Forward

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Culture

This nonagenarian knows more about the cellphone than you — because he invented it

By Irene Katz Connelly

After working from home for over a year, I still have no idea how Zoom backgrounds work, which means the various strangers I interview can look past me to see my ailing succulents, unopened prestige cookbooks and a childhood's worth of participation trophies.

Unlike me, a supposed "digital native," Martin Cooper is old enough that cries of "OK, boomer" don't even apply to him. But he's at home in the age of digital work. For our virtual interview, he chose to appear before an image of the Earth, captured from outer space. Perched, as it were, on top of the world, he looked like an intergalactic Jewish Santa Claus. I don't think this is the comparison Cooper intended to suggest, but it kind of makes sense: If you ever celebrated Hanukkah by receiving an iPhone with portrait mode, a Motorola Razr or a Nokia flip phone decorated with a really cool Hello Kitty charm, you have him to thank.

That's because Cooper, 92, is the father of the cellphone. The Chicago-born son of Jewish immigrants who fled pogroms in their native Ukraine, Cooper served in the Navy during the Korean War and later joined Motorola just as it was becoming a leader in research on transistors, tiny devices that control electrical signals and are integral to almost every electronic device. With his team at Motorola, he debuted the first portable handheld phone in 1973. An unwieldy device so heavy it was known as "the brick," it was nevertheless a major innovation on the car phone. Cooper was also a key figure in Motorola's disputes with AT&T, which in the 1970s sought to establish a monopoly over the radio spectrum, or the invisible waves that carry cellphone calls through the air. Arguing that like any other natural resource, the radio spectrum is a kind of "public property," Cooper lobbied the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to prevent any such monopoly – and ultimately succeeded.

You can get a crash course in the radio spectrum and peruse some pretty funky cellphone prototypes in Cooper's new memoir, "Cutting the Cord," which has already been optioned for film by Dana Brunetti, the producer behind tech world sagas like "The Social Network." I asked Cooper about staying busy during the pandemic, veering into literature after a lifetime in science and, most importantly, whether he'd ever used a song for a ring tone.

His answer was a lesson in digital etiquette from which today's industry disruptors could all benefit: "It's kind of obnoxious to be sitting at a table and half a song starts. Bad enough to have a tone by itself."

Image by Martin Cooper

The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Irene Katz Connelly: What have you been up to during the pandemic?

Martin Cooper: Like everybody else, I've been at home. I spent a good part of the time finishing up my book, and I've been working very hard trying to persuade people that the cellphone is very important for education. And I keep learning. That's one of my biggest, most important philosophies: In a complete life, you never stop learning.

What kinds of stuff have you been learning?

I set up goals about learning new things. As an example, I live 10 minutes away from the University of California at San Diego, and they've got experts there who are world-renowned for their understanding of the brain. And here I have the opportunity to sit down with these people and get firsthand information. So actually I know a lot about what you're thinking right now. But I've also had some failures. I tried to understand quantum physics – do you know a lot about quantum?

I can't say I do.

Well, I don't either. And I tried really hard.

It sounds like you prefer to learn by talking to people, rather than reading books.

There's some things that can't be done without a group of people. When Einstein was working on general relativity, if he had an idea that he wanted to exchange with a friend, he would write a letter. A couple weeks later, he'd get an answer, and then he'd write an answer back again. Today, he could look at him face to face and cut the time of interaction down by thousands of times.

You've been a scientist all your life, and now you're venturing into literature with this book. What was that process like?

Well, I had a failed process. I engaged with a collaborator who was going to help me turn this story into a book. She was a remarkable woman, but she took it upon herself to turn me into an author. She wanted to make me like Maya Angelou. The reality is, I love to read Maya Angelou. Her ability to create metaphors is extraordinary. But I can't do a metaphor for the life of me. So I wasted a huge amount of time before I realized we were never going to finish, and finally started all over again. What you read, if you really read the book, is amateurish in many respects, but it's my writing.

In the book, there's this dramatic scene where you meet up with a reporter and make the world's first cellphone call, on a New York City street corner in 1973. You dial up an engineer at AT&T, your biggest competitor at the time. When you made the call, could you have predicted anything about the massive role cellphones play in our lives now?

We absolutely believed that sometime in the future, everybody would have a cellphone. A joke we told was that someday, when you were born, you'd been assigned a phone number. And if you didn't answer the phone one day, it meant you'd died. But things like social media, or the cellphone replacing the camera – well, we didn't have digital cameras in 1973. The internet didn't exist in 1973. How could we know that a person could get into an argument and solve it instantly, just by pushing a couple buttons?

What's most surprising to you about the way we use cellphones in the present day?

The most surprising thing is that many people don't use the cellphone for talking anymore. You know, I do Twitter from time to time. I use Facebook. But talking to somebody is still my primary method of communication.

You've already sold the film rights to this book. What parts of your story do you want the movie to capture?

The part that I find most interesting is the conflict between Bell Systems and Motorola. One scene that I think would be a great part of a movie was when I testified before the FCC. This was before we had slide projectors, so I actually had an easel, and I was ripping off pieces of paper to explain all the reasons why Bell Systems was deceiving the world by capturing spectrum when they didn't really need it. When I got done with this really argumentative presentation, this Bell Systems guy in the back raised his hand and said, "I object. This is a hearing, not a trial." And the chairman of the commission gladly said, "Yeah, you're exactly right. And that's why you can't object." That's the kind of thing I think would go over great in a movie.

Do you have any thoughts about what actor you'd like to play you?

You know, the first thing that comes to mind is Brad Pitt, but he's just unsuitable. So maybe Bradley Cooper would be a good guy. I'm egotistical enough that I'd like someone who's better looking and more articulate than I am.

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News

For the Conservative movement, an audit of ethics policies might be overdue

By Molly Boigon

When the Conservative movement censured an upstate New York rabbi in 2019 for a problematic relationship with a woman who had received his rabbinic guidance and attended services, there was no public written record of the offense or the punishment.

There was no announcement to the congregation, Temple Beth-El in Poughkeepsie, indicating any problem with its senior rabbi, Daniel Victor, according to three current and former members of the synagogue and a former member of the board. The movement's Rabbinic Assembly required that Rabbi Victor have a rabbinic mentor and therapist for two years, these members said. The former member of the board, who resigned over the matter, said in a recent interview that other members still don't know the full story – that Victor, according to the three current and former members, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation in the community, pursued a member of the community, initiated sex and then abruptly dumped her.

"It was handled incredibly badly," said one of the current members. "Because of the way that it's been handled, it's a really big thing."

The fallout at Temple Beth-El has dragged on for years. The current and former members and the former board member said that at least five families have left the synagogue over the matter and more are staying away from services. Two members of the board resigned over Beth-El's handling of the complaint. The woman from Victor's relationship, who declined to be interviewed for this article, has left Jewish communal life altogether, the synagogue members said. [She was never officially a member of the congregation.]

The synagogue, through its president, Donna Gordon, declined to comment, but the executive board sent an email to congregants ahead of this article's publication that said the board dealt with the issue "in a confidential and appropriate manner."

Victor said in an email to the Forward that he "acted like a gentleman throughout the relationship" but "would have made different choices" if he could do things over again.

"The internal process within my synagogue and the R.A. in addressing the issue were in my view fair, which provided some relief," he continued. "The larger challenge I faced was from the few individuals who were refusing to forgive me. I continue to seek forgiveness and promote healing, understanding, and reconciliation.

"Of course, I regret that there were hurt feelings and acknowledge that I could have handled it better, but I adamantly reject the notion that I used my position of rabbi in any way to take advantage of the person with whom I had the relationship," he added.

While there are unique factors to the situation in Poughkeepsie – a small town, an unmarried rabbi, the thorns and roses of a close-knit community – the Conservative movement broadly has a checkered record of handling misconduct complaints, according to interviews with Conservative congregants and leaders, complainants and ethics experts.

"Within the Conservative movement specifically, people have not been heard, people have been re-traumatized or further traumatized, and felt like they had nowhere to go," said Nicole Nevarez, the national director of Ta'amod, an organization that works with Jewish organizations to improve their workplace cultures. "The Conservative movement is, in general, in a state where there's a tension between traditionalism and progressivism, and so I think that that is likely what's going on."

As many organizations, religious and secular, grapple with boundary issues and abuses of power, the Rabbinical Assembly is in the midst of a formal examination of the limits of its code of conduct and how it handles complaints. It has hired an outside firm, Sacred Spaces, to audit its policies, talk to people who have gone through the complaint process and ultimately make recommendations. People close to the revision process say it's sincere – that R.A. leadership really wants things to change for the better.

"We may indeed learn that we missed the mark in the past," said the R.A.'s CEO, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, in a statement. "Our own *teshuvah* means being accountable for and learning from any past mistakes and creating a plan for excellence going forward that brings all our current and future work to a higher and more present-day standard," he said, using the Hebrew word for repentance.

As the R.A. begins its revision process, a parallel soul-searching is happening in the Reform movement. Last month, a probe by Manhattan's Central Synagogue found that its senior rabbi in the 1970s and 1980s, Sheldon Zimmerman, had engaged in "sexually predatory behavior" with at least three female congregants and employees, including a teenager. The Central

Conference of American Rabbis – which suspended Zimmerman in 2000, forcing him to step down as president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion – along with several other Reform movement institutions are investigating their own processes for handling misconduct.

The complaint process

For those who have witnessed or directly experienced ethical violations by Conservative rabbis – including financial improprieties and sexual misconduct – the process of reporting them can be fraught.

Each synagogue is different, but most have no obligation to bring transgressions to the attention of the R.A., which serves as both a quasi union representing rabbis and an investigatory body through its ethics committee, the *Va'ad Hakavod*. Members of the R.A. are asked to report transgressions if a colleague is confronted and the problem isn't addressed. For other professional associations, like the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, such reporting is mandatory.

The process can take months – in the Poughkeepsie case, multiple complaints were made in April 2019, and the *Va'ad Hakavod* did not deliver a censure and recommendation until December.

"I honestly believe there are glaciers that move more quickly than the ethics committee of the R.A.," said a current member.

In the meantime, people in Poughkeepsie who voiced concern about the relationship to the rabbi or the synagogue said they faced hostility and intimidation. The R.A. updates the accused rabbi in writing at every step of the process, but only delivers news of the outcome verbally.

"I unequivocally did not engage in any form of intimidation or express hostility to anyone that voiced displeasure regarding my relationship–quite the opposite," Victor said. "Since the relationship ended, I have repeatedly apologized, asked for forgiveness, and proactively sought counsel to improve myself and better understand the ethical issues at play."

People who have reported other complaints described a bungled investigation process led by people without proper training.

One woman, who worked at a Conservative movement organization and spoke on the condition of anonymity out of concern it could hurt her career, said her ex-husband is a rabbi and Jewish educator who abused her and her children. She was ultimately granted sole physical and legal custody.

When she reported what she described as her then-husband's physical, verbal, emotional and financial abuse to the R.A. in 2018, she said, the Va'ad Hakavod asked her to rehash the same episodes of physical violence and manipulation over and over.

"It felt very wrong that they would always forget. I would always have to repeat things," she said. "No one said, 'I'm so sorry you experienced that.'"

When the *Va'ad Hakavod* ultimately did issue a ruling on her husband's case, she said, the body declined to tell her the punishment.

In another widely publicized case, back in 1999, the R.A. agreed to retain as a member Rabbi Arthur Charles Shalman, who was found to have violated rules against "improper touching" and "improper suggestions" after his synagogue, Temple Shaarey Zedek in Buffalo, voted to keep him on the bimah. Rabbi Shalman was ultimately expelled in 2008 after the R.A. finished a second investigation into an inappropriate relationship with a congregant.

Shalman, when reached by phone, declined to comment.

The then-synagogue president, Iris Zackheim, called the second investigation "a shock to most people in the congregation" in an interview with the Forward in 2008.

"A lot of people are devastated," she said at the time.

The R.A. does not publicize the names of rabbis who have been disciplined, unlike the Reform movement's C.C.A.R, which only started in the practice in 2017. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association also lists disciplined rabbis, though it's not clear when the policy began.

But Rabbi Sheryl Katzman, the senior director of member-engagement at the R.A. and an ex-officio member of the *Va'ad Hakavod*, said the R.A. is planning on changing that policy so that the community and other denominations are aware of which rabbis have been sanctioned.

Competing pressures

The R.A. established a Gender and Power committee in 2019 to study issues related to sexual harassment and gender inequity. That committee and the *Va'ad Hakavod* and found that its code of conduct needed to be updated. The revision of the code started in April, and is in the first of three phases.

Other Conservative organizations have started their own looks inward: the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the synagogue association, launched a tip line in 2017 after allegations surfaced on Facebook that one of its employees had molested a youth member in the 1980s.

In 2017, the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American

Jewish University in Los Angeles introduced a course to train rabbinical students how to handle experiencing sexual harassment.

Rabbi Katzman said the R.A. is zeroing in on guidance about rabbi-congregant dating. Right now, the code of conduct simply advises rabbis to "be alert to the temptations" that may arise, "be especially sensitive to the delicate nature and possible adverse consequences of such a relationship" and "proceed with caution."

Dating as a rabbi can be complicated. Single rabbis often want to marry and start families, but potential mates may be synagogue members or potential members. Carefully navigating issues of power and consent can yield healthy, long-term relationships, but secrecy and impulsivity can send individuals and whole congregations into disarray.

[Rabbi Daniel Pressman, the chair of the *Va'ad Hakavod*, is engaged to a former congregant, but in a statement to the Forward, Rabbi Blumenthal of the R.A. said that Pressman's "understanding of rabbinic boundaries is highly developed" and that he's "a strong proponent of re-examining our Code of Conduct and our procedures, including issues surrounding gender and power dynamics."]

"It's much too much right now left to their discretion and I think our rabbis are asking for more guidance," Katzman said.

Another issue that will be addressed, she said, is the complex roles of the R.A. as both prosecutor and defender of rabbis accused of wrongdoing, which is true of other denominations' rabbinic associations as well.

"The *Va'ad Hakavod* is there to ensure the safety of individuals and ensure the safety of rabbis," Katzman said. "It's absolutely one of our questions – what does it mean to play both roles?"

Ethics experts suggested that even the appearance of a conflict of interest could make it harder for the *Va'ad Hakavod* – or any rabbinical association – to do its job.

Just last year, Blumenthal, the head of the R.A., became the head of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, a network of 600 Conservative Jewish communities in North America. Now, the organization defending and investigating rabbis, the R.A., is led by the same person leading the organization representing the synagogues.

"The structure of rabbinic associations is deeply problematic," said Nevarez of Ta'amod, the nonprofit serving Jewish workplaces. "It gets very blurry and challenging to be truly successful."

But Rabbi David Teutsch, the the founding director of the Center for Jewish Ethics of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, said shared leadership might lead to "more coordination" between the USCJ, which provides support to synagogues dealing with misconduct, and the R.A., which issues recommendations.

"It certainly is a sign of real progress that they want to revise the code of conduct," he said.

Turn and face the change

Despite these challenges, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, a scholar in residence at the National Council of Jewish Women who serves on the R.A.'s Gender and Power committee described thoughtful and careful research by the R.A. as it considers other denominations' policies and best practices.

"I feel proud of this work and it makes me feel hopeful," she said. "It really does."

But for some in the Conservative movement, hope is in short supply.

Arnie Draiman, a nonprofit consultant based in Israel and a former United Synagogue Youth adviser, said even well-intentioned Jewish communities have to fight the impulse to "guard their own" and "close ranks."

"There have been terribly shocking episodes among rabbis of various movements, and you tell me – I haven't seen much significant change," he said. "Show me the change. I don't see it."

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Bintel Brief

I told my dad I'm not a zionist. Now my mom wants me to apologize.

By Shira Telushkin

Dear Bintel,

My father is a kind and very loving man, who I respect deeply. He's also just fun and cool. I often borrow his clothes, and we watch movies together all the time. All my friends love him. My whole family, in general, has a genuinely close relationship and I feel very lucky. We're really on the same page about most things.

But oh my God, mention Israel and I feel like everything goes right off the rails! My father, who is generally a normal, liberal, cares-about-people kind of guy, goes into a very hard place whenever you mention politicians he decides are anti-Israel. There is no redeeming them. Anything that suggests being anti-Israel is immediately seen as very bad. Our conversations about this are never really angry – he will listen to what I have to say, or at least not interrupt me, but then he throws a thousand questions at me that sound like far-right talking points. I'll talk about something terrible happening with Palestinian villages, and he'll ask if I care about women being oppressed in Saudi Arabia, or that Hamas is anti-gay, as if that has anything to do with anything.

As you might imagine, our conversations about this last series of attacks have gone nowhere. I genuinely do not know what to do. I told him I don't know if I can identify as Zionist, and he said some nasty things. My mother told me he's been heartbroken about it. Well, I'm heartbroken about what many self-identifying Zionists have been saying in recent weeks! I have two sisters who are 12 and 14 years older than me, and they mostly agree with me but say it is easier to just not talk about it with my dad. Is that what I should do?

His birthday is next week and I feel like I need to address it before then. I can't imagine writing a card without this being discussed! What can I do?

Signed,
No Peace

Dear Peace,

You have a few options. The first would be to say nothing and pretend this never happened. That's a bad option. Even if things go back to feeling normal, it sets a terrible precedent for how the two of you handle and navigate difficult conversations, which is especially tragic in the context of such a close relationship. The older you get, and the more tricky life situations come your way, the more you will benefit from having a template for how to discuss hard things with your dad.

The second option is to tell your dad you are sorry the conversation ended on such a heated note, and that you love him but do not want to address Israel any further. In other words, address the fight but not the issue.

The third option is to revisit the conversation with your father.

Right now, I'd go with a hybrid of options two and three. Say you're sorry and offer to talk down the road. You can call, send an email, or catch your father sometime he is relaxed, and say something such as:

Dad, I've been thinking a lot about our last conversation. It was hard to realize we are on such different sides of an issue that is so important to both of us. I also think a lot might have gotten lost in translation. If you are open to it, I'd like to find some time to sit down and talk through our positions.

I know this will be a hard conversation, but I think when the topic comes up organically, we get really emotional, and that makes it hard to have a real conversation. It might be worth sitting down and seriously discussing our views more intentionally. Of course, I love you and this might just be an issue we do best to avoid. But it feels strange to be on different sides of this topic, and I'd like to better understand each other's perspectives, even if we disagree. I'm sorry for how the last conversation ended.

The goal here is to acknowledge that this is not a conversation the two of you can have lightly, even if most of your interactions are easy. By taking it seriously, you set yourself up to not be caught off guard by the gulf between you and your father on such an important matter.

Hopefully, he'll apologize for his reaction too and that will bring you back into a place where you can celebrate his birthday, but not feel you've compromised on your own position.

As for what to do next…

One part of that question is how to engage your dad on Israel politics in a way that feels productive, not just accusatory. The other is how to understand and relate to this man who you love deeply and respect deeply yet who seems to be acting contrary to the moral compassion you expect from him.

I want to start with that second question.

I don't know how old your father is, though it sounds like he's somewhere in his 60s, if not older. In general, many Jews of that generation formed their relationship to Israel during the six day war, in June 1967. For six days, this new, tiny country was on the brink of total destruction and annihilation. And then it emerged victorious. Israel was the newborn who made it, against all odds, and bound itself to the hearts of many as the perpetual underdog whose survival is not a given.

Your father, in some way, might love Israel the way it sounds like he loves his children: fiercely, unconditionally, protectively.

Imagine how your dad would respond if you did something terrible. Barring some particularly heinous acts, he would likely stay in your corner and denounce those who suggested you deserved to die or ascribed to you the worst possible motives. Even when it seemed unlikely, I imagine he would always read your acts in the most generous light.

I don't know how old you are, but it sounds like you are in your 20s, if not younger. For a lot of Jews of this generation, their relationship to Israel is more like a person to their spouse; we were raised to love Israel, but within limits. A spouse, after all, can act in a way that makes their partner want a divorce. When their acts become inexcusable, you can fall out of love.

I don't mean to suggest that your father is reacting irrationally and that you are acting rationally. You both are responding to real threats and actions on the ground. But you are reacting to the Israel on which you were raised – strong, powerful, its existence a given – and that is not the only Israel your father knows. He knows a world where it is possible that Israel is destroyed, and I bet that ever-living fear is inspiring a lot of his initial reactions to these events.

I offer that as one way to understand why the two of you seem so inexplicably on different sides. For you, to be a Zionist might have a very specific, narrow definition to which you do not subscribe. To your dad, to say you are not a Zionist might mean that you've joined with those who want to see Israel, and the Jews who live in it, destroyed. This interpretation might feel tiresome and unnecessary to you, depending on what discourse you are immersed in, but it won't help your cause to assume that you and your dad are working from the same set of definitions and assumptions.

If you are looking to have a more fruitful conversation, then expect it to be slow and sometimes frustrating. Bring all of your warmth and patience and good faith. You have a lot of evidence that your dad is a good, decent person. Use that. Ask questions and listen, and when he asks questions, don't assume they are asked in bad faith (and don't conflate his questions with other groups who ask similar questions, even if they sound like "right wing talking points" – he, presumably, really wants an answer, and this is your time to explain your position).

It is also okay to not know something. The goal is not to win. If he points out a flaw in your argument, you can say "That's a good point, let me write that down and look into it." Be gentle. Be loving. Don't back down, and when you find yourself getting defensive, acknowledge the feeling. You can say, "I hear your point. I want to think more about it," or "I'm not sure if that's what I said, but it is not what I believe."

If you can, try not to get caught up in semantics or ascribing positions to one another that the other rejects. Stick with what you each really say and believe. Come to the conversation with a willingness to listen too. There are likely hard truths you have also not fully faced.

I advocate for this route simply because this man is your father, and the parent-child relationship is at the core of Jewish life. The last verses of the prophetic biblical book of Malachi describe the end of the world, a time when God promises: "Then I will send to all of you the prophet Elijah, before the coming of the great and wondrous day of the Lord, that he may turn the heart of fathers back to their children, and the heart of children back to their fathers – lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction" (Malachi 3:23-24).

When the hearts of parents and children are turned away from each other, we are vulnerable to destruction. Fight your fight, do your work and don't feel obligated to engage as gently with every person you meet. But this is your dad.

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Culture

Why do we keep turning Holocaust survivor stories into self-help books?

By Irene Katz Connelly

On a recent segment of "The Today Show," a cadre of well-coiffed hosts discussed the life of Eddie Jaku, a 100-year-old Holocaust survivor and the author of "The Happiest Man on Earth," a memoir about his imprisonment in Auschwitz. Grainy photos of concentration camp prisoners alternated with clips from an interview with Jaku and videos of him reading some of the most stirring lines from his book: "Through all my years I have learned this life can be beautiful, if you make it beautiful."

"What a message in this time, as we're in a state of recovery," one panelist sighed, presumably alluding to the coronavirus pandemic. "You see what this man endured?"

"If he can have love in his heart, surely everyone can," another chimed in.

"The Happiest Man on Earth" is not quite as unequivocally uplifting as interviews like this (not to mention its title) would suggest. In brisk prose, Jaku recounts losing his parents to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, staying alive through a combination of luck and cunning and emerging into a postwar Europe still rife with antisemitism. Although coverage and promotion of Jaku's book focus on his determination to make a "beautiful" life, its plot shows how little control he had over what happened to him.

The packaging of Jaku's story as inherently life-affirming speaks to a broader cultural phenomenon: our desire to fashion Holocaust history into self-help stories whose value is predicated on the idea that survivors could, and did, make the "right" choices. Such framings conform to powerful American notions of 20th-century history; they give readers palatable parables about events that may seem too distant or distressing to contemplate; and they provide a wide platform to survivors who wish to speak out. ("The Happiest Man on Earth" is already a bestseller in Australia, where it was originally published.) But editorial decisions like the ones that went into Jaku's memoir also ensure that many of the most accessible stories about the Holocaust give a reductive impression of what survivors – and victims – really experienced.

This framing of Holocaust storytelling is not new – in fact, it originated soon after the Holocaust ended. When I asked Pam Nadell, the director of American University's Jewish Studies program, about our addiction to uplift in Holocaust narratives, she pulled out a 1952 edition of "The Diary of Anne Frank," the first to appear in the United States. The book included an introduction by Eleanor Roosevelt that praised Frank's "ultimate shining nobility" and stressed its relatability: "These are the thoughts and expressions of a young girl living under extraordinary conditions, and for this reason her diary tells us much about ourselves and our own children," she wrote.

While memoirs like Elie Wiesel's "Night" struggled to find American publishers, "The Diary of Anne Frank" became a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that ended not with her terrible death at Bergen-Belsen, but with one of her diary's most optimistic lines: "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are truly good at heart."

Writing in 1997 on what would have been Frank's 68th birthday, Cynthia Ozick argued that the creation of an edifying feel-good tale out of Frank's suffering amounted to a kind of literary malpractice, transforming her diary from a "painfully revealing" document to a "partially concealing" one. It would have been better to burn it, she concluded, than to adorn the covers of its various editions with bromides like "a song to life" or "a poignant delight in the infinite human spirit."

That redemptive storyline, for however little redemption Frank actually saw, fit right in with widespread American attitudes at the end of World War II, said Sara Horowitz, a professor of Jewish studies at York University who focuses on literature. Americans saw their soldiers as heroes who had rescued Europeans from a remote and bloody conflict, so they were primed to layer over that story "the idea of survivors triumphing over evil."

In the decades after the Holocaust, Horowitz added, commercial publishers may have had a vested interest in promoting uplifting survival stories: In doing so, they were both catering to the broadest possible reading public and meeting the psychological need to make meaning out of horrific events.

"If you look at the Holocaust without that triumphant, redemptive story arc, you have to grapple with the randomness of what happens to people," Horowitz said. "The fact that good doesn't always triumph over evil, that wonderful, moral, warm, fabulous, heroic people don't always triumph over the forces that are poised against them. Who wants to contemplate that?"

Who indeed? The book blurbs to which Ozick objected wouldn't feel at all out of place in some of the latest Holocaust literature. The cover of "The Choice," a 2017 memoir by the Holocaust

survivor and psychologist Eva Eger, features the plucky maxim "Even in hell, hope *can* flower." In the book's foreword, Philip Zimbardo characterizes Eger's survival as a decision, writing that "Despite torture, starvation, and the constant threat of annihilation, she preserved her mental and spiritual freedom." To him, this supposed decision is the basis of the book's educational value: He concludes that "For all of us who suffer from the everyday disappointments and challenges of life, her message inspires us to make our own choice and find freedom from suffering."

This insistence on individual choices seems perverse given the systematic degradation and random violence Eger recalls in the memoir: She sees her mother die in Auschwitz, survives through a series of lucky coincidences and narrowly escapes sexual assault by an American soldier, one of her supposed liberators. Eger herself is fairly explicit about the lack of options available to her as a concentration camp prisoner: While she stresses the importance of maintaining hope, for her the titular "choice" comes at the end of the war, when she musters all her psychic resources to begin anew. But the book's editorial framing obscures that distinction – Library Journal, for example, observed loftily that the book "bears witness to the strength of the human spirit to overcome unfathomable evil." Such comments imply the fact of survival is in and of itself both a choice and a virtue.

This framing should give us pause, and not just because it implies that the Holocaust victims – who outnumber survivors by far – lacked sufficient determination to stay alive. Survival in concentration camps depended much less on individual decisions than predetermined factors like age, physical health and location, not to mention luck. Within a system designed to eliminate autonomy and rife with random violence, it was often impossible to make rational choices about survival. The Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer, for example, describes a survivor who arrived at a concentration camp and was sorted into one line with his brother, while their parents stood in another. The survivor sent his brother to stand with the rest of the family, thinking they should be together, only to later realize that all three were sent to the gas chambers.

In response to widely accepted ideas about the "decision to survive," Langer coined the term "choiceless choice" to articulate the scenarios faced by concentration camp survivors and to distinguish them from the notion of choice as we experience it in everyday life. To find instruction or inspiration in choices that weren't really there, as the editorializing around many contemporary Holocaust memoirs encourage us to do, is to collapse that distinction, presenting genocide as an extension of the vagaries of modern life rather than another reality altogether.

Primo Levi, one of the Holocaust's earliest and starkest chroniclers, gives voice to the concept of "choiceless choice" in his 1983 essay "The Gray Zone." New arrivals at Auschwitz, he writes, expect to encounter a microcosm of the outside world, or at least some solidarity from fellow inmates; instead, they find "thousands of sealed off monads" engaged in "a desperate covert and continuous struggle." For Levi, the horrible choices, or "struggles," inherent in concentration camp life pitted prisoners against each other and eroded their humanity, without ever guaranteeing survival.

Levi's writings lionize nobody, and the modern reader will find in them no advice on personal conduct. But he presents another kind of lesson, one that's as relevant as it is unsettling: a demonstration of the ease with which totalitarian governments can dismantle social norms and create worlds totally distinct from our own, worlds in which ideas of choice simply do not apply.

I couldn't help thinking of Levi's monads when I looked at the cover of "The Happiest Man on Earth." On it, Jaku poses with a gentle smile spreading across his weathered face, one arm crossed over his chest to display the number tattooed on it. It's a pose of triumph, but it's also a disclaimer, reassuring readers that the Holocaust is but a chapter in a longer story of human decency and freedom, not an argument against that story. Things were bad, the image tell us, but now they're just fine.

We shouldn't require survivors to give us such assurances.

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News

Once the world's tallest politician, Robert Cornegy wants to take Brooklyn to new heights

By Jacob Kornbluh

Not long ago, Robert Cornegy, a member of the New York City Council, was dubbed the tallest politician in the world. As borough president, he said, he can make the world look up to Brooklyn.

Cornegy, 55, who played professional basketball in Israel and talks about his strong affinity for the Jewish state, is one of the leading candidates – along with councilmember Antonio Reynoso and Assemblywoman Jo Anne Simon – for the office in the June 22 primaries. His height may help him stand out in a crowded field of 14.

At 6-foot-10, Cornegy earned the title of the tallest politician from the Guinness Book of World Records in 2019 after submitting several doctors' measurements of his body – both standing up and lying down. "He's brought politics to new heights," NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio, who himself stands at 6-foot-5, said in a ceremony marking the achievement. In November 2019, Cornegy lost the title to a Republican politician in North Dakota, Jon Godfread, an insurance commissioner who was a centimeter taller. "I don't mind losing, but I lost to someone who holds an elected role that I've never even heard of before," Cornegy quipped in a recent sit-down interview. "But I was very grateful to be able to be among the people who internationally represent the borough of Brooklyn."

The challenges of being tall, he said, is that you are always noticed and people tend to have very high expectations that you're going to be a leader and speak out. When he was a child, people always assumed he was older than he was. He's confident that his height and his political experience will make him a strong voice for Brooklyn.

The office is a relatively ceremonial one, though, without many enumerated powers. But among the responsibilities are appointing community board members, issuing advisories on land use, convening task forces to discuss weighty issues, and sponsoring legislation before the City Council, in addition to using the role as a bully pulpit. "The borough president's office is such an undefined role that it allows you to actually bring your level of activity to that role," Cornegy said about his decision to run this year after being term-limited in the council.

Marty Markowitz, the longtime former borough president, was largely known as the cheerleader of Brooklyn. His successor Eric Adams focused on social justice, development and building multicultural bridges. Cornegy said he would use the office both to amplify the needs of the people who live in this borough and to boost its image. "I am the epitome of dualism," he said in an hour-long interview. "I'm a little bit of a showman, but there's also the solid policy and legislative acumen that I have that fits my role."

"While I'm this athlete, I also teach at MIT," added Cornegy, who is chairman of the housing and buildings committee and an adjunct professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "I think it's that kind of nuanced leadership that you get to take to Borough Hall."

Jewish support

The competitive race is drawing attention in Brooklyn's Jewish communities, which make up 25% of the borough's population and over half of the 1.1 million Jewish residents in the city, according to the 2011 survey by the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. Adams, the current borough president who is running in the Democratic mayoral primary, called Brooklyn "the Tel Aviv of America."

Cornegy, 55, among a number of candidates, has courted the Orthodox voting blocs, which historically have been influential in local elections. He recently earned the backing of the Bobov Hasidic sect in Borough Park.

His support in the Orthodox community is rooted in the independence he has demonstrated while in the council and his strong support for Israel.

He said he inherited his passion for public service from his father, the late Dr. Robert E. Cornegy, Sr., who served as the longtime pastor of Mount Calvary Baptist Church in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. But it was only after a successful career as a basketball player that he sought political office.

Living the Israeli experience

In 1991, after spending two years playing for the Paşabahçe club in Istanbul, Turkey, Cornegy went to Israel to play for Maccabi Petah Tikva. His two years in Israel coincided with conflict – the first intifada that began in December 1987 and ended in September 1993. Cornegy recalled witnessing a vehicle-ramming terrorist attack at a military bus stop in Tel Aviv, which he said made him understand what it was like to live under the constant threat of terror. He also saw firsthand the dedication of Israeli citizens to the protection of their country when his Israeli-born teammates would spend the weekend on military

training instead of practicing for important games, a sacrifice which at first seemed unfathomable to him. “Learning their commitment to their country and to the protection of their soil inspired me tremendously,” Cornegy said, adding that he would sometimes be invited to watch them train.

Cornegy said that that “lived-learned experience and feeling the residual effects” on the Jewish people after the Holocaust, shaped his strong support for Israel in elective office.

Last year, Cornegy expressed shock at the Democratic Socialists of America for asking council candidates to pledge “not to travel to Israel if elected… in solidarity with Palestinians living under occupation.” The DSA later clarified that it was referring to the annual trips sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council. Cornegy said he was ‘outraged” when he saw the questionnaire. “I lived there, seeing an entire culture in a different context. How dare you, from your couch, make those kinds of blanket statements against Israel,” Cornegy said, explaining his reaction to the questionnaire. “I was pissed off because I got to be there, and how dare you tell me what those trips meant to me,” he added.

Cornegy also advised his fellow candidates and politicians not waver on their opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which he described as being antisemitic. “My grandmother used to say that the same thing that makes you laugh, is the same thing that makes you cry,” he explained. “So my commitment, passion and dedication to what I believe in, is the same thing that people hate about me. There are certain things that there’s no compromise around, and that’s one of the things for me.”

Running to win

Cornegy was first elected to the council, representing the 36th District, in 2013. Four years later, he ran to become the council speaker but dropped out of the race after failing to garner enough support.

Cornegy said he was “very disappointed” with his colleagues at the time. “Being an athlete, I spent a lot of my time playing in all-star games, where you take the best and brightest from a particular region, assemble them as a unit and perform against the same group from another region,” he explained. “So I thought that when I went to the City Council, it was the all-star game – that everybody from the 51 districts around the city had put together the best and the brightest and sent them to represent them. That wasn’t so much the case when I got there. It was way more political than I thought it was.”

His experience on the basketball court is what Cornegy thinks distinguishes him from his competitors. “When you’re in that box hole, the vision and the focus is on winning. You don’t care what others look like or where they come from. All you care about is their commitment to combining all of the talents around you to get to a particular goal.”

“My focus now is on winning and doing a great eight years,” he said.

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News

For Turkey's Sephardic Jews, Spanish passports provide a pathway for vaccination

By David Ian Klein

When Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews of the Iberian peninsula, the Ottoman Sultan Beyazid II sent ships to Spain to ferry them to what is today Turkey and welcome them into his empire.

More than 500 years later, the descendants of these Sephardic Turkish Jews have embarked on another potentially life saving journey, but this time it's their European citizenship they have to thank – passports acquired from Spain and Portugal since 2015, when the two countries began granting them to Jews whose forbears had been banished from those lands in the 1400s.

In recent weeks hundreds of Jews from Istanbul and the coastal city of Izmir have made the trip across the border to neighboring Bulgaria, where they were welcome to receive COVID-19 vaccines.

While the Pfizer-Biontech, Moderna and other vaccines have been made available to almost all Americans by now, that is not the case in Turkey. So far, only the elderly can get vaccinated, and the stock of vaccines largely consists of China's Sinovac, which has a significantly lower rate of effectiveness than any of its western counterparts.

Turkish officials have reported that they expect to have some 90 million doses of Pfizer by the end of July. There are more than 15,000 Jews in Turkey, and most of them are Sephardic.

In Bulgaria however, not only are the Western vaccines already available, but there is an apparent surplus – vaccine skepticism among Bulgarians has left many doses unused.

One recent vaccine convoy, on May 14, set out from Istanbul with 40 to 45 cars filled with Turkish Jews headed for Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, as well as Burgas and Plovdiv, two cities not far from the Turkish border, Avlaramoz, a Turkish-Jewish news outlet, reported.

While Bulgarian vaccination sites were open to all, the border of Bulgara, as member of the European Union, was still closed to those without EU citizenship or visas from Schengen zone countries, which include 26 European nations, with open border policies between them.

That barred most Turks from crossing the border to receive vaccines in Bulgaria.

"Only those with double nationality could go," explained Tali Behar, a Turkish Jew who had travelled to Plovdiv for the shot. Weeks ago, when manyTurkish Jews discovered that their Spanish and Portuguese passports could help them get COVID-19 vaccines, the news spread like wildfire through the Jewish community.

"The Jewish community is very well connected," Behar told the Forward. "By then there were hundreds of emails from people going to Burgas and elsewhere, sending the location of where you can get vaccinated and other information."

But the unexpected influx of Turks at Bulgarian hospitals in mid-May prompted Bulgarian authorities to bar non-resident EU citizens from new vaccinations. Still, hundreds of Turkish Jews still managed to make the trip before the clampdown, and a few after. Bulgarian authorities have confirmed that those Turks who were able to obtain their first dose in Bulgaria will be welcomed back for their second.

When they applied for Iberian passports, many Turkish Jews saw them as safety nets that would be useful in case antisemitism spiked or the economy declined in Turkey, but no one was thinking of them as a way to obtain a hard-to-get vaccine.

"We didn't think about it all back then," Behar recalled. "For me it was most important that I got it for my son, I wanted him to have as many options as he could, especially to work or study in Europe." Behar said.

"We feel rather privileged to have the second European passport," Behar added. "With these we feel like we are treated as part of the premier league."

A more vaccinated Turkish Jewish community also means that a beloved Jewish summer tradition will be able to continue this year: Istanbul's Jews often spend their vacations the island of Buyukada, one of the so-called Prince's islands – a chain that sits in the sea of Marmara just 13 miles from Istanbul's historic center.

"We wanted to have a good summer on the island of Buyukada," Behar said. Now according to Behar, the joke in Istanbul is that Buyakada will be the safest place in the city, "because the Jews are vaccinated."

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David Ian Klein covers breaking news and international Jewish communities for the Forward. You can reach him at Klein@forward.com and on Twitter @davidianklein .

News

She's single, she's Jewish and she's running her own farm in rural Georgia

By Stewart Ain

Ever dream of just getting away from it all? Shana Frankel, has done just that by starting a farm in rural Georgia, where she lives all by herself.

"Yes. I am out there all alone," said the 28-year-old. "I do have visitors and family who come, but on a day-to-day basis it is just me working in the fields."

The industrious Frankel is renting 20 acres in LaGrange, Ga. – about 80 minutes from her home in Sandy Springs, a suburb of Atlanta – and is farming on about a quarter of it.

"I moved onto this land in December and right away I started preparing for the season, which in Georgia starts in April," she said. "All my crops are now in – kale, different greens like Swiss chard, lettuce, green onions, radishes, basil, dill, cilantro, cucumbers, green beans, peppers, eggplant, tomatoes, okra – along with lots of different flowers," she said. "This is my third season as a farmer – my first with my own farm."

The rest of the property is wooded and there is two acres of pasture lands on which she cares for a variety of animals kept as pets "for my mental health" – two donkeys, two lambs, four ducks and two hens, one of which lays an egg each day that she eats for breakfast or gives to neighbors.

"I have the capacity for more, but I don't want to bite off more than I can chew because I'm already way over my head," she confessed.

"I had seven lambs, but two months ago five were killed by a predator when they were just three weeks old. That was a very rough introduction to having farm animals."

She said she believes they were killed by dogs. "In the country, apparently people let out their dogs and they become wild," she said. "They look like pet dogs. I'm assuming the dogs mauled one of the baby sheep and then chased the others into the pond and they drowned. Donkeys are supposed to be protectors of sheep. Right after this happened, the donkeys went to protect the two who are still alive."

Providing for her Jewish community

Frankel was raised in a Sabbath-observant community where her family attends Congregation Beth Tefillah. She calls her farm MaRabu, a Hebrew word from a Psalm that praises God for the greatness of the natural wonders in the world.

She said that while growing up she noticed most of the farmers' markets where organic farmers sold their produce were on Saturdays and only a few were on Sunday.

"I saw this [farm] as a way for me to be able to grow local, small-scale food for the community that helped raise me," she said. "And so I am doing what is called community-supported agriculture and I have 18 families that have committed to paying me a certain amount every week. In return, I will produce for them a certain amount of flowers and produce."

Farming was not always her dream job. She earned her undergraduate degree at the University of Maryland in social work and a master's degree in social work from the University of Michigan. But right after finishing school, she went straight into farming.

"I loved social work but I got into farming because I thought I would do social work through farming. I had studied community organizing and I wanted to do community development through growing food and plants. But once I started working as a farmer, I realized it came naturally to me and that I really loved it."

Toiling in the fields

With help from a tractor and the owner of the property, Frankel said they dug 28 rows of pits each about 50 feet long into which they planted the vegetables. They also laid drip tape that have emitters that release the water and that are connected to a water line that Frankel said she turns on manually.

"I use Israel's invention, drip irrigation," she explained. "It's a good way to conserve water. For a small farm like mine, it seems to work the best. I spent my gap year at a seminary in Israel after graduating high school and I saw drip irrigation there."

Frankel said on a typical day she awakens at 6:30 a.m. and is in the fields by 7.

"I finish by noon or 1 because of the Georgia heat. I have lunch, sleep and do the business side of the farm work before going back out around 6 and working until whenever I am done for the day, usually around 8:30. I feed the animals when I get up and before I go in for the night."

She has Wi-Fi through her cell phone and joined the Jewish

Farmer Network, which connects more than 2,000 Jewish farmers and growers worldwide.

"It is good to connect to Jews of all different backgrounds who are farmers. I have met farmers in Israel and Australia through their page."

She is also on Facebook. And just last week she connected her TV to different streaming services. "I resisted it for a long time," Frankel confessed.

Asked if she envisions making this her life's work, Frankel replied: "My mom literally just asked me that the other day. I would like to make a life out of this. But I'm very isolated and it is very hard. If I ever want to meet someone and have the semblance of the Jewish lifestyle I was raised with, I think it would take finding someone very niche and special to join me. I'm not as observant as I once was, but I want a Jewish guy. There are dating apps. Most go by location and I'm pretty remote."

For now, she's looking forward to the years ahead. "I'm now thinking about my future. I don't own the land and I expect to be renting for a few years. Farming is where I found my happiness, work ethic and my drive."

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Stewart Ain, an award-winning veteran journalist, covers the Jewish community.

News

Black Orthodox Jews carve out their own space amid a national reckoning over race

By Josefin Dolsten

(JTA) – For years, Chava Shervington would connect informally with other Black Orthodox Jews to celebrate Black history that often wasn't discussed in their communities and to offer and receive advice on a range of topics – from what communities were the most inclusive to how to deal with their children being bullied at majority-white day schools.

But it wasn't until last year – as the death of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests led to a nationwide racial reckoning – that Shervington decided to join forces with three other Black Orthodox Jews to create a formal space where those conversations could take place. The result was Kamochah.

"We've known each other for a really long time and we've always been talking about the need for an organization that specifically speaks to the Orthodox community and the experience of being an Orthodox Jew around race and racism," said Shervington, who lives in Los Angeles. "I think that the racial justice moment that we're in right now created the impetus for us to make it an actuality."

Officially launched in December through the Jewish Federations of North America, Kamochah now has around 150 members from across the Orthodox spectrum, most of whom are based in the United States. Members volunteer to run daily virtual Torah classes and monthly separate events for men and women; a recent women's group meeting included a lesson about how to make Louisiana bread pudding, while men held a special gathering before Passover. The group also serves as a resource for the wider Orthodox community and its leadership has provided guidance, coaching and training about race and racism to more than a dozen schools, synagogues, camps and other groups.

Kamochah's founding comes at a time when there is growing recognition of the fact that the American Jewish community is becoming increasingly diverse.

"It's reflective of a broader change that is the reality of the demographics of Jewish America, and I think the presence of Black Orthodox Jews – and of Jews of color more broadly – has woken the broader Jewish community up to the fact that we're not all from Europe and that we're not all white," said Bruce Haynes, a professor of sociology at the University of

California, Davis, who has done research on Black Jews.

A 2019 report by the Jew of Color Initiative estimated that 12-15% of Jews are people of color, although definitions of the term vary. A study released by the Pew Center in May found that 8% of Jews are Black, Asian, other minority races or multiracial, or Hispanic of any race – a proportion that grew to 15% for Jews under 30. About 2% of younger Jews identify as Black, according to the study.

In recent years, a number of Jewish groups have launched initiatives to engage with this growing population, a trend that has sped up in the past year amid the national movement to tackle racial justice issues. But many Orthodox Jews do not necessarily feel comfortable participating in events that do not cater to those leading a religious lifestyle.

"There are Orthodox Black Jews who want to be in an affinity space with other Black Jews but can't go to some of these other organizations because they're visibly not frum," or religious, said Kamochah co-founder Rabbi Yonason Perry. "Going to events and there's no kosher food, or having to worry about kol isha [the prohibition against hearing a woman singing] – whatever it is, we just have different needs."

Shervington herself has long been involved in groups for Jews of color – she is a board member and former president of the Jewish Multiracial Network. But with Kamochah she hopes to address issues that are unique to Black Jews in the religious world.

Many Jews of color say they are often questioned or made to feel unwelcome when they enter Jewish spaces, but this problem is only amplified in the Orthodox community, which tends to be more insular. Many Orthodox Jews largely socialize within their communities – shopping in kosher stores, sending their children to Jewish schools and frequently attending synagogue services.

"Naturally your engagement with people of color and communities of color is less frequent than maybe in other Jewish communities where people are regularly playing in the community soccer league or their kids are in public school," Shervington said. "Often in our community there's just not an opportunity to build these relationships with people of color in the same way."

That often translates to palpable racism for Jews of color in the community.

"Because of the assumed lack of racial diversity in the Orthodox community, when you show up, often you're perceived as an oddity," Shervington said. "It's the stares when you are at a kosher restaurant, it's the sometimes having to talk your way into an Orthodox store, it's the people muttering, 'What's the goys doing here?'"

Kamochah – which means "as yourself" in Hebrew and is a reference to the biblical commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself" – is pushing back against assumptions and providing a safe space for Black Orthodox Jews. Members help others with those same questions that Shervington had informally asked community members for years, and there are new initiatives too, such as a singles matchmaking service.

"We're responding to a sense that people don't see themselves in their communities and we're trying to make sure that people are able to celebrate their whole selves as Jews, rooted in Torah, rooted in spirituality and rooted in the identity of being both Black and Orthodox," said co-founder Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein, who last year was hired by the Jewish Federations of North America to lead its racial justice work. Kamochah is an outgrowth of that role and is run through the JFNA's Initiatives for Jewish Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.

Finding that sort of space is crucial for members like Judith Krumbein, a Baltimore resident who despite being involved in the local Jewish community for years and working at a Jewish community center says she gets questioned on a daily basis about whether she is Jewish.

"There's definitely a need for it. It's a respite," she said.

Through Kamochah, the co-founders hope to bring the Orthodox world closer to a place where that type of respite isn't quite as necessary.

"It should be normative to be in a multiracial Jewish community where there are Black Orthodox Jews," Rothstein said.

Despite the challenges, Shervington sees some reason for hope in evolving attitudes in the Orthodox community.

"'I'm not saying we're remotely where we need to be but I've started to see some shift in the conversation," she said. "I'm starting to see an active interest from some people around wanting to learn about racism, wanting to teach their kids that there are different types of people in this world."

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Josefin Dolsten is a former news fellow at the Forward, writing about politics and culture, and editing the Sisterhood blog. She received an MA in Jewish Studies and Comparative Religion from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a BA in Government from Cornell University. Follow her on Twitter at @josefindolsten.