

Forward

WEEKEND READS

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Culture

With his ‘Jewish or antisemitic’ viral videos, Eitan Levine is stepping into a comedy lineage

By Mira Fox

“Spiderman: Jewish or antisemitic?” Eitan Levine asked in one viral TikTok video, speaking with the patter of an auctioneer to a man he had approached on the street in New York. “Oh, Jewish,” the man responded immediately. “100% Jewish.”

The bit is reminiscent of Lenny Bruce, whose famous Jewish or goyish act was, in his own time, and is still, rude; Bruce’s comedy was known for profanity and pushing boundaries. But there’s also something intuitive about it. Pumpnickel and black cherry soda are Jewish; white bread and lime jello and Kool-Aid simply aren’t. Italians are Jewish, but B’nai B’rith isn’t.

Shockingly, when I asked him about it, Levine was not familiar with Bruce’s famous monologue – though he had, of course, heard of Bruce – but his comedy relies on the same kind of intuition. Spring is antisemitic because of allergies, and it’s too colorful and cheerful. Autumn is Jewish, thanks to the High Holy Days and sweaters – which are, by the way, the most Jewish piece of clothing, possibly more so than tzitzit since, as Levine pointed out, “every Jew wears a sweater, only some Jews wear tzitzit.”

The videos have led Levine to start up a comedy show, turning the gag into a game show – the first was a week ago – where participants compete in questions about what is and isn’t Jewish. And, last weekend, he hosted the Brooklyn Cyclones’ Jewish Heritage Game.

Levine has been doing comedy and making content for years. But “Jewish or antisemitic” has gotten at something deeper for Levine: his relationship to his Jewish identity.

Raised Modern Orthodox, he didn’t always see his Judaism as something fun; instead, he felt that Judaism was all doom and gloom, antisemitism and the Holocaust and strict rules and limits – things that made his life harder. Comedy has allowed him to relate to his

heritage in what he thinks is a healthier, more appealing way, and his TikTok videos seem to be striking a similar, positive and relatable note, especially with young audiences – in the fall, he's going on a college campus tour.

When I spoke with Levine about his comedy over Zoom, he was wearing a baseball cap with a bacon burger on it, the very non-Kosher mascot of a minor league baseball team – very Jewish, by the way, much more so than major league baseball, according to Levine. Our discussion, edited for length and clarity, is below.

So were you inspired by Lenny Bruce's act?

I only heard, like, a snippet of it, and only after I started. When I heard it, I was like, “Oh, this is pretty funny.” There's a slightly different vibe to it, but it's definitely similar. I think the concept of breaking down Jewish vibes has permeated comedy for years and years.

My thing kind of came about because I think that oftentimes Jews become the gatekeepers of tragedy. But I think occasionally we're too quick to throw the title of antisemitism onto stuff. I think that, now more than ever, there needs to be a step back and laughing at the stuff that makes us unique. Celebrating the stuff that is not related to murder.

Do you try to pick mostly Jews to interview on the street? What happens when it's not someone Jewish?

Interviewing non-Jews about what they think about Jews and what they know about Jews has been fascinating. It would baffle you how many people think Donald Trump is Jewish, for example – a lot of foreigners think he's Jewish; that's a thing. And Putin, also; people think Putin is Jewish.

The concept of what is a Jew – people don't really know!

Wow, wild. Have you asked people why they think Trump is Jewish?

Oh man. It's partially because of Israel stuff, but that's only the narrative behind the Israel stuff – because I don't think Trump was actually good for Israel.

And there's the Jared and Ivanka tie-in. And Trump had a very sizable base in the Hasidic community, and I think people noticed that Orthodox Jews were on board with him.

Is that a naive misunderstanding from most people or more toward the white supremacist

conspiracy theory end of things?

Definitely both. I've talked to people where I had to cut the interview short just because I saw, in their eye, something. None of this makes actual sense, so they read one thing and 10 steps later they think that Putin is being controlled by Zelenskyy – if you go down the line of stuff, you end up at crazy theories. It's the dumbest version of broken telephone.

How do you pick who you walk up to?

I'm very proud that the series has taken off amongst college students, so we get recognized a lot when we're filming. And I think New Yorkers like to talk.

Another thing is picking the time and location. If we're on the Upper East Side, we get less people stopping. But if we go to Washington Square Park, people don't shut up.

I have a lot of footage I can't use of me talking to people for a little bit and then I'm like "OK, we're going to play this game, Jewish or antisemitic," and they'll say, "I want to keep my job!" and hand me the mic back and walk away.

Do you feel like you're trying to rehabilitate Judaism?

I was born and raised in a Modern Orthodox community, and parts of it were great and parts were awful. I remember having major issues in Jewish day school, for instance, because I had a learning disability. And in Jewish school, if you're failing Jewish subjects, you're not just a bad student, you're a bad Jew.

Like a lot of people, I left Judaism for a pretty long time and the only way I was able to come back to it was to organically find a way to do it my own way.

It is humbling to see how big this series is and to see the comments that are like, "this is relatable Judaism," or, "I feel seen. I'm a little Jewish kid in the middle of nowhere, the only Jew in my town, and this really resonates with me."

We're a silly, endearing, beautiful people. Highlighting that instead of the strict rules and getting up early to go to minyan – I'm hoping this more casual celebration of Judaism pushes the narrative into something that is nicer to be part of.

That makes it sound like the series is largely for Jews who struggle to relate to their Jewishness. Do you think you're also shifting the understanding of Judaism for outsiders?

I think if you were to ask a lot of people to write a Jewish person, they'd draw a Hasidic person; they wouldn't draw a modern Jew, the Jew that's living in New York and doesn't have any vacation days because they have to take them all off in September. I think that's a Jew that a lot of society doesn't get to meet.

It's interesting to hear you say that this regular, barely-religious New York Jew is unknown, because a lot of people see New York as synonymous with Jews. And there's a strong pop culture tradition of that nebbish Woody Allen Jewish character.

I think if I were to edit what I just said, if you were to ask people to draw a Jew, it would either be a Hasidic person or a Woody Allen type. Luckily, I do think that over time, the narrative is shifting, and people are starting to see Jews as a wider variety of people. Like the Seth Rogen kind of Jew has had a moment.

On your bit, and your game show, it seems like you already have the answers to the question of Jewish or antisemitic – even though, of course, there are no answers.

Well, first of all, everything I say is law.

But it's hard – everyone does seem to know the answers, but how do you land on things that will feel true in that way for everyone?

Is it hard? Once I think of a list of stuff, there's an immediate answer to all of it. The tough thing is to figure out why. Like Aquaman – Jewish or antisemitic?

Antisemitic. But I don't know why – I mean, barely even know who that is.

And yet you got it right.

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Opinion

Before he died, he recorded songs and stories for his future grandchildren

By Ellie Kahn

It was September of 2019 when Elliot Sturman reached out to me with the news that he had brain cancer.

A number of years earlier, I had conducted oral histories with Elliot's mother and uncles, as part of my business helping people record their life stories. Now Elliot, at 63, wanted to discuss his legacy.

"I probably have about a year to live, so I sort of need to get on this," he said. "I want you to help me share my own lifetime memories, and also record me reading my sons' favorite childhood books."

I've helped hundreds of people, including many with terminal diseases, save their personal and family histories, but Elliot's plan to read his children's books was a first. His sons, Joshua and Daniel, were both already in their 20s, and the idea was to create something for the future grandchildren he'd never get to meet.

"One of my favorite things to do with my dad when I was a little kid was him reading to us, and I wanted to somehow be able to give my own children that experience with him," explained Daniel, an engineer who lives in Northern California. "It was also about me being able to relive that myself."

Elliot, who worked in human resources and also taught b'nai mitzvah students to lay tefillin and ran scholar-in-residence weekends at Temple Etz Chaim in Thousand Oaks, California, loved the idea. Growing up, he had always wondered about Jacob Mitzman, the relative his own middle name honored – he didn't even realize that was his mother's grandfather until he read the memoir I'd helped her compile in 2011.

“I’d seen his picture, and I’d been told that I was named after him, but I never knew anything about him and his life – just that photo seemed insufficient and inadequate.” Elliot said of Jacob. The video, he thought, would ensure that for his own descendants, “I would be more than just a picture on the wall. They’d have a sense of who I was.”

Stage 4 cancer

The illness had hit quickly. Elliot suddenly had difficulty controlling the muscles in his face. The family thought he had suffered a stroke; instead, it was brain cancer, already at stage 4. “His clarity of mind was off,” Daniel recalled, “and he was pretty rapidly deteriorating.”

The tumor was surgically removed right away, which allowed him to function relatively normally for about six months. During the course of a few weeks, when Elliot could muster the strength, I recorded over his shoulder as he lay on each of his sons’ childhood beds, reading books by Dr. Seuss and Sandra Boynton along with “Calvin and Hobbes,” “Harold and the Purple Crayon,” and many others. He sang “The Wheels on the Bus” and “Waltzing Matilda” into the camera. I wanted to sing with him, recalling the same tunes and stories from the childhood of my own son, Ben, who is now 31.

As he read, Elliot paused to describe details in the books’ drawings, asking a future grandchild what he or she thought a certain character on the page was doing. He talked about the authors. When he opened Dr. Seuss’ “If I Ran the Circus,” he started at the copyright page. “This book was written in 1956, which is the year that I was born,” Elliot told the camera. “So the book is 63 years old, like I am.”

Daniel recalled him doing the same things years before.

“On every page, Dad would find things to point out,” he explained. “He would pick up on subtle things, like when he read ‘Harold and the Purple Crayon,’ he said, ‘See how the moon has moved across the sky between these two pages, to show the passage of time?’”

Daily gratitude

Daniel smiled through tears, and then shared another memory.

“After we read books at night, we would say the Shema, in Hebrew and in English, and then we would say good night to each other, and then Dad would ask us, ‘What were you grateful for today?’”

Elliot had told his future grandchildren about this ritual, too. “There’s a lot of psychological literature that says that there is a heavy correlation between being grateful about what you have or what you are, and being happy,” he said. Then he looked at the camera and said, “And hopefully, you guys will be happy.”

I had to hold back tears. My time with Elliot was such a mixture of joy and sadness. It was so clear that he wanted to leave behind something more meaningful than money.

Knowing that we’re all going to die, what do we want our lives to be about? How do we want to be remembered? And how do we spend whatever time we have left?

Choosing his legacy

I reached out to Arash Asher, director of a cancer rehabilitation program at the Cedars-Sinai Cancer Institute, for some perspective.

“We should be thinking about our legacy when we’re not facing a life-threatening illness,” he told me. “You can define your own legacy. You can still find meaning in things that are very important to you.

“I’ve found that people who have some sense of legacy are much less likely to be depressed,” Asher continued. “They’re much more likely to do things that are meaningful to them because they know, like we all probably should, that we don’t know when our last day is going to be.”

Rabbi Steve Leder of Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles has a new book about legacy, called “For You When I Am Gone: Twelve Essential Questions to Tell a Life Story,” which guides readers to create what Leder calls “an ethical will” to share their most important values with their family.

Rabbi Leder was delighted when I told him about Elliot’s project. “Reading to children at bedtime is one of the most beautiful intimate parenting and grandparenting opportunities given over to humankind,” he noted. “And this will enable his sons, in a sense, to invite their own father into that intimate moment with their future children.”

Communicating love

In 2009, when I was turning 60, I signed up for a yearlong workshop based on another book, by Stephen Levine, called “A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as If It Were Your

Last.” We participants were all in good health, but we were instructed to imagine that we had received a terminal diagnosis. How did we want to spend that final year? Who did we want to spend time with? What would we regret not doing?

That year, I took my son, Ben, to the Galapagos Islands. And ever since, I have made sure I tell people I love them rather than assuming they know.

And I’ve been only imagining I had a year left; Elliot was experiencing that reality. He died in July 2020, at 64.

His open and courageous approach to his final chapter allowed him to leave something joyous and meaningful for his family. And it’s not just the video.

“When I was in high school,” Daniel recalled, “my dad drew me a note on the back of the tear-off cardboard of a Ziploc bag box, and wrote, ‘Good morning Daniel. I know you can do it. Love Dad.’

“I have it framed in my room,” he said, “and it might be the most important thing I own.”

Ellie Kahn is an oral historian, helping families and organizations preserve their unique stories. She can be reached at ezkmail@gmail.com or via www.livinglegaciesfamilyhistories.com.

Opinion

Stop bullying drag queens who perform in Israel

By Matthew Nouriel

Dressed in gold from head to toe, I put one foot in front of the other and made my way onto the stage.

I opened my overdrawn nude tone lips, batted my fake eyelashes and swallowed my nerves at performing in drag in front of the very Persian Jewish community that I had tried to run away and hide my queer identity from. I sang a mix of Selena Gomez and legendary Iranian pop diva Googoosh, and once I started performing all my anxiety faded away. I felt powerful, beautiful and free.

I was living out my fantasy of being the quintessential Mizrahi goddess, and the audience was living it with me, applauding and singing along. Not only was the little-Matthew-within ecstatic beyond words to express their true self, they were also proud to have been part of something which positively shifted the perception of queer people in the hearts and minds of the Iranian Jewish community.

I was reminded that night just how powerful drag can be. That is why it is particularly upsetting to me that the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement has been pushing popular drag queens to cancel their performances in Israel.

Tayce – a queen from “Drag Race UK” – caved to the relentless pressure campaign from BDS and canceled her April 2022 show. American queen Kandy Muse expressed regret on Twitter for ever performing in Israel after being “educated” by BDS activists. Twitter accounts like Does Your Queen FW Israel? exist to bully queens into avoiding Israel and inform on those who do not.

The BDS movement’s attempts to shut down drag queens and LGBTQ+ Israelis are not only harmful and regressive, but they punish the very community who are at the vanguard of the push for liberal ideals within Israel.

Growing up queer in a fairly conservative, immigrant Persian family was a struggle. I attended an Orthodox Jewish school in London where I was bullied relentlessly. I had no role models of queer Iranians or Jews. When I came out as a teen, one family member told me to hide who I was and marry a woman. When I discovered drag, my entire world opened up.

At 16, I started “borrowing” my mother’s clothes and jewelry and sneaking out to gay clubs where they had drag shows. Watching these stunning gender-defying performers, something clicked inside of me. Something just felt right – I wanted to be like them. The bullied child who lived within me felt an overwhelming sense of empowerment and freedom.

Drag is all about breaking down societal constructs and going against the dominant narrative of what is considered acceptable for men and women. It forces one to examine who they are, ironically through putting on a costume and makeup. It’s about freedom from society’s constructs, self-expression and liberation.

Drag has played a crucial role in my personal journey of self-expression, self-acceptance and continuous growth as a nonbinary person – and nowhere is the ideal of unity and peace more evident in Israel than among the LGBTQ+ community.

For years, Tel Aviv, dubbed the “gay capital of the Middle East,” has been a haven for queer people. It is one of the most open and accepting cities I have ever been to, and hosts one of the largest pride parades in the world. Israel is the only Middle Eastern country to acknowledge same-sex marriage and allow same-sex couples to adopt children.

While I can’t say Israel’s track record with LGBTQ+ issues has been perfect, its progress is leaps and bounds ahead of its neighboring states, mostly because queer activists and organizations within Israel continue to work tirelessly to move the dial in the direction of recognition and inclusion. Discrimination based on sexual orientation has been criminalized since 1992.

Radical anti-Zionists, however, exploit the queer community by willfully spreading harmful disinformation. They dismiss Israel’s LGBTQ+ progress as a cynical attempt to “pinkwash” other aspects of the country’s complex society. Nowhere else in the world would you reject a country’s flourishing queer scene because you disagree with its government on other issues.

The refusal to acknowledge the serious, and oftentimes deadly, consequences for queer

people within the Palestinian Territories clearly indicates that anti-Israel advocates and activists care more about demonizing Israel than helping actual LGBTQ+ Palestinians.

Canceling drag shows has no effect on the Israeli government and the occupation. It only furthers animosity toward marginalized people and undermines potential progress and connection between queer Israelis and Palestinians. This exposes BDS's true agenda: bigotry, discrimination and the destruction of Israel by all means – including exploiting and weaponizing the LGBTQ+ struggle.

On my journey to find myself, I have found that visibility and acceptance are essential. The LGBTQ+ community cannot turn a blind eye to those of us who are Jewish or Israeli – we all deserve to be seen and to be proud of who we are. Canceling drag queens because of BDS and anti-Israel xenophobia does not help anyone, most particularly the queer Palestinians for whom BDS claims to speak.

Matthew Nouriel is a nonbinary digital activist who advocates for LGBTQ+ rights and equality in the Iranian and Jewish communities. They've held leadership positions with JQ International, JDC Entwine, and Tel Aviv Institute, and currently work as a program coordinator at JIMENA – Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. They are the recipient of the TrailBlazer Award at the JQ International Impact Awards.

Opinion

My fellow Orthodox rabbis need to take a stronger stance against guns

By Rabbi Seth Winberg

Orthodox rabbis have got to take a stronger stand against the leading cause of death of children in this country: guns.

While other Jewish groups take strong stances on gun control, the response of the Orthodox community to the epidemic of mass shootings has been lacking in force and substance.

The day after the Uvalde, Texas, massacre that left 21 people dead, the Rabbinical Council of America, the leading membership organization of Orthodox rabbis in North America, called for “meaningful dialogue” and “substantive actions” to curb gun violence.

The RCA did not specify who should engage in dialogue, and it was unclear what “substantive actions” they had in mind – a tepid response that shows waning support for gun control.

It wasn't always this way. In 1968, Orthodox leaders joined a petition to all members of Congress in favor of “strong Federal control of the proliferation of firearms.” In 2014, the RCA narrowly passed a resolution in favor of “restricting American citizens’ easy and unregulated access to weapons and ammunition.” One counter-statement read like an NRA lobbying handbook: “We might as well try to regulate criminals’ shoes, gloves, masks, or cars... Guns are ‘equalizers.’”

By deviating from their previous strong stances, the RCA gives the impression that it is trying to distance itself from its record on gun violence and gun control. Have Orthodox rabbis followed their congregants’ growing embrace of the culture of the Republican party?

As in many debates, traditional sources can be used to support a range of views on firearms. Most frequently quoted in this context is the halachic permission for self-defense: “If someone comes to kill you, kill him first.”

On the other hand, there is no halachic basis for easy access to weapons of violence.

The Talmud forbids selling weapons to people who are likely to use them for violent crimes, and cautions against keeping dangerous objects in our homes, lest they cause accidental death or injury.

A rabbi’s job is often to weigh competing values and make distinctions. In the postwar period, Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg – a noted Rosh Yeshiva who ordained some of the foremost rabbis of the last century, including Chabad’s late Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson – pointed out that transposing ancient statements about self-defense to contemporary contexts is often inappropriate.

“Israel in those generations,” he wrote, “was despised and oppressed by savages. There was no reasonable expectation of justice for Jews in court or protection of Jews and their property from local authorities.”

I share the concern of many campus rabbis and Hillel directors about rising antisemitism in this country. Like many Jewish organizations, we have increased our investments in infrastructure to protect ourselves from potential attacks, revised our emergency plans and trained staff and students for various scenarios. However, in an active shooter situation, these measures will only go so far to save lives. What would save more lives is immediately reducing the number of guns in our country.

The appropriate lesson for our society and century is Rabbi J. David Bleich’s crisp formulation written in *Jewish Law and Contemporary Issues* in 2015: “[W]hen preservation of life comes into conflict with other values, it is preservation of life that must triumph.”

In 1982, Rabbi Bleich wrote an open letter to the unwitting Jewish seller of the gun used to shoot President Reagan. Referencing Leviticus 19:14 [“You must not... place a stumbling block before the blind”], Rabbi Bleich wrote: “Jews ought to be in the vanguard of those seeking to impress upon our legislators that handguns are indeed ‘stumbling blocks’ which must not fall into the hands of the ‘blind’.”

Studies show that states with the weakest gun laws have more gun-related deaths and violence. Conversely, those with the lowest gun ownership rates have the lowest rates of

gun death in the country.

When we teach “you shall not be intimidated by anyone” [Deuteronomy 1:17] we can point to examples of lawmakers who stand up to NRA pressure and threats. Just weeks after the 2018 murder of 17 people in Parkland, Florida, then-Gov. Rick Scott (a Republican) signed a bill that made it harder to buy weapons and gave law enforcement the ability to seize guns temporarily in some situations.

We can also point to Israel as an example of a society with robust restrictions on guns. It rejects the vast majority of gun license applications and has a culture of ongoing training for the small percentage of civilians who own them. Israel unsurprisingly has a low rate of gun-related violence.

Orthodox rabbis must inspire students, congregants and elected officials to spare no effort in saving lives. If students go on strike to demand action from elected officials, we should be marching with them. If municipalities arrange buy back campaigns, we should be there too. Better yet, we should contribute funds toward these campaigns.

Just as some Talmudic statements need to be understood contextually, so does the Second Amendment. As Justice John Paul Stevens argued in 2018, the Second Amendment is “a relic of the 18th century.” We should vocally support repealing it. After all, as Cardinal Cupich of Chicago recently tweeted, the Second Amendment was not handed down from Sinai.

The RCA statement is disappointing, insufficient and weak. We all need to speak and act to end mass shootings, accidental gun deaths and suicides.

Rabbi Seth Winberg is executive director of Brandeis Hillel and the university's senior chaplain. The views expressed are his own.

News

'Ironic': Koufax statue to be unveiled on Shabbat

By Louis Keene

Jewish baseball lovers have long doted on Sandy Koufax not only for his dominance on the mound, but also for his choice to sit out Game 1 of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur.

Now, with the legendary southpaw being immortalized in bronze at Dodger Stadium, some of those fans will face a similar dilemma: The new Sandy Koufax statue will be revealed before the Boys in Blue face the Cleveland Guardians on June 18, a Saturday afternoon.

That's right: The Koufax unveiling – and accompanying replica statue promotional giveaway – falls on Shabbat.

The scheduling conflict vexed Sabbath-observant Angelenos who see Koufax as a Jewish hero and a totem of their faith.

As one observer tweeted: "It is certainly ironic that a man who is idolized by observant Jews for refusing to play on Yom Kippur will be honored on Saturday [Shabbat]," when observant Jews won't be able to attend.

Benjy Bain, an Orthodox Dodger fan who collects bobbleheads, called Koufax "the quintessential culmination" of his Jewishness and fandom.

Though Koufax famously skipped his World Series start before Bain, 33, was born, the moment resonates deeply with him.

"That a Jewish player could even be considered good – but he was great, if not one of the greatest – and for him to make a point of embracing his identity, that's definitely notable for a religious Jew like me," he said.

Before each season, Bain reviews the Dodgers' promotional calendar and picks out one or

two games to attend. He looked at the Koufax celebration as “a really cool thing to go to.” But when he realized it was planned for 4:15 on a Saturday, he says he remembered thinking “how ridiculous that was. Just really, really poor thinking on the part of the team.”

Making it even more perplexing was the apparent care the Dodgers put into planning the season’s other giveaways. Japanese Heritage Night is planned for a game against the Angels – whose star, Shohei Ohtani, is Japanese. Justin Turner’s bobblehead night is against the Mets – the team that released him.

It’s possible that Koufax’s date was planned for the anniversary of Clayton Kershaw’s no-hitter – Kershaw, the Dodgers’ Hall of Fame-bound ace, is seen as Koufax’s baseball heir. The two lefties have a close relationship.

The Dodgers did not return a request for comment.

Most Jews do not observe the Sabbath, among them Koufax, now 86, who is expected to attend Saturday’s ceremony.

That made Ephraim Moxson, who writes the Jewish Sports Review, a semimonthly guide to Jewish athletes, okay with it – though Moxson qualified that he was “about as un-religious as they come.”

“If Sandy’s going to be there and it doesn’t bother him, it doesn’t bother me,” he said. “It’s great that he’s having a statue. It should have been done a long time ago.”

But even some non-Sabbath observant fans could be off-put.

Ron Rimmon, who grew up in Los Angeles when Koufax was hurling his notorious overhand curve, wears Koufax’s No. 32 jersey – which has been retired by the team – on every trip to the ballpark. He calls Koufax, who won three Cy Young awards and Most Valuable Player in 1963, “the most important Jewish player” of his time.

He does not refrain from driving on Shabbat, and said he likely would have gone to Saturday’s game if he were not out of town this weekend.

But Rimmon, 65, still thought it was “a little weird” to fete Koufax on a Saturday.

“There are only six other options available to them,” he said drily. “Obviously they don’t have a yiddishe kopf running the operation.”

The statue will be located outside the centerfield entrance, next to a statue of Jackie Robinson, which was fashioned by the same sculptor, Branly Cadet.

The first 40,000 fans in attendance will receive a miniature version of the sculpture.

Louis Keene is a staff reporter at the Forward who writes the weekly California Briefing. He can be reached at keene@forward.com or on Twitter [@thislouis](https://twitter.com/thislouis).

News

Former IDF general emerges as consensus candidate for Jewish Agency head

By Jacob Kornbluh

The Jewish Agency's executive committee is expected to vote within the next two weeks on a new head for the largest Jewish global nonprofit, marking the end of a year-long search.

Doron Almog, a former major general in the Israel Defense Forces, has emerged as a consensus candidate who could win the required nine out of 10 votes from selection committee members, who represent major Jewish and Zionist groups. He would succeed Israeli President Isaac Herzog as the agency's executive chairperson, according to two people familiar with the matter.

The job is highly sought after, and has been compared in prestige to Israel's president. With an annual budget of close to \$400 million, the organization is devoted to promoting aliyah, connecting Israel with world Jewry and strengthening Jewish identity globally.

The committee has postponed a vote on a new leader several times since it began its search last July, after several finalists failed to muster enough votes. Since the agency's founding in 1929, its head has traditionally been chosen with the recommendation of Israel's prime minister, with the exception of Herzog's appointment in 2018.

In October, the leading candidate, Elazar Stern, withdrew from consideration over comments he made about shredding anonymous complaints, including sexual harassment claims, during his time as head of the IDF's Manpower Directorate. Since then, leaders of the coalition government have not been able to agree on a candidate who could muster 9 nine committee votes.

The agency extended the search to July 2022, and granted acting chair Yaakov Hagoel an extension until the committee agrees on a successor and the agency's board of governors

accepts it. The board is slated to meet in Jerusalem in July.

The committee also formed a four-person subcommittee to vet candidates and present the panel with a shortlist, and the names of several cabinet ministers emerged as possible candidates in recent weeks, including Zeev Elkin, construction and housing minister; Nachman Shai, minister of diaspora affairs; and Pnina Tamano-Shata, the first Ethiopian-born minister of aliyah and integration.

Another name has emerged. According to sources who wish to remain anonymous because the committee's choice hasn't been publicly announced, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid is pushing his deputy, Idan Roll an alternative to Almog, whose service in the IDF might bother progressive American Jews. Almog also has a history of mismanaging millions in funds for a startup company he created in 2007.

Roll, 38, a member of Lapid's Yesh Atid Party, has been tasked with reaching out to disaffected American Jews since the government was formed last year. His ties to the U.S. go back to the mid-2000s, when he served as an emissary for the Jewish Agency at a Jewish summer camp in Texas for two years. He was later a spokesperson for Masa, an Israeli government and Jewish Agency-funded organization that sponsors trips to Israel. Roll married his husband, pop singer Harel Skaat, in Provo, Utah, last year.

In a document shared with the committee and obtained by the Forward, Roll wrote that as agency head, he would prioritize raising the agency's profile, as well as engaging young Jews, and strengthening their Jewish identity and connection to Israel.

A Lapid spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Mark Regev, former Israeli ambassador to the U.K. and former foreign press spokesman to Israeli prime ministers Ehud Olmert and Benjamin Netanyahu, has also been rumored as a possible choice.

The uncertainty of the fragile ruling coalition, which has lost its majority in recent weeks, and the likelihood that Israel is heading towards early elections, could complicate the process.

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