difference—and it inspires us to keep going.

Helping drive change is not just about policy, but about people. When thousands of us speak up, we become an undeniable force for change.

On Rosh Hashanah, we begin a new chapter in a very familiar book, and we all have a part to play as Jewish community advocates and dedicated allies.

This high holiday season, I'm asking every community member to build a relationship with their Member of Parliament.

Call Your MP. Tell them what matters most to you, and our community.

In our democracy, the greatest force in making positive change happen is you. Tell them how you feel about antisemitism and what needs to be done to keep your family safe.

The government has made important commitments to address public safety concerns of the Jewish community—including increased funding and direct partnership with our community security agencies and federal mandated Safe Access Zones.

In addition to urgently implementing these commitments, there are impactful actions that MPs can support right now to safeguard Canadians and our community, such as boosting security for Jewish communities and banning the glorification of terrorism on our streets.

We need your help. Go to ActionHub.ca to join the movement. Let's keep showing up—for each other and for the future we believe in.

Shana Tova,

Noah Shack
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The Kibbitz

Architect **Moshe Safdie** on Jewish aesthetics and the power of design to shape community by **AVI FINEGOLD**

“BELONGING
IS NOT IN THE
EYES OF THE
ARCHITECT;
IT’S IN THE EYES
OF THE USER.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTONIO ZAZUETA OLMOS

FEW ARCHITECTS launch with the splash Moshe Safdie did: Habitat 67, the now iconic housing development showcased at Montreal's world's fair, grew out of his master's thesis. In the half-century since that first project, Safdie has proven to be a versatile and prolific architect. The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, and the Khalsa Heritage Centre in Anandpur Sahib, India, all demonstrate the breadth of his abilities. We sat down this summer to discuss his many projects in Israel, Jewish aesthetics, and the importance of light in architecture.

We are living in a very polarized time. You have written about the Mamilla district in Jerusalem, which you planned in the early 1970s as a physical, constructed manifestation of an open society. It took over 40 years for it to be fully realized as a shopping district and bridge between the old and new cities, and Jewish and Palestinian areas. Can architects still play a role in mending a broken society?

I think it's important to distinguish between what architects can do, which is physical, and between what statesmen and politicians can do, which is create policy. Architects can create the physical setting to improve cohabitation, collaboration, interaction: they can have extraordinary impact as they design the public realm and how it relates to the urban fabric. But that can only be done via an opportunity that has to be enacted one way or the other by policy.

But, if there is policy in place, the architect can create the physical setting. To do that, they need to not just be a strong physical designer of the public realm, but to have their antennae out to appreciate various kinds of

forces: how people move in a city, when do they feel secure and insecure in a city, how you can mix certain uses. Cohabitation by different populations in residential neighbourhoods is very difficult, more difficult than commingling in, say, the bazaar, in the marketplace.

Right now, I'm working in Singapore, which has an interesting mix of minorities: the majority are Chinese, but there are also Indian, Tamil, and Malay communities. The government, by design — and that's policy plus architecture — has every one of the new towns mixed racially, because they had race riots in the early years of the state, and they were determined never to let that happen again. They are socially engineering the population in housing projects. You can go far with that. The architect is a player, but not the sole player.

Do you think that Mamilla actually fulfilled its function?

I think Mamilla is a major success in three ways. First, it created a powerful link between the Old City and the new city. Before it was done, all the

land that was cleared around the walls was kind of a no man's land in terms of urban activity, and it created this very powerful bridge which is full of life almost all the time. Because of its position between different communities, it also, by definition, attracts all the people. So Mamilla, when you walk around, there's a lot of Orthodox, some haredi, the secular Jerusalemites, there's tourists, there's Arabs — and those who are visibly Arabs, walking around freely with the dress and head covers, etc. There are a significant number of Arabs serving and buying in the shops. So it is really a place where the public realm is mixed and cohabitated, and it gives it a certain richness. It also created a flow between the Old City, between Jaffa Gate and the new city: on the *chagim* you get people going to prayers at the wall, during Ramadan you get a flow of people coming from Sheikh Jarrah. So it's a mixer.

In *The Body of Faith*, Jewish theologian and philosopher Michael Wyschogrod wrote about the Jewish community that “the level of taste in the Jewish community — and not only in the Orthodox community — is very low. Families that could afford the best live in homes decorated in the most pedestrian taste, lacking all individuality and personal statement. And when an attempt is made to express some individuality, more often than not the result is merely weird rather than in good taste.” He went on to say that it's a “very dangerous development, not mainly because our synagogues and homes exhibit poor taste, but because a totally bourgeois Judaism will be a dead Judaism.... A bourgeois Judaism is dead because it is out of contact with the explosive ferment of the religious spirit.”



Mamilla plays a central role in Jerusalem by linking the old and new cities, and the Jewish and Arab quarters. Safdie's plan for the area was approved in 1972; politics, litigation, and opposition by various groups delayed its completion until 2008. In addition to being one of the only places where the full range of Jerusalem's population goes to shop, it is remarkable for its blend of contemporary architecture with historic buildings.



The Skirball Cultural Centre was built over 30 years. It was designed to nestle into the Santa Monica Mountains by integrating stepped gardens throughout the campus, and creating expansive views of the landscape from inside the various buildings.



Does that resonate? Why have there been so few great synagogues built in the past half-century or so?

It does resonate, very much so.

Erich Mendelsohn did a couple of synagogues in America. Not great, but pretty good. I have an office of 80 people, maybe 20 percent are Jews. And when we get a Jewish institution in here, there's always that sense of skepticism. Can we transcend the taste level? With exceptions—the Skirball Center, in Los Angeles, is an exemplary exception—it remains true.

I think in the haredi and religious community, it's most extreme. And the sadness for me is it's not just the aesthetics of building a synagogue; it's also the way space is used. I did a building for Rav Goren [a former chief rabbi of Israel] called the Idra. It abuts the Western Wall piazza: an old building, quite beautiful, that I restored. And within years, they built a horrible cover on the terrace with an awful makeshift roof. Because they want to have events there, they built fences on the upper roof—the ugliest fences, it looks like a prison and has lights that look like prison lights. I have my house next door looking down on it, and I said with disbelief that they were doing everything you could do to destroy how that building appears in the city and how it contributes to what's around it. It is disastrous. And that's true down the line.

You go around the Jewish Quarter, which started with some good guidelines and so on, and people keep adding things: terraces, this and that, pergolas—but with no control, and there's no will. There's no will of the authorities, the city, or the Hevra Le-shikum Ha'rova [the organization overseeing the development of the Old City in Jerusalem] to control it. There is no judgment of the people

The Kibbitz

themselves who are doing all these improvisations. Some people would go further and say it's because of the Jewish tradition of *lo tase lecha pesel umesichah* [the prohibition against graven images], that the desire to avoid representational art gets extended to include all sorts of beautification. But I don't buy that because, in history, it's true that we were always impacted by local culture, but that's inevitable. But there were buildings that people took pride in and care of.

I did the national museum of the Sikhs in India. And I'd say India is not a great place for maintenance, generally speaking, but I did it 20 years ago and it is absolutely impeccable because there is this pride. It's deeper than just aesthetic taste. It's the culture of caring for the environment.

If you had an opportunity to talk to people who don't think about architecture or design in this way, how might you get them to begin to appreciate it?

When I look at the curriculum in Israel—I have grandchildren now of school age, kindergarten age, my one grandson is going to Grade 2—it's a pleasure to see what they do in the arts: drawing, observing, having trips to look at nature. I lament the fact that schools in Israel have less and less of that. And I think it's a very important thing to try and introduce it in the Jewish school curriculum. And I know, people always say Jews are not much in the visual arts. But you come to the United States and how many important architects are Jewish? Frank Gehry, Richard Meier, I can go on and on. And the same is true in the world of art—Rothko and others, there's a good list. So I'd say that when the opportunity and the education and the exposure are there, there's no lack of talent and appreciation.



The Khalsa Heritage Centre (top) incorporates Sikh symbolism throughout the design; while not a religious site, it is a significant site for Sikhs worldwide and a hallmark for how to build for a client's culture while still retaining an architect's signature.

Habitat 67 (right) combined modular building techniques (units were prefabricated and then moved into place) with a striking design.

Notre-Dame (opposite page), Paris' iconic cathedral, recently had its nave restored after a devastating fire in 2019.



Moving from the haredi to the hiloni side, have you ever thought of the Habitat 67 housing complex as an urban kibbutz?

Yeah, I think in many ways when I designed it, the kind of collective life of the kibbutz was there. I mean, there wasn't the common dining room and the children's house, but there was that sense of collective living. And in fact, what's interesting is that Habitat, now 60 years later, is very much a communal place. They have a residence committee, they have sub-committees, they have a cookbook that they did, and they have newsletters and internal politics and I'm

very involved because, until recently, I owned an apartment so I would get all the stuff. So it is very much a communal place.

Could you walk me through the process of completing a project? How do you balance the site, the program, the client — and how do they all inform what the ultimate design is?

A project is the outcome of a dialogue with a client. No great building can occur without a great client. Clients have real impact on the outcome because it's part of the dialogue. Good architecture comes out of that dialogue. Sometimes it involves educating the



as they were a thousand years ago. They've been washed and cleaned. You see the stone, beautiful lighting. What makes that place extraordinary? It's light, the quality of light. It is the resonance between the form and the structural system, the sort of soaring up, soaring structure, the way everything sort of meets, columns become pilasters become flying buttresses. There's a world of ornament, which is an outcome of the crafting of the building. In the case of the church, there's another layer of art, stained glass windows, the sculpture and all that play a role.

Now a synagogue is minus the art, minus the sculpture, but not minus the colour necessarily; there is the structure itself and there is the light. The synagogue first of all is a matter of light — light of all kinds. There are so many different qualities of light. Light is an element by which we can have that sense of spiritual uplift.

In the case of the synagogue, it also has to do with a sense of the communal. The *bimah* is an important centre, and then there's the *aron hakodesh*, another important centre, and the ritual path between them. And then the way people sit in the synagogue looking at each other with the heights, the levels. It's very hard to give a prescription.

I've noticed that ever since writing your memoir (*If Walls Could Speak: My Life in Architecture*, published in 2022), you've done a lot of interviews. What have you learned about yourself in the process?

I think the nice thing about being almost 87 is that you reach a certain level of security and self-appreciation about what you've achieved that allows you to look at things much more openly and in an appreciative way. I'd say that, 20 years ago, I would be more critical of things. There is a mellowing. ▀

client, and sometimes you learn from the client. It's a dynamic thing.

For me, understanding the site with all its subtleties beginning from climate, topography, the surrounding culture, the lifestyle of the community — all these things are important. I gave a lecture series at the Harvard Graduate School of Design this semester on the theme of belonging: How do you make a building belong? And belonging is not in the eyes of the architect; it's in the eyes of the user. If you want to achieve a sense of belonging, you've got to have it emerge in the user. If you do a school, I don't care about the shapes and sculptural

qualities. What matters is: Is it a wonderful place for learning? Is the classroom an inspiring place? Is it the place where community evolves? These are the ingredients. Then there's economics and reality and building codes and you are orchestrating and floating between them all.

What do you think are the elements of great synagogue architecture given the specific needs of any given synagogue, such as an ark or *bimah*?

I was recently in Paris and I went to see Notre-Dame, which has been refurbished and rebuilt. And for the first time we're seeing it with all the walls

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by **cogir**

IF *LASHON HARA* IS A SIN, WHAT DO WE DO WITH FACEBOOK?

Just like Hillel's student, we all have complex questions that we want answered as simply as possible. Here, we consider a question of contemporary relevance and explore how sources both classical and modern address it.

by **AVI FINEGOLD**

THERE IS a parable told of a rabbi who was approached by someone asking for advice about how to curb their tendency to gossip. The rabbi told the penitent to take a feather pillow, tear it open and cast its contents to the wind. The penitent does so and then returns; the rabbi continues: then go and gather all the feathers back into the pillowcase. "But that is impossible," the person replied, to which the rabbi said, "Exactly. Just like all the feathers have scattered so far and wide, so too are your words when you speak *lashon hara* to others."

This parable (likely borrowed from sixteenth century saint Philip Neri) speaks to a very human struggle: we tend to know instinctively that gossip isn't good, but we also have a hard time avoiding it. While gossip has always been with us, the pervasiveness of social media has brought *lashon hara* — literally evil speech — to the forefront of our collective consciousness. Is it possible to be an ethical participant in social media? How do we balance the benefits of social media platforms, like the opportunities they provide to speak out against evil and forge new connections, with the temptations they create to be snide, snarky, or downright mean to others in public?

LEVITICUS 19:16/PSALMS 34:13-15

Do not go about as a talebearer among members of your people. Do not profit by the blood of your fellow [Israelite]; I am the Lord.

Who is the man who is eager for life, who desires years of good fortune? Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech. Shun evil and do good, seek amity and pursue it. **1**

1 **THESE TWO BIBLICAL VERSES** create two parallel ways of understanding *lashon hara*: one takes a legalistic approach with an outright prohibition, while the other makes an ethical case encouraging us to pay attention to the language we use. These two approaches continue throughout the history of Jewish thought, where *lashon hara* is sometimes treated as a matter of straightforward adherence to mitzvot, and sometimes as a matter of self-improvement.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, ARACHIN 15B

Rabbi Yohanan says in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra: Anyone who speaks malicious speech is considered as though he denied the fundamental belief in God.

And Reish Lakish says: Anyone who speaks malicious speech increases his sins until the heavens ...

The Gemara asks: What is considered malicious speech? In other words, how is malicious speech defined and what are the limits of the prohibition? Rava said: For example, if one says: There is always fire at so-and-so's home, indicating that they are always cooking food there. Abaye said to Rava: What did this person do wrong by saying that there is always fire in that home? His statement is merely revealing the true facts, and is not malicious speech. Rather, it is considered malicious speech if he expressed this in a slanderous manner. For example, if he says: Where else can one find fire except at so-and-so's home, because they are always cooking food there. **2**

**RABBI YISRAEL MEIR KAGAN, *SEFER CHOFETZ CHAIM* (1873),
PART 1:1 PRINCIPLE 1 AND PART 1:10 PRINCIPLE 1-2**

It is forbidden to speak demeaningly of one's friend, even if it be absolute truth. And this is termed everywhere by *Chazal lashon hara*. Even if one speaks true statements which will not cause any visible damage, one transgresses this prohibition.

If one witnessed someone committing a wrong against his fellow — such as theft, damage, embarrassment, or wrongdoing — even if only a single person saw it — and the offender has not yet repented, it is permitted to relate this to others, for the purpose of helping the guilty person repent and repairing the wrong.

However, there are seven precise conditions which must be fulfilled before one may speak such beneficial lashon hara:

- You personally witnessed the event, or you conducted due diligence to verify its truth.
- You are absolutely sure the incident was truly wrongful.
- You first approached the offender privately.
- No exaggeration — report facts accurately, without embellishment.
- You have a purely constructive intent.
- There must be no alternative way to achieve the goal.
- The harm caused by speaking must be proportionate and fair. **3**

2 IN THIS EXCERPT from a longer section of Talmud about *lashon hara*, the rabbis expand on the dual nature of the dangers it poses, which they frame in terms of the spiritual damage that it can cause as well as a matter of adherence to law. This sets the tone for much of the discussion in later generations, with many taking up the spiritual and ethical damage that language can inflict, while others focus more on defining exacting parameters for what constitutes bad speech.

3 FOR CENTURIES, RABBINIC TRADITION has included laws about *lashon hara*, but with a couple of exceptions, most notably Maimonides, these were scattered across larger texts and not given a comprehensive treatment.

Kagan is the first to collect all these sources into a single work, essentially codifying the thinking of the previous generations and also greatly expanding the scope of laws around speech. While he was careful to discuss both the legal and the ethical sides of *lashon hara* in this book and others that he wrote on the topic, his emphasis on the legalities seems to have had lasting impact: to this day, the work has become extremely popular, with daily study guides and even a foundation devoted to promoting *lashon hara* awareness.

However, this legal approach is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, as we see in this passage, it gives a framework for how and when something is not only permitted, but obligatory to speak. On the other hand, it means that, unless someone is an expert in the laws, they may feel unable to judge whether they are allowed to say something or not, and err on the side of silence. In the introduction to his book, Kagan lists up to 32 possible Biblical prohibitions that may be violated by speaking *lashon hara*, many of which aren't directly related to the act of *lashon hara* itself: an approach that can have a chilling effect among those who take his work seriously.

RABBI MARK DRATCH, “LET THEM TALK: THE MITZVAH TO SPEAK *LASHON HARA*” (2006)

Victims of abuse need to speak out, for all kinds of personal reasons, in order to help themselves. Their supporters need to speak out in order to help them. And the community needs to speak out in order to hold the perpetrators responsible and in order to protect other innocents from potential harm. All must be diligent in meeting the conditions required for such speech, including knowledge of or verification of the facts, proper motivation, the curbing of personal animosities, no exaggeration, and the like. Allowances must be made for persistent rumors and circumstantial evidence when their credibility meets halakhic standards. And each of us needs to recommit ourselves to protecting the physical and spiritual welfare of women, children, and men; safeguarding the integrity of the social fabric of the Jewish community; and securing the honor of Torah and God’s very Name.

According to rabbinic tradition, it is the capacity of speech that distinguishes humans from the animals and from all other parts of Creation. The Torah demands of us to use that divine gift of speech wisely and carefully in order to protect the humanness of victims of abuse, as well as the humane-ness of every member of our society. **4**

4 **THE #METOO MOVEMENT** was a driving force for change in the Jewish community. Before that era, many victims of Jewish abusers were silenced when they tried to speak out about their experiences. One concern was that it might be damaging to the community (for example, in the case of Michael Steinhardt, the co-founder of Birthright and donor to many Jewish institutions, who had been credibly accused of abuse by women who were told to keep quiet because of his status and contributions). Another was that the laws of *lashon hara* prohibited the victim from speaking publicly about abuse (as in situations involving Malka Leifer, an Orthodox school principal in Australia; Chaim Walder, a popular haredi author in Israel; and Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, the founder of the Israeli rescue and recovery organization ZAKA — all had rabbis using *lashon hara* as a cudgel to warn against victims speaking up). This passage is from the coda to a much longer halakhic article that amply demonstrates how, if one follows some good general guidelines, concerns about *lashon hara* should never be used to silence victims of abuse.

SILVIA FEDERICI, “HOW THE DEMONIZATION OF ‘GOSSIP’ IS USED TO BREAK WOMEN’S SOLIDARITY,” *IN THESE TIMES* (2019)

It is women who ‘gossip,’ presumably having nothing better to do and having less access to real knowledge and information and a structural inability to construct factually based, rational discourses. Thus, gossip is an integral part of the devaluation of women’s personality and work, especially domestic work, reputedly the ideal terrain on which this practice flourishes.

This conception of ‘gossip,’ as we have seen, emerged in a particular historical context. Viewed from the perspective of other cultural traditions, this ‘idle women’s talk’ would actually appear quite different. In many parts of the world, women have historically been seen as the weavers of memory — those who keep alive the voices of the past and the histories of the communities, who transmit them to the future generations and, in so doing, create a collective identity and profound sense of cohesion. They are also those who hand down acquired knowledges and wisdoms — concerning medical remedies, the prob-

Rabbi Tzvi Sytner

SENIOR RABBI OF THE VILLAGE SHUL (TORONTO) AND FOUNDER OF CLEAN SPEECH TORONTO

LASHON HARA is one example of how the 3,300-year-old, seemingly antiquated Judaism is becoming more and more relevant over time. All of a sudden, this idea of gossip is such a big deal: we see how, with things like teen suicides or cyberbullying, online forums have really amplified the impact of *lashon hara*. You have just one person making one comment, and then it's a matter of a couple of clicks before it's viewed by hundreds of thousands of people. We've seen people's lives be totally destroyed. I think

that when it comes to our words in general, our words are so powerful.

We say God created the world using words. He's God. He doesn't need words. God doesn't have a mouth. God doesn't speak. It's really not about God and words. It's about us learning the power of words.

I think that wherever there's conversation, we have to be engaged in the conversation. We just have to be the ones to bring light to it. As a people, we can use social media for the positive.

As a practical matter, I think there's a difference between talking about someone and talking to someone. When we're talking about *lashon hara*, and saying that things said for a constructive purpose are permitted, what does that look like when we're talking about people? If we're really looking for constructive dialogue and for some type of productive outcome, then we [have] to talk to them. I remember when I was working as a therapist, there was this thing called, "Nothing about me without me," which was another way of saying: if you want to be productive, don't talk about me, include me in the conversation instead. And so I think that's where we see more productive things coming out. But for everyone to banter on Facebook, on Instagram, on Twitter, on X, and just to banter about other groups, I can't say that that's productive.

lems of the heart, and the understanding of human behavior, starting with that of men. Labeling all this production of knowledge 'gossip' is part of the degradation of women — it is a continuation of the demonologists' construction of the stereotypical woman as prone to malignity, envious of other people's wealth and power, and ready to lend an ear to the Devil. It is in this way that women have been silenced and to this day excluded from many places where decisions are taken, deprived of the possibility of defining their own experience, and forced to cope with men's misogynous or idealized portraits of them. **5**

5 **THOUGH THE** definition of gossip is inherently neutral about the identity of the gossip, historically the sin has been associated with — and used to vilify — women in particular. The stereotype persists to this day, despite research showing that men gossip just as much as women. That research also explores gossip's usefulness in creating friendships and communities. One of the main takeaways of academic explorations of gossip? Differentiating between negative, neutral, and positive gossip. In all types, the speaker is communicating about other people when those people aren't present. Women tend to engage in neutral and positive gossip, while men tend toward the negative. We might even say that the idea that women are gossips is itself a classic case of *lashon hara*.

WE NEED LOOK no further than the litany of sins that we confess on Yom Kippur, the Al Chet prayer, to see the extent that our tradition views language as being a high-stakes affair: eight of the 44 sins listed are all directly related to speech. As we beat our chests and seek repentance, we can easily come up with many examples from our own lives and our own social media feeds that are clear violations. This can be paralyzing — making it seem that the entire project of managing your speech is futile: the point of the parable, after all, is that so many feathers can never be recaptured. But our tradition does not seek to silence us or to shame us. We can and should make better choices — even if not perfect ones — about what we say online, and Jewish thought gives us a clear way to think about how to do so. **■**

Shana Tova U'Metukah

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ESSAY

ON GENERATIONAL CHANGE,
TIKTOK TALMUD,
AND A VERY JEWISH TRADITION OF REINVENTION

WHO GETS TO BELONG?

BY MIRIAM ANZOVIN

BELONGING. Throughout Jewish history, belonging to the Jewish community — be that here in the diaspora or in Eretz Yisra'el — has always been the enduring strength of our people. It manifests in how we show up for each other in times of joy, and how we give strength to each other when the pendulum swings to times of fear and danger. We find ourselves in one of those latter moments now. It is — and this is an understatement — a challenging time to be Jewish in a world which is vocally, vehemently, and violently conveying to us how little it believes we belong on the face of this earth.

Jewish responses to this moment often reflect a generational divide. Often, those with longstanding history with, investment in, and loyalty to the community tend to be protective of status quo expressions of that community. What I see in my own demographic of millennial Jews, and in our younger Gen-Z siblings in Moses, is many Jews distancing themselves from being Jewish altogether. Others are taking the diametric opposite approach and diving head-first into finding new ways to embrace their identities.

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH BY
DOUG LEVY



Even before the horror of October 7, and the pain and disillusionment that have followed for so many of us, shifting social norms and cultural tensions were already changing how new generations of North American Jews have understood themselves, and where we belong in the Jewish community. The great talmudic sage Hillel, who lived during the end of the first century BCE, once said, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” He knew then the importance of community, and to this day that need remains. But what that community looks like, acts like, believes in, holds dear, how it manifests its Judaism, and who gets to belong — that is what is evolving so dramatically in this current moment.

There are very good reasons for this tectonic shift. North American Jewish legacy institutions, those that once defined communal life and gatekept what was considered “real” or “normative” diaspora Judaism, are in, well, a bit of a pickle. To many younger Jews, these institutions have lost credibility, and their moral compass.

We see them fighting primarily over the actions of the Israeli government and ego. As a small personal example, I can never trust the Anti-Defamation League the same way again after their shameful rationalization of Elon Musk’s infamous one-armed salute. The chasm between the values of legacy institutions and the needs of the Jews they allege to serve is vast. The analogy this brings to my mind is Biblical: the enormous pit that opened up beneath the feet of the insurrectionist Korach and his followers during the forty years that Moses and the Jews were wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt.

We wander in another sort of wilderness now. Despite desperately spending hundreds of millions to “engage” unaffiliated or alienated Jews, it feels like most (certainly not all, but most) Jewish institutions are not succeeding in this endeavour.

The yearning to belong within our own communities is so innate that we will do a lot to try to fit in, to try to make it work. But we all know — or perhaps we have been — someone who has felt deeply betrayed by the exclusionary policies and attitudes of “status quo” Jewish organizations. I think of the marginalized and under-indexed fellow Jews: Jews of colour, queer Jews, interfaith families, patrilineal Jews, Jews living with disabilities, Jews without the financial means to live close to a Jewish community or pay synagogue dues, “Off the Derech” Jews. People too often tokenized, and rarely centred, represented, or supported in the ways they need.

But here’s a plot twist: yes, this moment for North American Jewry is a crisis, but it’s also an opportunity. Chaos, as one of my favourite authors, George R. R. Martin, writes, is a ladder. As these conventional mechanisms have foundered, there are new forms of Jewish community emerging right now — vibrant, compelling, full of heart, deeply rooted in our heritage and ancestral wisdom, and in our shared diaspora experiences. More and more Jews are discovering alternate modes of engaging with Jewish identity and finding community: formats that

resonate and have meaning in their own lives in new ways or, sometimes, in ancient ways made new again. And from my particular vantage point, these modes are working. They are giving people connection, and a sense of purpose, in Jewish life right now.

SOMEHOW, completely by accident, I’ve become both a participant and an enthusiastic witness to some of the most exciting and hopeful changes unfolding in North American Jewish communal life. And I have discovered that true belonging really happens only when we are authentic and vulnerable and fully ourselves — no matter how initially alone in the wilderness that might make us feel.

I am a person who never truly felt like I belonged in any Jewish community, until suddenly, accidentally, surprisingly, it happened.

I was raised in a *baal teshuvah* family — a family that gradually became Orthodox over time. A deep love of Judaism shaped my early life. First, we went to a Reform temple. Then a Conservative congregation. Eventually, we stopped driving on Shabbat and began walking to our local Chabad house. (Naturally, there was a local Chabad house.)

By the end of fifth grade, I was enrolled in a Lubavitch day school, where I successfully acquired a lot of learning and also a lot of intense religious trauma.

Part of that trauma was encountering a hard truth: that large parts of Jewish knowledge — Talmud, for example — and significant areas of Jewish practice had, with a few notable exceptions, been historically and deliberately kept from Jews like me: women. Judaism, I realized, existed in stratified segments, not just by denomination or affiliation but by gender. By access. By who is allowed to engage with Jewishness, and in what ways.

That was tough to wrestle with, because I longed to understand, appreciate, and embody everything I could about Judaism. I was truly devout. My family kept kosher. I dressed modestly, hiding my elbows, collarbone, and knees from view. I prayed thrice daily to God, with whom I felt a powerful and personal relationship. On Shabbat mornings, I was on the women’s side of the mechitzah before most of the men rolled out of bed for minyan. I noticed this discrepancy and I internalized it, but I set it aside. For the time being.

Any mitzvah, any commandment, that I was allowed to do, I did. I wanted to live up to what God expected of me, what my people expected of me, and what my Jewishness called upon me to do. What being part of a Jewish community required.

At seventeen, I helped prepare someone for burial as part of the *hevrah kadishah*, the sacred burial society. At eighteen, I was cleaning the mikveh. When I was nineteen, I made Passover for our family when my father was hospitalized and my mom was focused on his care. What I sacrificed in aluminum foil, totally covering all the surface areas of our kitchen, I gained in pride.

Throughout all this time, I was under the mistaken impression that there was only one way to be a “good Jew,” and that’s what I was striving for. I had not yet encountered

the idea from Bamidbar Rabbah that the Torah has seventy faces — that there are countless doorways into, lenses on, paths of perceiving, and ways of understanding, connecting to, and interpreting Jewishness. I felt that a lapse in my observance or faith would be a slap in the face of the Jewish people, of my ancestors, of my family. That would never be me, I said to myself. I wasn't going to be the weak link, the break in the chain from Sinai to now.

So in college, I majored in Judaic studies. This wasn't exactly a pragmatic thing to do, but it does demonstrate how deeply invested in and obsessed with Jewishness I was.

And yet, I began to feel the first real discord, a sense of alienation, enter my heart. Particularly, I'll readily admit, I struggled with how I saw women being treated in some Orthodox communities. When I learned about *agunot*, Jewish women unable to be free of a marriage because their husbands refused to grant them religious divorces, I was stunned. This was not the Judaism I had thought I understood. The misogyny was so glaring that it could not be rationalized.

I want to stress at this point: I am referring only to my personal experiences and observations. I am not the Lorax of all formerly Orthodox, Chassidic-adjacent women. I speak only for myself and how I discovered I did not actually fit, I did not actually belong, perfectly within that specific paradigm of Judaism.

My junior year of college was a deeply traumatic one for several reasons, including the passing of my beloved father. The upshot was that even though I never would have predicted this could happen — to me of all people, who had such a strong belief in God, such a strong Jewish identity, such a strong commitment to being part of the Jewish community — one day I realized that the feeling of God was gone from me. I could not find that Presence in my heart anymore. It was devastating. It was terrifying. I felt lost, adrift, and afraid.

Despite what some might believe, you cannot force that faith to come back. You can't put the divine metaphorical toothpaste back in the tube. Like Naomi in her grief in the Book of Ruth, what remained to me was bitterness toward the God I thought I knew.

Because of this spiritual crisis that had ambushed me, I was convinced that I had to completely sever myself from my Jewishness to avoid being a disingenuous hypocrite.

Dear reader, in my mind's eye I can see your eyebrow lift. You might be thinking that my response was rather extreme. I was taking self-exile too far. And you would not be wrong in your assessment. But I was young, and foolish, and had so thoroughly internalized the guidelines I had been taught on what is or is not acceptable Judaism. So I extricated myself from Judaism entirely.

It was excruciating.

Sure, I was thrilled I could wear miniskirts and short sleeves. But I also discovered that miniskirts can't actually heal a broken heart; they just don't wield that level of sartorial power. In so many ways, I wanted to be part of the Jewish community, but I no longer felt like I had a place within it.

Many years went by.

I wasn't actively doing anything particularly Jewish, other than working at Jewish nonprofits, because what else was I going to do with that incredibly pragmatic degree?

At the local Federation, I was burned out and miserable. And the behaviour I witnessed there reinforced my belief that I had no more value to the Jewish community. I was taken off of projects I built and loved because I wasn't "connected" enough, had not attended the right exclusive Jewish programs, did not have a recognizable family name.

However, that place did give me one thing I will always be grateful for: a lunch and learn. I often joke that it was perhaps the one time in human history that a lunch and learn actually changed someone's life. I know this because the life that got changed so dramatically was my own. And the ripple effects from that moment changed other lives, too.

The speaker was Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory.

A philosopher, leading Jewish thinker, and chief rabbi of the UK, he was an incredibly powerful communicator of Jewish ideas; he spoke about something called *daf yomi*, the practice of learning the entire Babylonian Talmud — this massive, vital, multi-vocal text of the Jewish people — at the rate of

one double-sided folio page per day. Rabbi Sacks described *daf yomi* as a beautiful way to connect with fellow Jews the whole world over. We may speak different languages, and live completely different lives from each other. But in this learning, we would meet together in the pages of Talmud, every day.

For a cycle of seven and a half years.

His words were a spark, a catalyst. I could do this. I *wanted* to do this — to set my feet on this path of learning. Perhaps learning Talmud was my way back to a Jewish identity, or maybe a way forward to a new one. One that was right for me, that I could fully embody.

I began my learning with my fellow *daf yomi* participants on January 5, 2020. It was an act of rededication to us, to the Jewish people — that was the joy part. But, because of the eternal Jewish oy-joy dichotomy, I was determined that it be something else, too. During Hanukkah just a short time prior, there had been a series of horrific antisemitic attacks in New York and New Jersey, including a machete assault against Jews lighting the hanukkah. How deeply I wish I could say things have improved since then, but we

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know the acts of hatred against us have in fact descended to worse depths. My learning, I decided, would also be an act of defiance against those who hate us. This would be my seven-and-a-half-year *fuck you* to the antisemites.

Every single day that I learn, that you learn, that we learn, that we continue, is a rebellion, is an act of resistance, an act of defiance. It gave me a sense of power, of continuity — of, yes, community.

The pandemic forced all of us *daf yomi* newbies to figure out ways to learn online. Thank goodness for the existence of virtual resources like Sefaria. And so, after about two years of learning Talmud, which were also two years of living through the pandemic, and two years of lurking on TikTok like so many in search of connection and laughter in apocalyptic times, I decided to do something very outside my comfort zone.

To help myself retain what I was learning, I started making short, reaction-style videos to what I was encountering in the Talmud and posting them on TikTok. I called the series “Daf Reactions.” In it, I reimagined Talmud study for the social media age: accessible, something that anyone with an internet connection could discover and enjoy. I tried to bridge Jewish tradition and modern pop culture, weaving ancient wisdom into the fabric of today’s conversations and current events, with my own blend of slightly snarky commentary and heartfelt emotion.

Like a lot of folks who started experimenting with new ways to embody Jewish culture, connection, learning, and spirituality during the pandemic, I didn’t expect that talking to my phone camera, alone in my room, about something I loved and dearly desired to engage with would end up changing my life — never mind anyone else’s. I thought only five other people would ever see or enjoy or find value in these videos, in my specific approach to Jewish learning.

But sometimes the world is weird and wonderful. To my astonishment, the videos I create have resonated with thousands of people around the world who, like me, are finding, forging, or rekindling their own unique connections to Jewish community and identity. In many ways, my story is a microcosm of the seismic shifts happening across North American Jewish life.

I was wrong, you see, about my audience being five people. Within a month, Daf Reactions — the study of ancient texts meeting an extremely modern format, through a feminist lens — had gone “Jewish viral.” People had strong reactions to my reactions.

Some of that was negative. The hook for a lot of the criticism that popped up in newspapers, blogs, and on Israeli TV news was: here I was, a non-religious, blonde woman with dramatically winged eyeliner and her collarbone exposed,

making *daf yomi* reaction videos. And I was speaking like a millennial. Sometimes there was swearing. Sometimes, I highlighted the sexual innuendo that was present in the text all along. Who had given me permission to do such things?

It was a scandal. Minds were blown; fainting couches were summoned. Some people were absolutely incandescent with rage. Some rather extreme communities sent out memos warning people against my nefarious influence.

I was told I was destroying the Jewish people. By learning Talmud, and then talking about it online.

But what truly shocked me was not the hate I received. What amazed me were the incredible, enthusiastic messages I received from thousands of Jews and non-Jews around the world. People who embraced what I was doing.

People who felt disconnected.

People who had been discouraged from asking questions.

People who had never seen themselves represented in Jewish learning.

People who felt like the organized Jewish community didn’t welcome them for one reason or another. People who said that laughing and learning was helping to heal their religious trauma.

People on a conversion journey who found learning with me helped them.

People who wanted accessible Jewish content that didn’t make something as fascinating and beautiful as Judaism somehow as boring as watching paint dry, and, instead, presented it with as much fun and joy and personal authenticity as possible.

And so, to my shock, a delightful, chaotic, nerdy community grew around the videos. (I assure you, not in a weird Shabbtai Tzvi sort of way. In a good way!)

A few months after folks discovered my videos, I had such a surreal experience: I, an outsider, a loner, discovered that some people from around the world had chosen to dress up as me for Purim. Now the mind that was blown was my own.

My platform became a space where people actually wanted to connect, learn, and be Jewish on their own terms. Where they felt they had the permission to do so.

I can’t tell you how many people have said, “If my Hebrew school teacher had talked like you, I might’ve actually paid attention.” (Obviously, the lesson is that Hebrew school teachers should be swearing more. Do not worry, I’m just kidding. Or am I?) For all of these people, the videos demonstrated that having personal reactions to a text is not only okay, but actually an integral part of forming real connections with that text.

And for the folks who don’t have any experience with Jewish learning at all? For them, I’m delighted to be a gateway drug.

Part of what the Daf Reactions community — now thousands and thousands strong across Instagram, YouTube,

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CONNECTING TO,
AND INTERPRETING
JEWISHNESS.**

TikTok, Bluesky, Threads, and other platforms — values is that I am not in any way a representative of any organized Jewish group or denomination. I'm not a rabbi. I am not affiliated with any organization they feel they cannot trust, or worry may have ulterior motives. I'm just a massive nerd for Judaism, a fellow learner, inviting people to walk side by side with me on this journey, and trying to show them as many of those seventy faces, (old, new, renewed) as I possibly can.

Yes, there are risks for emergent online expression, as anyone who has gone online in the past few years can tell you: insane levels of antisemitism, algorithms blocking Jewish content, platform volatility. When TikTok was briefly banned in January 2025, our joyous, eclectic crew of Jewish learners panicked — not because we'd lose a fun and silly app where any object could prove to be made of cake, but because we'd lose this place of connection. Social media is where so many people who once felt left out of Jewish life have finally found a home, a new paradigm of community, despite all the deep, painful failings of these platforms.

I made sure my community spans many platforms because of this. This is also why I love to continue the engagement in person as a scholar-in-residence at synagogues and organizations across the country that truly, deeply understand why this all matters, that see the value of embracing these new ways to belong Jewishly.

This past Shavuot, moments after reading with horror about the terrible antisemitic attack in Boulder, Colorado, I delivered a keynote speech at a Tikkun Leil Shavuot event in Manhattan. The room was filled with Jews of all kinds: Orthodox women with their hair covered, queer Jews with fabulous purple hair, men with long beards who looked like they study Torah in the *beit midrash* all day, elders, teens, beginners, academics. All of us learning together. All part of this beautiful constellation, beautiful *kehillah*, of Jewish life. And I felt more part of a community in that moment than I ever have before, united together, bonded forever in *Am Yisrael*.

Daf Reactions, a project that began as something small and personal, has become something much more. It is my *tikun*: my repair, my healing, my Judaism.

My deepest hope is that others might find their own meaningful connection to Jewishness in ways and forms that feel right to them — that speak to their lives and resonate deeply. Our texts are not relics. They are living, breathing inheritances. They are not the domain of the few, but the birthright of all Jews regardless of denomination, gender, observance, or economic status.

Daf yomi itself, though it may feel like a longstanding tradition, is a relatively new practice in Judaism: only 100 years old. A nanosecond in our long history.

There are religious gatekeepers that tell us the only Jews who can speak with learned authority on anything pertaining to Judaism, Jewish history, Jewish law, or Jewish learning are going to be easily identifiable: just look for the beard and the hat! (Excellent branding, by the way. Hard to compete with that.) Nobody else can really be trusted to know what they are talking about, you see.

But they are so wrong.

As Rabbi Sacks wrote in a d'var Torah called "A Nation of Storytellers":

"Throughout the book of Devarim, Moses warns the people — no less than fourteen times — *not to forget*. If they forget the past they will lose their identity and sense of direction and disaster will follow. Moreover, not only are the people commanded to remember, they are also commanded to hand that memory on to their children. This entire phenomenon represents a remarkable cluster of ideas: identity as a matter of collective memory; about the ritual retelling of the nation's story; above all about the fact that *every one of us is a guardian of that story and memory*. It is not the leader alone, or some elite, who are trained to recall the past, but every one of us."

This isn't a blanket call to abandon all legacy institutions (well ... maybe just a few), but it is a call to evolve. When institutions respond to alienation with defensiveness instead of curiosity, they render themselves obsolete. And they will be left behind.

The vibrant, emerging communities forming right now aren't "Judaism lite." They're not "for the aesthetic," or unserious, although, yes, they're often joyful. There are more than I can list here. Judaism Unbound and the UnYeshiva. SVARA. Amud: The Jews of Color Torah Academy. Lab/Shul. Maharat. IKAR. Beit Toratah. Reboot. The Kohenet movement. Temple of the Stranger. They are real, resonant, deeply rooted in Jewish learning, history, and spirit.

These new modes of Jewish life have fuelled a revolution in online cultural and religious engagement. It's reshaping how we learn, pray, connect, and lead; it is building communities that transcend geography and denomination, and that people genuinely want to be part of.

These aren't breakaway sects. They're breakout models. Jewish tradition is rich with reinvention. The Talmud itself is a remix of voices across generations. It's a conversation — messy, multi-vocal, sometimes contradictory — but always alive.

The question before us now is simple: How do we keep the eternal flame burning without burning people out?

The need for community hasn't gone anywhere. So we build. We reinvent.

We're not walking away from Judaism — we're walking *toward* it. Just on paths that better fit our lives, our values, and our stories.

As Rabbi Benay Lappe of SVARA (tagline: "a traditionally radical yeshiva") puts it: "If your house is burning down, do you rebuild the same house? Or do you build a new one that doesn't catch fire so easily?"

I think we know the answer.

To add to the statement of the great sage Hillel: do not separate yourself from the community. Instead, create community that will never separate from you. Because you belong to it, and it belongs to you. ■

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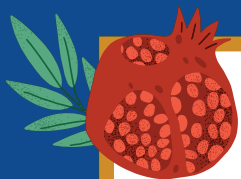


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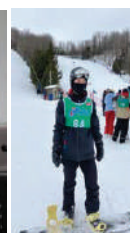
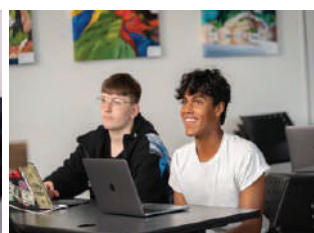
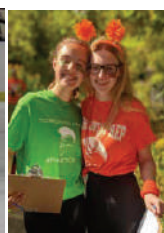
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The rabbi reexamining
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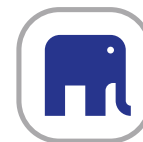
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Phil Klein on the Necessity of Pizza

by COREY MINTZ

IF YOU LET YOUR restaurant employees eat for free, they'll appreciate it. If you don't, they'll be hungry and steal from you. That was the lesson Phil Klein learned as a teenager, when he got fired from one of his early restaurant jobs for cooking himself a pizza. It's something he keeps in mind now, as an employer. "If it keeps my staff happy and nourished to eat something on the job," says Klein, "it's a small token of appreciation that I think goes a long way."

In 2020, Klein launched Bagelsmith, a Montreal-style bagel shop in downtown Winnipeg. Separated from the East Coast Jewish hubs, Winnipeg had no loyalty to the bagel styles of Montreal (small, dense, slightly sweet) or New York (big, fluffy, salty). Winnipeggers were an ideal new market, primed to be converted by the first bagel-maker who made either style well. I moved to Winnipeg around the same time Bagelsmith opened; perhaps it was a longing for some kind of culinary connection in my new home, but I fell hard for Klein's Montreal-style bagels. (At the risk of both-sidesing this vital question, I like Montreal bagels as much as ones evoking New York.) In a town with so few bagels of distinction that Costco seems to be the local favourite, it felt like Bagelsmith had given Winnipeg a reason to pick a side in this debate.

"I do think the style difference can be quite divisive," says Shannon Sarna, author of *Modern Jewish Baker* and *Modern Jewish Comfort Food*. "I've found that the Montreal versus New York bagel divide is more alive for Canadians — especially Montrealers — who are passionate about their hometown

version, and with good reason because they are amazing. New Yorkers tend to think they are the centre of the world, and their bagels are the gold standard. Montreal bagels often don't register in their mental map of what a 'real' bagel is."

As co-founder of the Mile End Delicatessen in New York, Joel Tietolman has had one foot in both bagel worlds. When he began bringing bagels from Montreal, driving them overnight in his car, some guests were excited. Others were shocked at his chutzpah, as if he were importing cheese to France or wine to Italy. "It's more contentious in a place that already has an established bagel identity," Tietolman says. "In a place like Winnipeg, it doesn't matter."

But though Klein has successfully transitioned Winnipeg to Montreal bagels, his first love is pizza. His favourite way to spend time with his wife and two children is making and sharing it at home. "We're all in the kitchen. The kids are at the island. I'm stretching pies," Klein describes the scene. "That's my happy space."

There is always dough in Klein's fridge at home. On pizza nights, he stretches and bakes them one at a time: plain cheese or bacon for his youngest son, Josh; two meats plus mushrooms for the older boy, Sam; and white sauce (ranch dressing from the fridge, thickened with parmesan) with pickled jalapeños and onions for his wife, Ayli.

When I've made pizza for my family in the past, I've served it all at once. But I like Klein's one-at-a-time method: how it slows



Stretching dough takes a lot of practice. Be patient with yourself as you work on your technique — and enjoy the delicious imperfections you create along the way.

down a family meal, keeping us all in the same space as we make and await the next pie. I'm going to try that with my wife and daughter, who has recently started stretching dough herself. (Perhaps the extended ritual will also loosen our daughter's tongue to tell us something about her day at school?)

As a cook, Klein is particular about what goes into his pizza, like all-purpose flour for the dough, which is not as heavy as the bread flour he uses for bagels. It achieves a less dense structure that's still sturdy enough for a slice; it will get crispy, but still allows for folding. But as an eater, he'll take it any way it arrives: good, bad, or even cold. "I love cold pizza. Even the worst pizza is still edible. You can't say that about other food. I could eat it every day for every meal."

Klein is currently adapting his recipe for a planned pizzeria — and finding that what works in the home kitchen doesn't translate to a commercial one. "I had a recipe I liked, doing it at home on the pizza



stone. Then I came into the shop and it turned out different. It's amazing how a commercial appliance yields a better product."

Until ovens are installed in the new kitchen, he won't know how hot they run, or if they have spots in them that behave differently. And, because the business will be focused on re-firing slices, the dough will need to be a little bit higher in fat. When a slice is reheated, instead of getting dried out, it should retain enough fat so it folds and doesn't "crack like a piece of matzah.... How much caramelization and char you're going to get is going to be dictated by the oil. So that's pretty much where I'm going to have to modify things the most."

As Klein speaks, the wheels are still turning, the transformation and systematizing of something he does for love into a commercial enterprise. "Bagels make me money. Pizza makes me happy," he cites a motto he's almost ready to have tattooed. "Hopefully pizza will make me money soon."

Klein's pizza dough has a nearly 70 percent hydration rate

— the percentage of the dough’s weight that comes from liquid. I’ve been working from a recipe by Joe Rosenthal, a Minnesota-based mathematician, food writer, and devotee of New York pizza, which has a hydration rate between the high 50s to low 60s. “Gluten is formed by a network of proteins primarily made up of glutenin and gliadin, which are water-soluble and water-insoluble, respectively,” writes Rosenthal. “When hydrated, glutenin provides strength and elasticity to a dough while gliadin increases viscosity and provides extensibility, which contributes to rise.”

When I started making pizza at home, I was buying dough, rolling it out with a pin, and shaping it to fit a rectangular baking tray. Over time, seeing how much my family likes pizza and how often we eat it, it felt worthwhile to get as good as possible at this.

I experimented for months, probably making a couple dozen before the pizza was something I was proud of. Along the way, I switched out my tomato sauce for just San Marzano tomatoes, pureed in the can with a pinch of salt. And I’ve made modest investments, like a scale that can measure out 0.001 grams, to get a precise weight on yeast. But I’m still baking on the same battered sheet pans I’ve had for 20 years.

It helps to have a family who thinks that your first try (which you consider a flop) is delicious, and is happy to have pizza as often as you make it.

Here is my method for one 13-inch pizza. ■



NEW YORK– STYLE PIZZA

SERVES 1-2

DOUGH

194 g all-purpose flour
4.8 g salt
0.5 g instant yeast
2.7 g sugar
4 g fat (olive oil)
120 g water

TO ASSEMBLE

more oil
semolina flour
coarse salt
tomato sauce
cheese

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Mix dough ingredients in a stand mixer or by hand until a smooth dough forms. Place in a sealed container brushed with olive oil. Refrigerate for one to three days, until doubled in size.

2. Remove dough from the fridge 30 minutes before cooking and preheat the oven to 500°F.

3. Brush a baking sheet with olive oil. Sprinkle semolina flour on your work area and stretch the dough by hand. Rosenthal has written a 14-paragraph direction for this, and there are a million videos to watch. But they are all governed by the universal wisdom of samurai philosopher Miyamoto Musashi, whose every nuanced instruction for defeating your enemy with mind and sword was appended with some version of, “This requires thorough training and practice.” It will not work out the first time. But it will still taste good.

4. Place the stretched dough on the baking sheet. Brush the edges with oil and sprinkle a pinch of salt on them. Spread a couple of spoonfuls of tomato sauce in the centre of the dough, followed by a handful of cheese. Bake until blistered but not burnt, about 10 to 15 minutes.

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A Laughing Matter

Jewish jokes in the age of humourlessness

by PHOEBE MALTZ BOVY

THE MOST META-JEWISH JOKE of all time was told in “The Yada Yada,” a 1997 episode of *Seinfeld*. Jerry — Jewish on the show, as in life — shows up at a priest’s confessional. He does so because of a grievance he has with his dentist, a man who was, until recently, Catholic:

Jerry: I wanted to talk to you about Dr. Whatley. I have a suspicion that he’s converted to Judaism purely for the jokes.

Father Curtis: And this offends you as a Jewish person?

Jerry: No, it offends me as a comedian.

It’s a quip that is in keeping with the show’s history of ribbing the Jews who make a big thing of antisemitism. (Jerry’s Uncle Leo does this incessantly in 1996’s “The Shower Head.”) But it is also quintessentially of its moment. Who was worried about antisemitism in the 1990s?

Fast-forward to today, when Jerry Seinfeld is one of the major anti-antisemitism celebrities. (Consider that there is even a category: anti-antisemitism celebrities.) The Second Intifada, 9/11, and, most definitively, October 7 have

changed the tenor of public speech by and about Jews. Exactly which antisemitism different Jews — famous or not — care most about varies, as do definitions of the term. But this much is clear: antisemitism's days as a laughing matter were, in retrospect, a blip.

That blip is the subject of a densely packed new book, *The Last Jewish Joke*. Its author, Michel Wieviorka, is one of France's premier sociologists, the author of dozens of books, and a former president of the International Sociological Association. Wieviorka's thesis is that Jewish jokes — which he defines as “funny stories that can be told and heard by non-Jews without stoking anti-Semitism” — thrived in a specific atmosphere, one where Jews still felt a bit Other, still felt the recency of oppression, but were also relatively at ease and welcome in their surroundings. A good-for-the-Jews moment made for a golden age for Jewish jokes.

The times we now live in, with their complicated mix of reality and discourse of ever-rising antisemitism, do not lend themselves to joking around. Indeed, part of Wieviorka's argument is that, while antisemitic comedy lives on, Jewish humour is much scarcer: the days of light-hearted ribbing are kaput. To make his case, Wieviorka offers a deep background in modern French and (to a lesser degree) American Jewish history. (At times, this background strays far enough from the question of humour that I wondered, *Where do jokes fit into this?* But I wasn't too bothered: the value of the book might equally be getting an audience of anglophone Jews to learn about the third-largest Jewish population, as much as about anything punchline-related.)

As a conceit, framing Jewish history through humour is spectacular. What if you told the story of Jews not via what has led us to cry but through

what's made us laugh? (It is explicitly a counterpoint to the eminent historian Salo Baron's concept of lachrymose Jewish history.) While plenty has been written about Jewish humour — Wieviorka makes no claim to be the first scholar taking it on — his approach is novel.

A GOLDEN AGE?

THE CHAPTER that will feel most familiar to English-speaking readers — “The American Invention of Jewish Jokes” — was bound to be the trickiest to land in translation, for a readership possibly more familiar with the original material than the book's own author. But it's, in a sense, the most important part of the book, describing the intersection of Jewish humour and optimism under the most golden-age-type circumstances: postwar, pre-9/11 America. That time and place offered a promise of a post-antisemitism landscape that went beyond what was possible in France, due to the recency of the Holocaust and the fallout from decolonization, among other factors.

This chapter on American comedy covers a lot of ground quickly, running the gamut from Saul Bellow to Mel Brooks and Woody Allen. *Seinfeld* merits a paragraph — less real estate than the Jewish-mother jokes. Wieviorka's observations about the show read like those of someone who knows what it is but has not necessarily seen it: “This sitcom, perhaps the most successful from a financial standpoint in the history of American television... makes *Seinfeld*'s Jewish milieu seem very appealing, as it demonstrates that those in this milieu do not hesitate to make fun of the Jewish religion, even on television.”

That summary is broadly correct, but the relationship between *Seinfeld* and Jewishness is so much more complicated than a golden-age interpretation makes it seem.

Wieviorka describes 1990s sitcoms, and even 1960s and 1970s film and fiction, as a break from an earlier era, when American Jews succeeded — but via their embrace of the universal. He cites the significance of Fran on *The Nanny* (1993–1999) being Jewish and not euphemized as Italian, as sponsors had wanted, presenting this as emblematic of its golden age. In truth, it was more like a rule-proving exception, a brief respite from a catalogue of Jewish-coded American sitcom characters who were not permitted to be open about this status. I'm thinking of “Italian-Americans” like haughty Dorothy Zbornak and no-nonsense mom Sophia Petrillo on *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992), neurosis-incarnate George Constanza on *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), or wisecracking Carla Tortelli on *Cheers* (1982–1993): not merely Jewish actors in Jewish-created roles, but iconically Jewish characters despite being officially gentile. (Add to the list Michael Stivic, a.k.a. Meathead, Rob Reiner's lefty, proto-Bernie Bro son-in-law character on *All in the Family* (1971–1979). Meathead is Polish in the same way that American senator Bernie Sanders is Polish, which is to say, in geographical origin.)

Jews absolutely existed in these shows' universes, but the thinking seemed to be that we were tolerable only in small doses. One finds plenty of parallels here to (and overlapping with) Matt Baume's work on gayness and American sitcoms in 2023's *Hi Honey, I'm Homo!: Sitcoms, Specials, and the Queering of American Culture*.

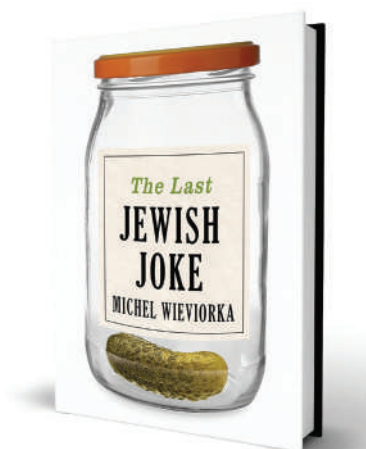
Absent these generational memories, it can be difficult to understand how refreshing it was when *Broad City* aired in 2014, and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* the following year, with unabapologetically Jewish women characters front and centre, effortlessly blending self-deprecation and sex appeal — or as the

French might put it, particularism and universality. Long-present Jewish actors and references were finally given licence to be open about their Jewishness. The arrival of “out” Jewish characters represented the end of a certain hybrid idiom. The new order was, in a sense, a better time to be Jewish, because you didn’t have to be evasive.

The lack of evasiveness about Jewishness was itself born of a moment of intense literalism in criticism. It wasn’t merely that shows could depict people from historically marginalized groups triumphing. The cultural mood was one that demanded sitcoms contribute in overt ways to social justice. That, and even apart from political polarization, there was a new expectation that fictional characters be nice people, leading to the gentle comedy moment exemplified by shows like *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015). This was meant to be a corrective for the nihilism of *Seinfeld*, which I suppose it would have been, if you’d seen that as a flaw.

One was forever hearing that comedy must punch up, as though this were a descriptive rather than prescriptive fact about all that elicits laughter, or indeed as if there were always a consensus on which targets count as “up.” As part of a general cultural obsession with privilege hierarchies, ascertaining Jews’ whiteness and privilege became a major preoccupation in parts of media, social media, and academia, in ways that would presage the campus-encampments discourse of 2024. Jews’ ambiguity in these hierarchies made us a tricky fit for a moment in comedy — and in the culture generally — that favoured absolutes.

Am I panning Wieviorka for not adding to the one or two trillion existing works on Jewishness in American sitcoms? Am I mad at him for not grabbing the low-hanging fruit of



THE LAST JEWISH JOKE

By Michel Wieviorka

Polity Press, September 2, 2025

Elaine Benes introducing gentile audiences to the concept of the “shiksa” yet being played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus of the Dreyfus Affair Dreyfuses? Hardly — I am, if anything, borrowing his analytic framework for looking at these micro-eras. The subtle distinctions between the moments when (say) *Seinfeld* versus *Broad City* were possible are, if you focus on the right elements, a tremendously rich source of information about where Jews were in American society at the times these shows were made. Comedy is not high culture, but it’s a category of primary source that academics aren’t always as plugged into as they could be, and it’s to Wieviorka’s credit that he is.

MEANWHILE IN FRANCE...

WHAT WIEVIORKA lacks in deep engagement with the late twentieth century American Jewish sitcom repertoire, he makes up for in how attuned he is to nuances across time, place, and attitudes of European Jews. He points out that the shtetl was already on its way out when the Second World War

began, its one-time residents leaving not just due to antisemitism, but also in search of opportunity, or anonymity, elsewhere.

And he offers a readable, thought-provoking synthesis and analysis of French-Jewish history, from French Jews’ 1791 emancipation up to the post-October 7 moment, with an emphasis on the postwar period to the present. He covers notorious antisemitic attacks as well as cultural achievements (the Asterix comics were created by René Goscinny, a Jew!) and intracommunal strife over how much to support Israel. Much of this material will be new to anglophone North American Jewish readers who grew up, as I did, thinking of Europe as the old world from which the fortunate Jews escaped.

The French part of the story is where Wieviorka’s true expertise lies, and where his own family history comes into play. He writes entertainingly and movingly about friends and relatives in the garment industry, and about his own initiations as an Ashkenazi Jew into Sephardic culture. He explores how Jewish identity politics came to thrive within French republicanism — something the original architects of that republicanism would have neither foreseen nor desired. Indeed, unlike the Anglosphere generally and the US specifically, France didn’t do hyphenated identity.

Much has changed in not all that many years. We now have a situation where multiculturalism and diversity and such can be more accepted in France than in the United States.

COMMENT DIT-ON YO MAMA?

THE LAST JEWISH JOKE opens with Jewish mother jokes, recounted and admired. Wieviorka retells a joke told to him about Jewish mothers, about how they don’t want their sons to be gay, but if they must be gay, better that

they should marry a doctor. Not a homophobic joke so much as a joke about homophobia. Wieviorka adds his own commentary: “The invasive Jewish mother is no mere myth.”

As a Jewish mother myself, I tried to square this with Wieviorka’s framing of this subject matter: “The most defining characteristic of Jewish jokes is that they are favorable, and not hostile, to Jews. They are made for them, and generally by them, or for those who appreciate them or at least do not reject them.”

Hear me out: What if someone is Jewish, but also a woman?

Wieviorka is on the cusp of addressing this. He notes that his mother and sister enjoy Jewish-mother jokes as well, and is careful to state that he did not grow up with an overbearing mother. He suggests the jokes are good-natured and come from a place of knowledge that Jewish women were at the forefront of feminism: “The ‘Jewish mother’ was wildly successful because it arose in a context of empathy for an increasingly visible Jewish culture and history, and at the same time evoked a development whereby women attained emancipation while paternal authority declined.”

Is that really the reason? Might there not be another explanation for the popularity of a strain of humour at (canonically sexually unappealing) women’s expense?

This chipper, nostalgic take on Jewish-mother humour is at odds with how others — who happen to be Jewish women — have interpreted matters. In a 2025 article about pioneering sitcom *The Goldbergs*, *The New Yorker* staff writer Emily Nussbaum writes, “By the nineteen-sixties, Jewish women were rarely portrayed as protagonists, and, when they did show up, it was often as cruel stereotypes: the spoiled princess, the homely *meeskite*, the castrating mother.”



Groundbreaking radio series turned sitcom *The Goldbergs*, a predecessor to *I Love Lucy*, introduced a fictional Jewish family into households of all kinds.

A longer, scholarly analysis of this phenomenon can be found in the late historian Paula Hyman’s 1995 *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*. Hyman dates the origin of this strand of humour to Ashkenazi life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe and the United States. Antisemites, Hyman explains, focused their resentments on Jewish men. These men, in turn, did the classic thing of taking out their entirely legitimate frustrations on whichever women were closest by:

By caricaturing Jewish men as feminized, antisemites and their fellow travelers attempted to strip them of the power and honor otherwise due them as men, especially as economically successful men. Jewish men,

in turn, as they experienced emancipation and conditions of middle-class life and anticipated the rewards of both, responded to their disparagement in cultures influenced by antisemitism by creating negative representations of Jewish women.

Moreover, as the role of transmitting Jewish culture and religion shifted from men to women during this period, Jewish women began to represent, for Jewish men, that which was parochial, stifling, and holding them back from their big adventures.

Referencing a “study of Jewish-authored jokebooks” by the sociologist Gladys Rothbell, Hyman explains, “Both the narrators and the male audiences of the disparaging Jewish-mother jokes that circulated in the years



after the Second World War could perceive the jokes as ‘instances of sympathetic in-group humor’ because they did not stress the Jewishness of the female target of the humor.”

Is it strange that Hyman, a major figure in American scholarship of French Jewry and author of *The Jews of Modern France*, wouldn’t have been on Wieviorka’s radar for this, given how deep she dove into Jewish-mother jokes? Not necessarily; even the best-read haven’t read everything. But something about Wieviorka’s interpretation of these jokes missed the mark. In his defence, he points out that the younger generations don’t find these jokes funny. In less of his defence, was Paula Hyman — born, like Wieviorka, in 1946 — part of a younger generation?

To borrow from Jerry’s offended-as-a-comedian punchline, what gets to me here is not (or, not just) the obliviousness to sexism. Rather, it’s that Jewish-mother jokes are so ripe for analysis, and Wieviorka barely scratches the surface.

SCOLDS VERSUS TROLLS

WHAT KILLED the Jewish joke, if it is dead? Wieviorka looks to Jewish history for answers, and it is, caveats aside, a fun trip to take with him.

But the Jewish-history framing gets you only part of the way there. For the rest, you need to look at the evolution of humour generally. Wieviorka notes that Jewish humour doesn’t work as well online as it does in person or in movies, books, and so forth. This is true of jokes more broadly, and is as much about changes to Jewish identity as the shift from in-person to online.

In the US especially, the culture wars have led to a polarization where virtually every comedian, every joke, is instantly legible as on one political team or the other. The left version of this was exemplified by *Nanette*,

Hannah Gadsby’s 2018 Netflix special, which deemed self-deprecation, if not comedy itself, problematic and harmful to marginalized people. The right wing’s was *The New Norm*, an animated sitcom whose pilot was accurately described on *Wonkette* as, “What if we remade *All in the Family*, set in 2024, only Archie Bunker is always right, his foils are always idiots, and it’s not funny?” Between the “humour” that exists solely to offend, and the one whose only purpose is to educate and uplift, there’s little space left for uncomplicated (or, apolitical) amusement. Our times may just be too ideological for jokes, Jewish or otherwise.

There is also the awkward question of whether Wieviorka has picked up on the end of an era or is merely revealing his own lack of familiarity with contemporary Jewish comedy. Alex Edelman, Ilana Glazer, and Nathan Fielder are all Jewish-joking for Jewish and mainstream audiences. Then there’s the *Slam Frank* musical, Andrew Fox’s satire that “imagines what happens when a progressive community theater company decides to transform Anne Frank’s true story into an intersectional, multiethnic, genderqueer, decolonized, empowering Afro-Latin hip-hop musical.” It’s not what Jewish humour looked like previously, and it’s not for everyone, but is it any less authentically Jewish than *Annie Hall*?

Wieviorka writes of the “near absence in Israel” of Jewish jokes, something I cannot speak to (beyond the oft-circulating *Eretz Nehederet* clips satirizing Western leftist pro-Palestinian activists, which have struck me more as political point-making than funny). But I’m not sure he can, either, as Hebrew-language humour does not appear to be his area. Here, too, one sees the drawbacks to an “X is dead” framing, coming from someone whose primary

expertise is not in the area in question.

His assertion that Jewish humour outside of Israel doesn’t much reference the Jewish state had me nodding along, until I remembered counterexamples. There’s the 1995 episode of *The Nanny* where Fran recalls losing her virginity at a kibbutz, with the teen girl she is (inexplicably at this point) nannying for poised to do the same, in a scene set in what is meant to be Israel but it’s a sitcom, so they’ve just added some plants. The Birthright Israel-inspired episode of *Broad City*. The Adam Sandler film *You Don’t Mess with the Zohan*. Sasha Baron Cohen’s *Borat* character speaks a “Kazakh” that is largely modern Hebrew. And Philip Roth’s 1969 novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* — an assumed presence in any Jewish humour canon — ends (well, almost ends) with Alexander Portnoy in Israel, incapable of performing with an Israeli woman.

Wieviorka is correct that there was a style of Jewish humour that was a happy part of diaspora Jewish culture, and that is less congruent with our times. The titular “last Jewish joke,” about clerics of various faiths caught gambling, is one that hovers between a cozy Jewish joke and an indictment of Jews as disloyal — that is, an antisemitic one.

The end of “The Yada Yada” has Jerry flirting with a woman who shares Jerry’s affinity for making “anti-dentite” jokes (a play on *antisemite*, but referencing jokes about dentists). It’s all fun and games until she mistakenly assumes Jerry will share her enjoyment of jokes about Black and Jewish people. A wink to those in the know: playing this character is Debra Messing, who is Jewish, and who would go on to star as Grace Adler in *Will and Grace*. Who could have guessed that a 2025 *Wall Street Journal* headline would read, “Debra Messing Knows What Antisemitism Feels Like”? And yet, here we are. ■

Standing Against Antisemitism

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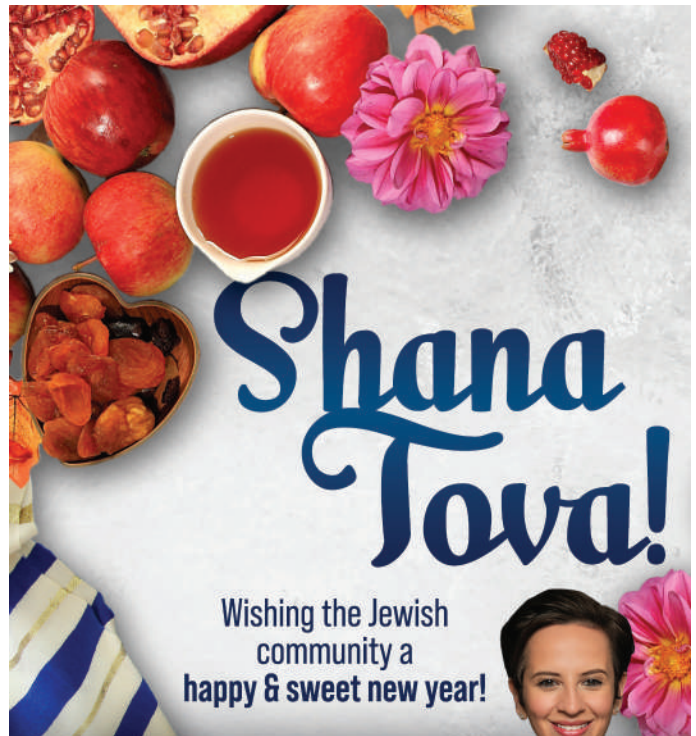
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Marilyn Iafrate, Ward 1 Councillor

Second row, left to right: Gino Rosati, Local and Regional Councillor;
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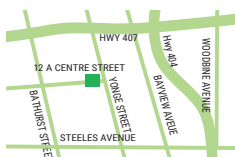


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BOOKS, MOVIES,
AND OTHER
NEW RELEASES
OF NOTE

A Season for Reflection: Revisiting the Stories that Shape Us



FILM / HISTORY

A classic comeback

THE HILLS are still alive: celebrating its sixtieth birthday, the Rodgers-and-Hammerstein-penned *The Sound of Music* is returning to the big screen. This ambitious, big-budget musical adaptation stars Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer and lovingly retells the real-life story of the Trapp Family Singers. Taking us back to the Jewish contributions to Broadway's golden age, its iconic songs have been stuck in fans' heads for decades. But another element of the film continues to resonate: its

confrontation with fascism. As white supremacy and antisemitism once again rise around the world, *The Sound of Music's* message — to climb every mountain and stand up to injustice — feels more urgent than ever.

Sophia Hershfield

THE SOUND OF MUSIC

Directed by Robert Wise
In theatres
September 12



FILM / BIOPIC

Cinematic sibling rivalry

THINGS MAY BE a bit awkward at the Safdie Shabbat table since the filmmaking breakup of brothers Josh and Benny Safdie: both are set to make their solo sports-themed directorial debuts before the end of the year.

THE SMASHING MACHINE

Directed by Benny Safdie
In theatres
October 3

Josh's comedy, *Marty Supreme*, starring Timothée Chalamet and loosely based on the true-life tale of table tennis star Marty Reisman, will hit theatres in December. Benny, meanwhile, is taking a more dramatic route with *The Smashing Machine*, a biopic about former wrestler and MMA champion Mark Kerr. Starring Dwayne Johnson, in his first departure from comedy, and Emily Blunt, *The Smashing Machine* promises to explore the deep emotional and physical toll of professional fighting. *Sophia Hershfield*

PHOTOGRAPHY, THIS PAGE: LEFT, ALAMY; RIGHT, A24. OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT, THE CANADIAN PRESS/TIJANA MARTIN; RIGHT, NETFLIX.



FILM / ROM-COM

Love and other adventures in Jewish Montreal

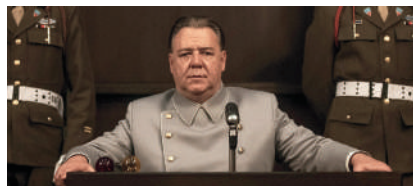
FOLLOWING the breakout success of her debut feature *I Like Movies* (2022), Chandler Levack returns to the Toronto International Film Festival with her highly anticipated second film, *Mile End Kicks*. Loosely inspired by her own experiences as a young female music critic, this romantic comedy is set

MILE END KICKS
Directed by
Chandler Levack
Premiering on
September 4

in Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood at the height of the vibrant indie music scene in 2011. Though now primarily associated with tattooed hipsters, it was once a home for working-class Jewish immigrants, and music has always been a part of its creative identity, from klezmer to Grimes. Produced by the team behind Canadian indie darling *BlackBerry*, *Mile End Kicks* will embrace the messiness and fun of love triangles, dating musicians, and 20-something angst. *Sophia Hershfield*

FILM / DRAMA

The trial to end all trials



AFTER GETTING its world release at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, this courtroom drama will go into wide release later in the fall. From the writer of *Zodiac* and *The People vs. O.J.*

NUREMBERG

Directed by
James Vanderbilt
In theatres
November 7

Simpson, Nuremberg follows chief prosecutor Robert H. Jackson (Russell Crowe) and a Jewish-American investigator (Rami Malek) as

they assemble the case against Nazi leadership. With survivor voices and camp footage presented as evidence, the film captures a turning point in legal history: one in which the world was forced to find language for crimes it had never dared to name. *Alex Rose*



TELEVISION / ROM-COM

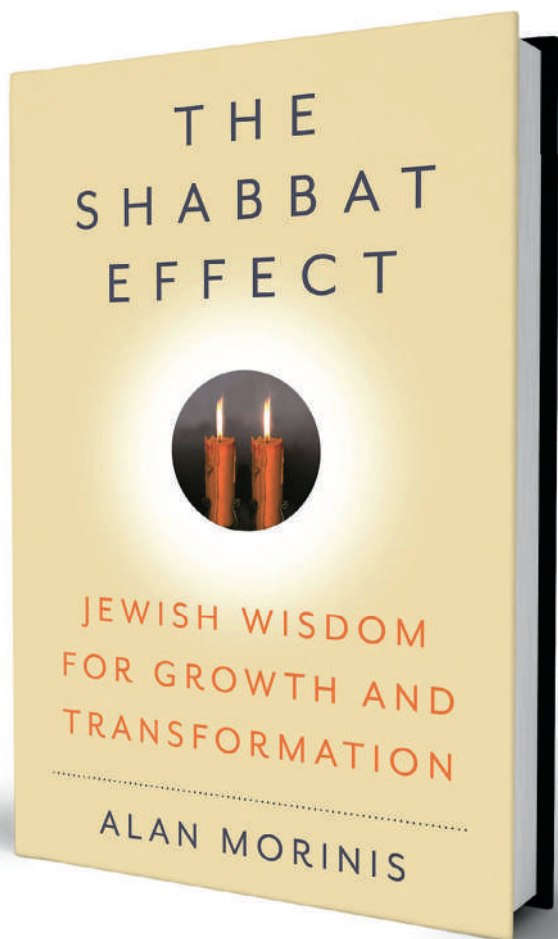
Everybody wants this

NAVIGATING an interfaith relationship is not easy, especially when dealing with fraught families, concerned congregants, and parasocial podcast fans. In this rom-com series that confronts the tension between Jewish community and the secular dating world — soon returning for a second season — Kristen Bell plays Joanne, an agnostic sex and relationship podcaster who falls for young, quirky Rabbi Noah (Adam Brody). Some Jewish feminists have taken

NOBODY WANTS THIS

Created by
Erin Foster
On Netflix
October 23

issue with the show's portrayal of its Jewish women, and there's been some controversy about the series' use of the word *shiksa* to describe Joanne. Still, Bell and Brody's undeniable chemistry has landed the show a whopping 95 percent on Rotten Tomatoes, and a second season for Adam Brody's Hot Rabbi. *Sophia Hershfield*



NON-FICTION / RELIGION

When Shabbat takes work

SHABBAT, like *Kaddish* and Jewish delis, is a topic that inspires many writers to wax rhapsodic about its history and ability to catalyze deep personal meaning. In the hands of Alan Morinis, a leader in the revival of Musar, the subject gets a more pragmatic treatment with a focus on developing practice. Musar was a movement of growth through self-examination in nineteenth-century yeshivot, and Morinis has made it a modern phenomenon by focusing less on the self-flag-

THE SHABBAT EFFECT: JEWISH WISDOM FOR GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION

Alan Morinis

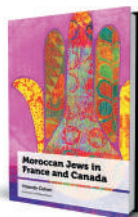
Bloomsbury Publishing
November 13

ellation and more on spirituality. You won't find a kugel recipe, but you may learn how to find yourself in the kugel.

Avi Finegold

NON-FICTION / HISTORY

Unknown country



MOROCCAN JEWS IN FRANCE AND CANADA

Yolande Cohen

University of
Ottawa Press
October 22

FOR MANY Canadian Jews with familial origins in Montreal, being Jewish meant being part of the Anglo population—one that, by and large, departed for Toronto and elsewhere with francophone ascendance. This shift did not mean an end to Jewish Montreal, but rather a shift toward a more francophone Jewish population. For those curious about the origins of some of Canada's francophone Jews, Yolande Cohen's book, *Moroccan Jews in France and Canada*, offers backstory. With contributions from Sara Cohen-Fournier, Noureddine Harrami, Martin Messika, and Stephanie Tara Schwartz, the book includes oral history, personal testimony, and historiographic analysis of this unique diaspora. *Phoebe Maltz Bovy*



NON-FICTION / CULTURE

Mirrors don't always tell the truth

RABBI Dr. Minna Bromberg, a sociologist-turned-spiritual leader, is the founder of the group Fat Torah, which connects Jewish practice with body positivity. Bromberg's book, *Every*

EVERY BODY BELOVED

Minna Bromberg

Wayne State
University Press
September 9

Body Beloved, is a continuation of this work, using Judaism as well as her own personal experiences to offer new perspectives on how to combat fatphobia and increase accessibility for those of all sizes. There's something in it for you, whether you're a

larger-bodied Jew in search of religious affirmation and liberation or someone looking to see how Judaism could help you challenge your biases on the subject. *Phoebe Maltz Bovy*

NON-FICTION / GRAPHIC ART

Fantastic flashback

ORIGINAL ARTWORK and stories by Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg) and Stan Lee (born Stanley Lieber) — two of the great Jewish comics creators, who launched *Fantastic Four* in

THE ART OF FANTASTIC FOUR

Jack Kirby and
Stan Lee

Dark Horse Books
September 23

1961 — are featured in this reprint. It's widely thought that Kirby put some of his own story into that of The Thing (a.k.a. Ben Grimm). Marvel Comics confirmed Grimm is Jewish in a 2002 story in which The Thing returns to Yancy Street, his old stomping grounds, based on Delancey Street in Manhattan's Lower East Side, where the character (and Kirby) grew up. Recently, the real-life corner of Delancey and Essex streets was renamed Yancy Street/Jack Kirby Way. *Jonathan Rothman*



NON-FICTION / RELIGION

Queering the Jewish canon

SOURCES OF PRIDE: JEWISH VIEWS ON GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Abby Chava Stein
Ben Yehuda Press
September 2

FOR THE UNINITIATED, Abby Stein is a rabbi, activist, and author of the 2019 bestselling memoir *Becoming Eve: My Journey From Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi To Transgender Woman*. Born in the strictly religious, largely Yiddish-speaking Hasidic enclave of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Stein is a tenth-generation descendant of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. She spent the first 18 years of her life pickled in the rich culture, education system, and rituals of Hasidic life, and, as

the first-born scion of a dynastic rabbinic family, would have been poised to be a future leader of that community. That very particular identity — as someone with both a deep, embodied knowledge of life in the Hasidic world, and of life as a transgender woman — gives Stein a rare perspective on the material. *Zachary Kauffman*

NON-FICTION / BIOGRAPHY

Twists of faith



BOB DYLAN: THINGS HAVE CHANGED

Ron Rosenbaum
Melville House
October 21

ROSENBAUM began his career as a *Village Voice* journalist and has been covering and interviewing Dylan for decades. Here, he dives into not only the catalogue but also the context of the artist's life in which the music was created, including Dylan's peregrinations into Christianity and return to a form of Judaism. The detailed biography delves all the way back to events like Dylan's father bringing a rabbi to rural Minnesota to serve as his son's bar mitzvah tutor. The resulting analysis of the songs and their detailed backstories makes this one for the mega-fans and the Dylan-curious alike. *Jonathan Rothman*



FICTION / FAMILY SAGA

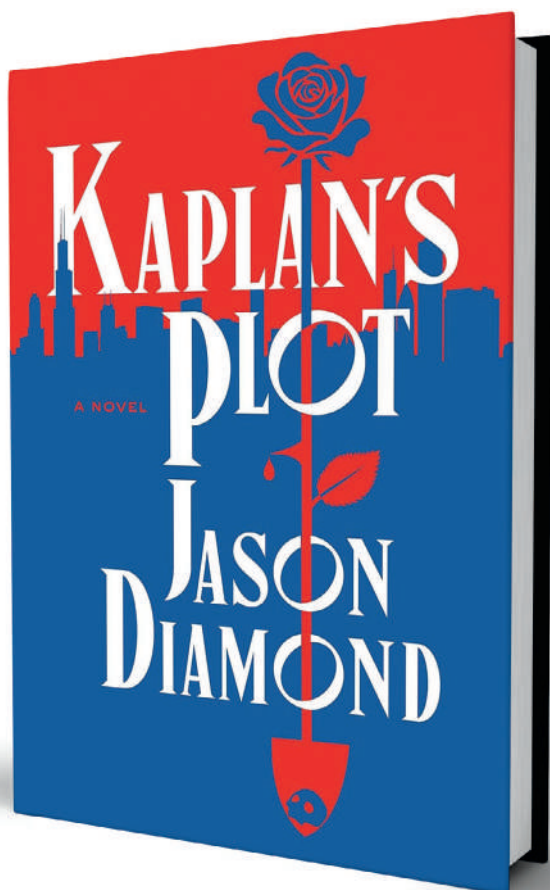
Of gangsters and graveyards

JASON DIAMOND'S debut novel is made up of two parallel storylines. The first concerns Elijah Mendes, a 30-something schlemiel, forced to move back in with his mother in Chicago after his Silicon Valley start-up dreams go bust. He then discovers a rabbi is trying to cajole his mother into selling a large piece of property, bought by his grandfather, that he never even knew their family owned: a Jewish cemetery.

The second storyline tracks the life of Mendes's grandfather, Yitz Kaplan, who arrives in *di goldene medina* as a child fleeing pogroms and scrabbles up Chicago's criminal underworld into the midwestern middle class. Between these two narrative threads, Diamond seems poised to fall into a long tradition of writers that includes the likes of Mordecai Richler, Philip Roth, and Jonathan Safran Foer: Jewish men whose stories are filled with sharply funny dark humour, and characters plagued by nervous conditions, unachieved potential, and intergenerational angst. *Zachary Kauffman*

KAPLAN'S PLOT

Jason Diamond
Flatiron Books
September 16



LITERARY FICTION

A new telling of a very ancient story

IN HIS FIRST novel in over a decade, John Irving returns to characters from *The Cider House Rules* with a story that spans generations and centres on Rachel — known to those closest to her as “Queen Esther.” Raised in a Jewish orphanage and trained as an obstetrician, Rachel's life unfolds against the backdrop of twentieth-century American upheaval, touching on themes of identity, survival, and chosen family. True to form, Irving weaves faith, fate, and fierce independence into a novel as sprawling as it is intimate. *Alex Rose*

QUEEN ESTHER

John Irving
Simon & Schuster
November 4

NON-FICTION / BIOGRAPHY

A life on canvas



CHAIM SOUTINE: GENIUS, OBSESSION, AND A DRAMATIC LIFE IN ART

Celeste Marcus
Public Affairs
October 28

BASED IN WASHINGTON DC, Celeste Marcus, who's also managing editor of the journal *Liberties*, has been at work at this first-ever full-length biography of the Minsk-born painter. Soutine was part of the Paris Jewish artists' colony in the 1920s and 30s, along with the likes of Marc Chagall, Amedeo Modigliani, and Pablo Picasso. He fled the city during the Nazi invasion and eventually died at their hands. Known for his obsessive, eccentric approach, Marcus attempts to chronicle his life while also showing how his work reverberates through to contemporary painters and techniques. *Jonathan Rothman*

PHOTOGRAPH, THIS PAGE: TOP, BY JANE SOBEL KLONSKY, COURTESY OF JOHN IRVING. OPPOSITE: TOP RIGHT, IMAGO/DEFODI IMAGES.

FICTION / COMING OF AGE

Growing up is hard to do



OTHER EVOLUTIONS
Rebecca Hirsch Garcia
ECW Press
October 7

GARCIA'S FIRST NOVEL, *Other Evolutions*, tells the story of a young girl of Jewish and Mexican heritage who lives in Ottawa. Alma Alt learns that her sister, in Montreal, is passing as white. In the book, Hirsch Garcia, also author of *The Girl Who Cried Diamonds & Other Stories*, explores themes of family conflict and post-accident trauma. The novel offers a timely exploration of coming of age in an interfaith, interracial Canadian household from an up-and-coming Canadian Jewish writer. *Phoebe Maltz Borvy*

PODCAST / PERSONAL HISTORY

The comeback kid

HAVE YOU HEARD the good news? Yes, friends, the neurotic Jew with a cult following and an obsession with other people's sins, Canada's own Jonathan Goldstein, is returning.

On the podcast, Goldstein acts as a kind of nudgy, meddlesome life coach. Each episode focuses on a guest who wants to resolve some moment from their past: a falling out, a withheld secret, an unsolved mystery. In a way, it is a show concerned

HEAVYWEIGHT with *teshuvah*, returning to some broken piece of the past in the hopes of repair.

Jonathan Goldstein
September 18

Goldstein is an audio storyteller whose career is a kind of microcosm of the entire industry. Much like the industry, his podcast

has suffered its own slights, most notably being acquired by corporate audio giant Spotify, which then cancelled *Heavyweight* in a round of mass cuts in 2023. Its welcome return signals some hope for the type of earnest, narrative storytelling shows that have all too often been squeezed out. *Zachary Kauffman*

PODCAST / COMMUNITY

Rebuilding connections

IN GOOD FAITH
The CJN
September 3

CAN A ZIONIST and a Palestinian be friends? Many Jewish-Muslim interfaith groups and personal relationships broke down after October 7; two years later, bridges are slowly being rebuilt. In a new podcast miniseries by The CJN, in partnership with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation and the Ronald S. Roadburg Foundation, two co-hosts — Modern Orthodox rabbi Avi Finegold and Palestinian peace activist Yafa Sakkejha — will hold challenging, honest, good-faith conversations with fellow Canadians whose lives have been torn apart by the Middle Eastern conflict. As online polarization pushes both Jewish and Muslim communities deeper into their respective echo chambers, this project aims to re-humanize each side, dispelling myths and opening a frank dialogue at a time when Canada needs it most. *Michael Fraiman*



STREAMING / SPORTS

Jews who hoop

IN THE 2024-25 SEASON, the National Basketball Association had approximately one Jewish player: the Israeli-born Deni Avdija. ("Approximate" because it's not publicly known whether three-time all-star Domantas Sabonis has finished the conversion process he began in 2023 after marrying his wife, Shashana.) This year,

however, the number of hooping Hebrews will jump by 200 percent, as two Jewish players, Ben Saraf and Danny Wolf, were drafted in the first round. Also unprecedented: they were drafted back-to-back by the same team, the Brooklyn Nets. Could there be a greater example of basketball *beshert*? Saraf, whose

parents were pro basketball players in Israel, wears number 77, the gematria of *mazal*, while the seven-foot-tall Wolf was born in Illinois but gained Israeli citizenship to represent the Holy Land in the 2023 FIBA U20 European Championship, where he helped lead Team Israel to a silver medal. Crown Heights will be a raging simcha if either one scores a triple-double this year. *Michael Fraiman*

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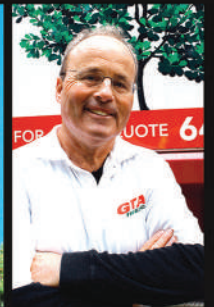
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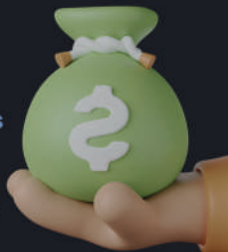
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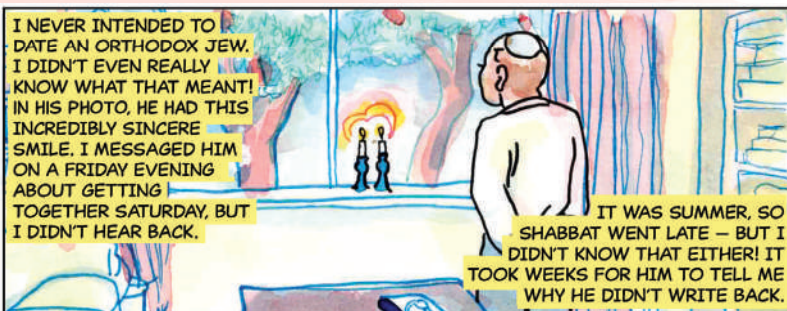


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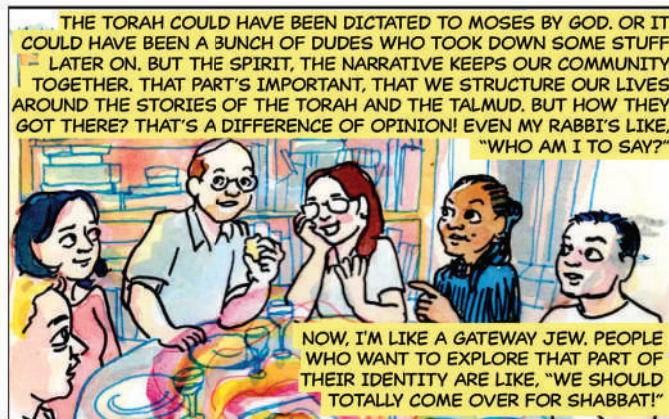
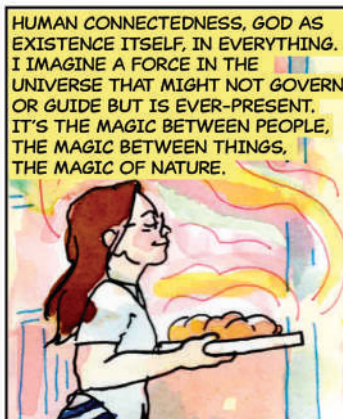
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ON BECOMING JEW-ISH



HE WAS SELF-CONSCIOUS: I CONSIDERED MYSELF THE ANTITHESIS OF RELIGIOUS! BUT I WANTED TO SUPPORT HIM IN HIS OBSERVANCE. I JUST NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND THE RULES. HE RECOMMENDED SOME PODCASTS, AND I CAME ACROSS THE PRACTICE OF *DAF YOMI*. IT WAS LIKE A FUNDAMENTALLY NEW RESEARCH PROJECT WHICH HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH MY ACADEMIC CAREER. I GOT DRAWN INTO ALL THE WEIRD ANECDOTES IN THE TALMUD! THIS PAST YEAR I STARTED THE CONVERSION CLASS. AT THAT POINT, WE HAD BEEN DATING FOR TWO AND A HALF YEARS.



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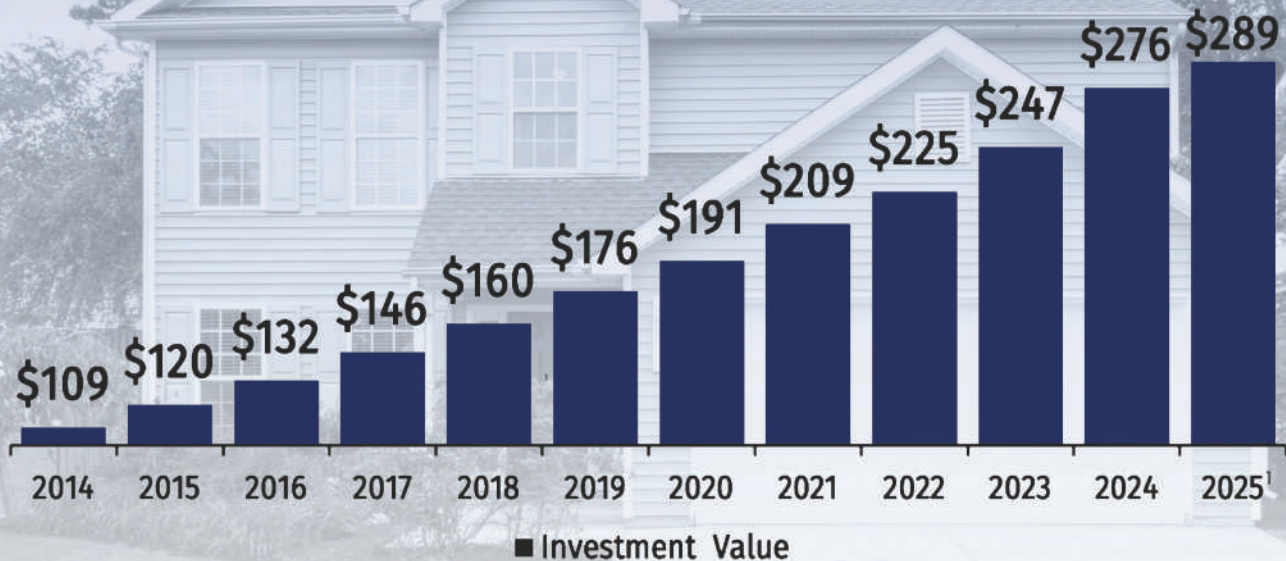
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