

Stories for you to savor over Shabbat and Sunday

Enough for a minyan:

A Jewish who's who of Biden's cabinet-to-be



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Enough for a minyan: A Jewish who's who of Biden's cabinet-to-be

By Jacob Kornbluh

As President-elect Joe Biden announced his picks for the Cabinet, the joke went around on Jewish Twitter that the West Wing would have a minyan.

Indeed, at least 10 prominent Jews have been nominated to key positions. There's Ronald Klain [chief of staff]; Anthony Blinken [Secretary of State]; Janet Yellen [Treasury]; Merrick Garland [Attorney General]; Alejandro Mayorkas [Homeland Security]; and Avril Haines [Director of National Intelligence]. One level down are Wendy Sherman [deputy Secretary of State]; Eric Lander [science and technology adviser]; Ann Neuberger [deputy National Security Adviser]; and David Cohen [deputy CIA director].

Plus there's Doug Emhoff, the Jewish husband of Vice President-elect Kamala Harris.

It's a "remarkable statement about the place of Jews in this society," said Jason Isaacson, the American Jewish Committee's chief policy and political affairs officer in Washington. Amid the rise in antisemitism and its role underpinning the Capitol siege on Jan. 6, Isaacson added, the fact that so many well-known and engaged Jews will serve in the highest levels of the administration "and no one talks about that and it's not an issue, that says a lot about how far American society has progressed." After Biden's inauguration on Wednesday, most of these individuals will have to be confirmed by the United States Senate. Here's a who's who guide to the West Wing minyan-to-be:

Ronald Klain: White House Chief of Staff

Born and raised in Indianapolis, Klain, 59, said in an [interview](#) with The New York Times in 2007, that when he married his non-Jewish wife, Monica Medina, they agreed that their three children – Daniel,



Hannah and Michael – would be raised Jewish, but that the family would also celebrate Christmas.

A Harvard Law School graduate, Klain first served as chief of staff to former Vice President Al Gore and later as chief of staff to Biden during his first term as vice president. In 2014 he was appointed as President Barack Obama's Ebola response coordinator.

Klain – an active Twitter user – played a key role in drafting Biden's plan to address COVID-19 during the presidential campaign.

Tevi Troy, a historian and author of "Fight House," a book about rivalries at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, pointed out that a number of Jews have preceded Klain in the role. Josh Bolten was President George W. Bush's chief of staff from 2006 to 2009, followed by Rahm Emanuel and Jack Lew, who both served President Barack Obama.

While neither carried the title, Jared Kushner and Stephen Miller were perhaps President Trump's closest and most influential aides throughout his term.

Antony Blinken: Secretary of State

Born in New York City, Blinken, 58, moved to Paris at age 9 with his mother and stepfather, Samuel Pizar, a Holocaust survivor from Poland. During the Biden campaign and in his speech accepting the nomination in December, Blinken recounted how Pizar, a lawyer, came to the U.S. after escaping a death march out of a concentration camp towards the end of WWII. Blinken's father, Donald Blinken, served as U.S. Ambassador to Hungary under former President Bill Clinton. His uncle Alan was ambassador to Belgium during the same time. Blinken's great-grandfather, Meir Blinken, was a [Yiddish writer](#) in the early 1900s.



Also a Harvard graduate, Blinken's first government job was at the National Security Council under Clinton. He was promoted to senior director for strategic planning, then became a speechwriter for the president. During the Bush years, Blinken was staff director for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Blinken worked on Biden's unsuccessful 2008 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, and eventually joined the Obama-Biden transition team. During Obama's first term, Blinken was Vice President Biden's national security adviser.

In 2014, he was tapped to serve as deputy to then-Secretary of State John Kerry. In recent years, Blinken was part of the WestExec Advisors strategy advising firm and served as a senior foreign policy adviser, as well as a channel for Jewish and pro-Israel organizations, during Biden's 2020 campaign.

Blinken has also [played](#) on a Jewish Community Center indoor-soccer team in Washington, and – [along with](#) now-Congressman Tom Malinowski of New Jersey – wrote parody songs and self-parody movies on American foreign policy. The pair revived their band in Obama's state department.

Blinken's plate is pretty full for the first 100 days. He must restore morale among career diplomats who have struggled under Trump, and reestablish fraying ties with traditional allies. He will also lead diplomatic talks about rejoining the Paris climate accord, reentering the Iran nuclear deal and advancing Middle East peace. In a pre-election interview with [Jewish Insider](#), Blinken applauded the recently signed Abraham Accords between Israel and several Arab countries as a "positive step," but indicated that the Biden administration will also focus on reviving the Israeli -Palestinian peace process and taking the diplomatic route to tackle the Iranian threat.

Dan Shapiro, Obama's ambassador to Israel, said that Blinken "draws on his Jewish and American family story" and "marries that with a core conviction about the essential nature of U.S. leadership in the world – to defend our people and our security, to support our allies, to confront our adversaries, to uphold our values, and to tackle the most pressing global challenges."

As Biden's closest foreign policy aide for two decades, Shapiro noted, Blinken will operate "with the full and complete confidence of the president."

Janet Yellen: Secretary of the Treasury

Born and raised by a Polish-Jewish family in Brooklyn, Yellen, 74, will make history as the first woman to head the department. The daughter of Anna Blumenthal and Julius Yellen, she was also the only woman to graduate with a Ph.D. in economics from Yale University in 1971.



Yellen went on to teach economics at Harvard before she was hired by the Federal Reserve Board of Governors to do research on international monetary reform. In 1994, Clinton appointed Yellen to the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors. Yellen left the Federal Reserve in 1997 to become chair of Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers, but returned in 2010, Obama elevated her to be chair of the Federal Reserve board in his second term.

Yellen was one of the people depicted in a last-minute campaign ad by Trump in 2016 that was criticized for – [peddling anti-Jewish stereotypes](#). The ad decried the influence of "those who control the levers of power in Washington" and singled out Yellen, billionaire George Soros and Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein. Despite this, Yellen was initially [favored](#) for another term on the Fed, but Trump changed course and picked Jerome Powell, a Republican, a move that Yellen [called](#) disappointing.

At Treasury, Yellen's challenges include reviving a pandemic-plagued economy, restoring some of the Trump administration's regulatory rollbacks and leading the sanctions regime against Russia, China and Iran, among other countries.

Sheila Katz, CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women, said that in addition to being uniquely qualified for the job, Yellen "will be breaking another glass ceiling on behalf of women everywhere," if confirmed.

Merrick Garland: Attorney General

Garland, 68, grew up in the heavily Jewish Chicago suburb of Skokie with a father and a mother whose immigrant parents fled Russia to escape antisemitism and persecution in the early 1900s. After graduating from Harvard, Garland worked as a clerk to legendary Second Circuit Judge Henry Friendly, and later to Supreme Court Justice William Brennan. During the Carter administration, Garland was special assistant to Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti.

In 1989, shortly after becoming a partner in a private law firm, Garland became a federal prosecutor. He had senior positions in the Clinton justice department, and since 1997, has served on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

President Obama's 2016 nomination of Garland [to the Supreme Court](#) was thwarted by the Republican-controlled Senate, which refused to hold confirmation hearings because it was an election year.

"As a longtime public servant, who is also the grandson of immigrants who fled antisemitism in Russia, Merrick Garland will bring a critical perspective to the office of U.S. Attorney General," Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, said in an interview. Greenblatt added that he's looking forward to seeing Garland tackle the numerous challenges the country is facing, "including rising hate crimes and violent domestic extremism, and the imperative of racial justice."

Alejandro Mayorkas: Secretary, Dept. of Homeland Security

Born in Havana, Cuba, Mayorkas, 60, would be the first foreign-born person to run the nation's top public security agency since its creation in 2002. His father was a Cuban native with a Sephardic background, and his mother fled Romania to Cuba amid Nazi persecution in the early 1940s. The Mayorkas family immigrated to the U.S. in 1960 following the Cuban revolution and the ascendance of Fidel Castro. For most of the 1990s, Mayorkas served



as a federal prosecutor in California focused on white-collar crime; President Clinton appointed him U.S. Attorney for Los Angeles in 1998.

In the U.S. Attorney's office, Mayorkas created the Civil Rights Section to prosecute hate crimes and other acts of intolerance and discrimination. During the Obama administration, Mayorkas served as director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and then deputy Homeland Security secretary.

Last year, Mayorkas joined the board of the Jewish refugee aid group HIAS. Mark Hetfield, the group's CEO, said that Mayorkas personal and family immigration history "means he has no illusions about where threats to our country come from."

"DHS has been so focused on foreign threats, and they've woken up to the fact that actually most of the threats to this country are right here at home," Hetfield added. "And I think that's something that the Mayorkas family is familiar with – that the threads don't always come from outside the country. So I think he's in a good position in terms of his psyche to deal with that."

ADL's Greenblatt, who worked with Mayorkas in the Obama administration, described him as a "person of the highest integrity" and as someone who worked closely with Jewish groups for many years "to improve Jewish communal security." Mayorkas, who was a volunteer lay leader at ADL, often said that his beliefs about national and communal security "were informed by the lack of security he felt as a Jew in his native Cuba," Greenblatt added.

Avril Haines: Director of National Intelligence

Haines, 51, grew up in Manhattan, and lost her mother at age 15. Her father, Thomas, [wrote](#) in a recent memoir that when he took her on a trip to Israel, some Israeli men encouraged her to move there.



After graduating from the University of Chicago and Georgetown University Law Center, Haines worked at the Hague Conference on Private International Law

and later as a clerk for Judge Danny Julian Boggs of the U.S. Court of Appeals. She joined the State Department in 2003, and also worked on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when Biden was its chairman.

In 2010, Haines joined the Obama White House as deputy assistant to the president and deputy counsel for national security affairs. She later served as deputy CIA director and then replaced Blinken as deputy national security adviser.

Haines was [among](#) the signatories on a letter circulated last year urging the Democratic National Committee to adopt harsher language on Israel and settlements in the party's 2020 platform.

Like Yellen, Haines would become the first woman to hold this position.

Wendy Sherman: Deputy Secretary of State

Sherman, 71, would also become the first woman in the role; she previously made history as the first woman undersecretary of state for political affairs in 2009. In a 2018 memoir, Sherman, who grew up in Baltimore, [recounted](#) the disappointing moment when she was notified by then-Secretary of State John Kerry that she wouldn't replace Bill Burns as deputy secretary when he retired in 2014 (Burns is Biden's nominee to head the CIA).



"On a Friday, the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Secretary Kerry called me to his office. The president, he informed me, had decided on Tony [Blinken]," she wrote. Sherman took the news very hard, breaking into tears as she packed up to go home to the final meal before the Yom Kippur fast and for evening services at the synagogue. "I spent the holiday in mourning," she recalled.

Sherman served as lead negotiator for the Obama administration on the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, and will likely play a prominent role in the Biden administration's negotiations with the signatories of the JCPOA and in potential talks with Tehran.

Rachel Levine: Assistant Secretary of Health

Levine, 64, originally from Wakefield, Massachusetts, became on Tuesday the first openly transgender person nominated for a Senate-confirmed position. Currently, Levine is serving as Pennsylvania's health secretary.



NCJW's Katz noted that Biden had pledged to make his Cabinet look like America, "and so far, it does." Katz said she's thrilled that for the first time, the majority of roles given to women is going to people of color. "These are diversity appointees, and that includes Jews, women, Black and indigenous people, representing the full diversity of our nation."

Eric Lander: Director, Office of Science and Technology Policy

Another Brooklyn native, Lander, 63, was named in 2008 as co-chair of Obama's council of advisers on science and technology, a group of prominent volunteer experts from outside the federal government.



He is currently director of the Broad Institute of M.I.T. and Harvard. Biden has made the role, which has been vacant for 18 months, a Cabinet-level post; Lander is expected to be a critical adviser to the president on the coronavirus pandemic and climate change, among other issues.

Ann Neuberger: Deputy National Security Adviser for Cybersecurity

Born and raised in Brooklyn's Orthodox neighborhood of Borough Park and a graduate of Bais Yaakov, Neuberger, 45, will serve in this newly-created role. She will be responsible for coordinating the



federal government's cybersecurity efforts, a priority of the Biden administration. Neuberger joined the NSA in 2009 and served as the agency's director of

cybersecurity in the past two years. Her parents, George and Renne Karfunkel, were among the passengers on the hijacked Air France flight that landed and was rescued by Israeli commandos in Uganda's Entebbe Airport in 1976. In a 2018 [interview](#) Neuberger said she is thrilled to be seen as a role model for young women in the Jewish community.

Nathan Diament, the Orthodox Union's executive director for public policy, called her appointment – along with Mayorkas's nomination – an “historic” moment for American Jews. “It's historic to have some of these people in these roles, and hopefully it will be good for the country,” he said.

David Cohen: Deputy CIA Director

This will be the second time serving in this role for Cohen, who is 58, grew up in Boston and graduated from Yale. In 2015, Cohen [became](#) the second highest-ranking Jew in the spy agency's hierarchy. He previously served in the treasury department as assistant secretary for terrorist financing and then undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, earning the nickname of America's “sanctions guru.”

Because his position does not require Senate confirmation, Cohen will become acting CIA director after Biden's inauguration until Burns's nomination as head of the agency is confirmed.

Doug Emhoff: Second Gentleman

Emhoff, 56, does not have to await Senate confirmation, either – he will make history on Wednesday just by being the first male spouse of a Vice President.. Known to friends as [“the Second Mensch”](#), Emhoff will likely play a key role in the administration in addition to teaching law at Georgetown University.

Is it good for the Jews?

“For the Jewish community, these announcements are a source of pride,” said Ann Lewis, who served as White House director of communications for Clinton and is now co-chair of the Democratic Majority of Israel's board of directors. “I think the political-science team is shepping naches. What they mean for the country will

be even greater.”

Troy, who served as White House Jewish Liaison in the George W. Bush administration, said in an interview that the last 20 years has been a “golden period” for Jewish appointees in both Democratic and Republican administrations. “It's a good thing for Jews so that our views can be represented,” he said. “Obviously there's more Democratic views than Republican views within our community. But the Jewish perspective definitely gets heard in administrations of both political strikes.”

Tamara Cofman Wittes, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a former Obama administration official, said: “It's not just their Jewish identity, but the way it informs their understanding of what America is and their approach to public service.”

Wittes pointed to the remarks given by Blinken, Garland and Mayorkas when their nominations were announced, in which each alluded to their Jewish background as something that has guided them in their careers.

“These are the stories of the American Jewish community: flight from persecution, America as a place of refuge and opportunity, a place where respect for individual rights and equality under the law are not just foundational principles but fundamental to the promise this country makes to its citizens,” she said. “And that means that their commitment to those principles and to realizing that promise is personal.”

But Isaacson also expressed concern about “the continuing strain of antisemitism that our country has to grapple with, as we saw on display on January 6.”

“There will absolutely be enemies of the Jewish people, enemies of American pluralism, and promoters of hate and violence who will do whatever they can with the fact that a significant number of Jews are in a senior level in the Biden administration,” he said. “We can count on that and we have to be on guard against that.”

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Israeli News

Israelis say 'I do' to virtual Utah marriages. The government says, 'You don't.'

By Ilan Ben Zion

When the pandemic scuttled Shira Hofesh's plans to get married overseas, she did what a growing number of Israelis are opting to do – she got married virtually in the state of Utah.

That seemingly simple act has landed her at the center of a case before the Israeli Supreme Court, one that – if her appeal succeeds – could fundamentally change the options available to Israeli couples unable to get hitched in the Holy Land.

Hofesh's husband, Alexey Kabishcher, immigrated to Israel from Ukraine as a child but is not recognized as Jewish by the Orthodox Rabbinate. As a result, the couple could not get married in Israel.

Israel does not have a system of civil marriage. Couples seeking to get married in Israel must do so through the religious institution of their faith. Jewish couples can only be married or divorced by the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, Muslim couples must be married by an imam, and Christians by a priest.

The existing laws make it impossible for intermarriage or same-sex weddings to take place in Israel, or even Jewish weddings performed by non-Orthodox rabbis. These policies – holdovers from Ottoman law – have increasingly alienated a large portion of Israel's population.

In line with legal precedent stretching back decades, Israel's Interior Ministry does recognize the validity of legally certified marriages and civil unions performed overseas, however. Cyprus – scarcely a one hour flight from Tel Aviv – is a common destination for Israelis getting hitched without wrangling with the rabbinate.

But with most international trips impractical, the coronavirus pandemic has closed off almost all avenues for Israeli couples seeking those alternatives.

Hofesh started searching online for alternatives when

she stumbled upon Utah.

Last year, the Beehive State approved wedding ceremonies over the internet in which only the officiating party is located in Utah proper, and which doesn't require any of the parties to be residents of the state. Israelis like Hofesh started flocking – virtually – to Utah, prompting Israel's interior minister to institute a freeze on marriages performed in Utah.

By November, several Israeli couples were married online by a justice of the peace in Utah, then submitted the paperwork to Israel's Population and Immigration Authority for a change in legal status. Hofesh said that she and her husband handed their marriage license to the Interior Ministry on Nov. 1.

They awaited approval while the authorities conducted their review of the documentation. But in the meantime, the Hebrew press reported on Israelis marrying online in Utah.

Once word was out, Interior Minister Aryeh Deri – a politician from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party – ordered all weddings performed online in Utah frozen until further notice.

Hofesh said the Interior Ministry informed her not to bother coming to pick up her paperwork because it had been returned to evaluation.

"We brought them a document from abroad that we obtained legally," Hofesh said. "To me, it seems like they're demanding that as a bureaucratic step, I get on a plane."

Eventually, she and a handful of other couples filed a petition to Israel's High Court of Justice to overturn the interior minister's order to freeze registration of marriages performed over the Internet.

The suit is titled Hofesh vs. Interior Minister. In

Hebrew, Hofesh's surname means "freedom."

Deri's office said in a statement to The Forward that because the ministry has yet to address the matter of an online wedding ceremony, "it's appropriate that the minister and senior [population and immigration] authority officials understand the principle and the way to treat it."

"Until the subject is examined and studied, Deri asked to evaluate the requests," the interior minister's office said.

Vlad Finkelstein, the attorney representing Hofesh et al., said the court mandated the state respond to the petition no later than Feb. 10.

"We are not going into issues of human rights, we are not going into the matter of civil marriage in Israel," Finkelstein said. All they seek, he added, is the registration of official U.S. documentation in line with decades of Israeli legal precedence.

Utah state officials did not reply to requests for comment about the matter.

Marriage rights groups have joined in the fight. On Jan. 18 Hiddush, an Israeli religious equality organization, wrote a letter to Israel's attorney general and interior minister appealing them to reverse course.

Hiddush Director Uri Regev said that Deri's decision was "a reflection of a fundamentalist religious urge to turn Israel into a theocracy, into a Torah state."

The Utah loophole "is a way of getting around the unacceptable state of affairs in Israel with regard to marriage," but did not solve the underlying problem that Israeli citizens must "go overseas in order to carry out the basic civil liberty of marriage," Regev said.

"The real solution would only be if Israel acknowledges the universally recognized right to family, respected by every other democracy in the world except Israel," Regev said.

For Hofesh, if Israel rejects her marriage in Utah, she believes it will "create a bizarre situation that everywhere else we're married, but here we aren't."

Culture

Bernie Sanders in his mittens is all of us

By Mira Fox



While many on Twitter obsessed over important inauguration fashion moments such as how great Michelle Obama looked, Gaga's brooch and, of course, Ella Emhoff's sparkly-shouldered coat, most of the internet's attention was focused on a picture of Bernie Sanders, hunkered down in a folding chair and bundled up in a puffy coat and enormous mittens. It has already become a meme, one which I fully expect to have great staying power. It's an instant classic.

But Bernie's sartorial choices are more than cute outerwear. At an event all about seeing and being seen, Bernie did what he has always done – refuse to perform, and remain stubbornly himself. His mittens – made [by a constituent](#) – are a reiteration of his politics, a reminder of his suspicion of big money and showy displays dominating politics. He is there to focus on the important thing, the actual work of governing, and he sees no reason not to remain comfortable while he's doing it.

"In Vermont," he [told reporters](#) after the inauguration, "we're not so concerned about good fashion. We want to keep warm."

At this point, we all know who Bernie is and what he stands for. And he made it clear through his jacket, his

expression, and his harried attitude while pushing through a mingling crowd of politicians, that he hasn't changed. He will show up, and he will make nice when he must, but only exactly as much as he needs to.

He's the uncle who showed up to the Bat Mitzvah because it's family, but thinks all the fuss is a bit much.

Or, possibly, he's your dad, waiting for you to pick out a dress for said Bat Mitzvah. He doesn't care which one, provided it's not too expensive.

Of course, he would have also had to go to Zabar's to pick up brunch supplies for the reception after the Bat Mitzvah.

Or, perhaps it wasn't a Bat Mitzvah. It may have been a shiva. Either way, far too much talking.

Really, Bernie just wants you to get to the point, regardless of the ceremony.

It's possible he's also a soccer mom. You've got to dress right to survive your kid's games if you live in Vermont.

Whatever it was, all the fuss certainly seems unnecessary.

And you know that's the only coat he owns – it's starred in other memes. Why would you need two? This one is warm. Gets the job done.

Since it's his only coat, he definitely didn't have time to clean it out. Anyway, your nose does tend to run when it's cold out. Best to be prepared.

He's a busy man. He was in a rush.

In a day that stands on ceremony, one which was full of designer coats and belts out of reach of the average American they work for, Bernie is there, as always, to stand for the Everyman.

And, honestly, even if Bernie had been the president-elect, things might not have looked too different.

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Opinion

Editorial | The right speech by the right man at the right time

By Jodi Rudoren

I've long believed that the most important superpower for an editor, or perhaps any manager, is the ability to match a particular individual to a particular assignment. With his pitch-perfect inaugural address on Wednesday, Joe Biden showed the American people that we nailed it by electing him our 46th president.

I am not, I should say, a huge Biden fan. I think 78 is not the ideal age for any new chief executive, never mind Commander-in-Chief of the most complicated country on Earth. I don't love long-serving politicians rooted in the ways of Washington.

And while I am moved by his backstory, I've always found Biden ...boring, to tell the truth. Other than the most important one – the historic selection of Kamala Harris as the first woman and first person of color to serve as Vice President – I have thought many of Biden's nominations so far uninspiring, an old-guard revival rather than a new generation of leaders.

But he gave the speech we needed to hear on Wednesday. And he was the absolute right person to deliver it.

There was no soaring rhetoric. Instead, there were short, straightforward sentences. In plain language, Biden said clearly what his administration will be about: hope, empathy, unity, truth.

"This is democracy's day," he began, saying his campaign had been not about a candidate but about "the cause of democracy." Democracy, he added, "is precious, fragile." And: "Democracy has prevailed."

He did not detail his ambitious agenda for his first 100 days. He did speak about the scourge of white supremacy, a first in any inaugural address, and a reminder – of special significance to our Jewish

communities – that he has repeatedly cited the deadly Charlottesville rally in which extremists chanted “Jews will not replace us” as what propelled him to make another bid for the White House.

“We can see each other not as adversaries but as neighbors,” Biden said. “We can treat each other with dignity and respect. We can join forces, stop the shouting, and lower the temperature.

“This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge,” he added, “and unity is the path forward.”

At another time, from another mouth, these might have sounded like the stalest of political talking points. But after the most polarizing campaign in memory and the Jan. 6 siege on the Capitol incited by a sore-loser president – coming from a guy who owes his nomination to African Americans in the South and his election to the industrial midwest – it sounded authentic.

It also sounded doable. “My whole soul is in it,” Biden said, echoing Abraham Lincoln at the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. “Joy cometh in the morning,” he said, quoting the same Psalm as my favorite president, Jed Bartlet of “The West Wing.”

Then there was the silence. A simple moment of silence for the 400,000 Americans lost so far to the coronavirus – “more lives in one year,” as Biden noted, than “American lost in all of World War II.” In this most routine act of collective public mourning, something that his predecessor somehow never bothered with, Biden set us on a path back to normal.

It’s a new normal, of course. The aerial photographs of the socially distant seating, the thick plexiglass protectors, the fist bumps (mostly) in lieu of handshakes and the ubiquitous masks were all stark reminders of the threats we face.

But behind those masks were all the staples of inaugurals past: ex-presidents from both parties (had to love W’s little American flag). The Supremes in their robes. The soldiers in the color guard. The historic flags showing our origins and our progress.

And Jennifer Lopez, in all her white and bling, with a

moving medley of two American classics. When she sang, “This land is your land, this land is my land,” a little slower than usual, I was surprised and yet not to find my eyes welling up. Yes: your land *and* my land! Our land, our nation, our democracy.

Hours earlier, I’d woken my kids up by calling, “Happy inauguration day – the first day of the rest of your lives,” My daughter, who is 13, shouted back, “That’s true every day.”

Yes, dear, but especially today.

–

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Opinion

Jon Ossoff was sworn in on my husband's Bible, and I couldn't be prouder

By Janice Blumberg

While much of the world smiles at the “firsts” attached to Vice President Kamala Harris’ swearing in, I think as well of something closer to home. It sounds like the opening line of a Borscht Belt joke: “A Jew and a Black minister walk into the Senate ...”

When the results came in from Georgia’s run-off Senate races, I recited the *sh’hechianu* prayer, thankful to be alive to witness it. As a native of Atlanta, born when Calvin Coolidge was President, Jim Crow prevailed and white people rose to give the rebel yell at the first strains of “Dixie,” it didn’t seem likely that Georgians would ever send a Black minister and a young Jewish filmmaker to represent them in Washington.

Throughout my childhood and early adult years, Georgia was a one-party state led by race-baiters and worse. Long time Jewish residents still quaked inwardly remembering the trial of Leo Frank in 1913, followed by his kidnapping and lynching two years later. They adhered to the philosophy directing them, in effect, to sit in the back of the room and not raise their hands.

That fear was dispelled in 1958 after an act of the violence we’d long feared, when The Temple, the Atlanta congregation led by my late husband Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild, was bombed in retaliation for his civil rights activism. The indignant city, led by Mayor William B. Hartsfield, overwhelmed us with sympathy and support. We began to see more Jewish hopefuls run for government office successfully, apparently unhampered by antisemitism. None of us believed that hatred had magically dissolved, only that it had crawled back under the rug for a while.

Now, reflecting on our great joy at being represented in the Senate by two good men who share our values, I have the very personal joy of knowing that one of

those senators, Jon Ossoff, chose the symbolic gesture of taking his oath of office using my late husband Rabbi Rothschild’s chumash, a book containing the five books of Torah in Hebrew. My husband used that particular book so extensively, its covers had to be taped back on.

The moment became even more meaningful to me and my family when we realized that Jon Ossoff never met Jack Rothschild – Senator Ossoff was born 13 years after Jack’s death – or, indeed, any member of our family. I presume Senator Ossoff based his decision on the concept, central throughout Judaism, of teaching our values to each successive generation. For that we thank Jack’s successors at the Temple, where the senator became bar mitzvah, who have taken such care to honor Jack’s memory.

Spreading a warm glow over the entire moment, for me, is the connection that chumash invokes recalling our friendship with Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King. We grew close to them in the years after the bombing, and seeing Ossoff sworn in on my husband’s book alongside Rev. Raphael Warnock, I felt such joy imagining how they and Jack might react to the moment.

I like to imagine Martin and Coretta holding hands as they look down on us, smiling and singing “We Shall Overcome.” We’re not there yet, but today is a wonderful milestone along the journey.

–

Janice Rothschild Blumberg is a historian of Southern Jewish history, an author and the widow of Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.

Letter from L.A.

No refrigerators left: L.A.'s COVID-19 spike swamps Jewish mortuaries

By Louis Keene

On one recent Saturday night, mortuary director Moe Goldsman got his first call at 10 p.m., his second at 12:30 a.m., and his third at 1:45 a.m. He worked through the night and went to sleep at dawn.

With coronavirus numbers skyrocketing in Southern California since Thanksgiving, Goldsman's Sholom Mortuary is struggling to keep pace with the mounting death toll. The mortuary's next availability is three weeks from now, and a cemetery across the street has paused scheduling new burials unless the family has prepaid arrangements.

A wait of several days to bury the deceased is nearly universal in Los Angeles right now, with some waiting weeks to bury their loved ones. Refrigerated storage units are in such high demand, Goldsman said, that the county coroner had called around at mortuaries looking for extra space.

"We've never seen anything like this," Goldsman said.

The backlogged mortuaries underscore a grim new reality in the Los Angeles Jewish community: the virus that seemed to pass over it in the spring and summer months has begun to deliver major losses, even as other groups suffer far worse – so far.

Someone is dying of COVID-19 nearly every eight minutes in Los Angeles County, and the county surpassed its one millionth case Jan. 17. An employee of Hillside Memorial Park, one of three major Jewish cemeteries serving the Los Angeles area, said Jan. 16 that the next funeral availability was seven days away. The following day California surpassed New York as the state with the most deaths in the pandemic.

So bodies – and the broken families who cannot begin shiva until they bury them – have to wait.

Yossi Manela, director of Chevra Kadisha Mortuary, also in Los Angeles, said the earliest available burial date at one cemetery was Jan. 25 for a person who died Jan. 14. And the only option for that time slot was direct burial, meaning no family could be present.

Until now, the novel coronavirus had been unable to keep prayer services canceled or Jewish schools closed. But the scale of the ongoing tragedy has finally overwhelmed the professionals who snap into action when a Jewish person dies. And with funeral homes overwhelmed and cemeteries booked for days in advance, the pandemic is steamrolling Jewish burial traditions as sacred as they are age-old.

Next-day burial, the standard in Orthodox life, is now wishful thinking – even families who created a funeral trust years ago are waiting two to three days. "I'm lucky if we get five days out" for a funeral, Goldsman said. It used to take 24 hours to transport a body from Los Angeles to Israel for burial. That turnaround time has stretched to a week, due in part to a contracted flight schedule.

Sh'mira, the practice of watching over the deceased from the time of death until burial, can become cost-prohibitive, costing several hundred dollars a day at mortuaries that do not provide it to all customers. Some families are instead hiring a *shomer*, or guardian, for a shorter period leading up to the funeral.

Tahara, the ritual washing of the deceased that takes place after the body is physically cleaned, is among Judaism's most hallowed practices. Sholom

Mortuary is not the only funeral home that does not perform tahara on COVID-19 patients. “We don’t want to risk the lives of people to do the ritual preparation,” Goldsman said. [Chevra Kadisha offers a modified tahara using water mixed with bleach.]

That the body should decompose naturally in the soil is also particular to Jewish burial practices. But due to concerns of coronavirus spread, some mortuaries are placing the body in a plastic pouch before laying it in the casket, slowing decomposition.

After a steady stream of cases passed through Chevra Kadisha in the first nine months of the pandemic, the losses began overwhelming the mortuary in late December. Roughly half the cases Manela receives now are COVID-19 deaths. When he is informed of an incoming case, “I don’t even check,” he said.

Howard Kaplan, general manager of Mount Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuaries, said he had offered to share his facilities with other mortuaries, as Mount Sinai was not facing a backlog at the time. That’s not to say his staff hasn’t been busy: Between its cemeteries in the Hollywood Hills and Simi Valley, Mount Sinai is hosting as many as 15 funerals on Sundays. Kaplan estimated 35% were COVID-related.

Through the first two weeks of last January, Mount Sinai’s mortuary prepared 46 people for burial. It received 75 this year in the same period.

As ICUs in Southern California reached capacity in December, some hospitals set up tents in their parking lots to accommodate new patients. Now the mortuaries are receiving bodies faster than they can inter them.

Kaplan recently rented a 40-foot refrigeration unit to supplement the 35-footer he rented last March, which is full.

But the refrigeration units, too, are in high demand. Goldsman, the Sholom Mortuary director, said he is advising families to keep their deceased in the hospital morgue if possible.

He added that the backlog is even worse at the non-

Jewish cemetery he shares an office with. Many of its clientele are Hispanic families, often low-income, whose loved ones have died of COVID-19. Some of them will wait two months for a burial.

“I feel bad,” Goldsman said. “There’s no room.”

Manela estimated that 120 people with COVID-19 on their death certificates had passed through his mortuary since the pandemic started, with an average age between 80 and 90. He did not have exact numbers on hand.

“Before, it would be busy for a day or two or three, then quiet,” Manela said. “Here, it doesn’t let up. It keeps going. Every day.”

But mortuaries are not the only bottleneck – cemeteries are also backed up.

Eden Memorial Park and Hillside – two major Jewish cemeteries serving the L.A. area – had multiple-day waits for burial services when contacted on Jan. 16.

Kaplan said the unrelenting flow of tragedy had beleaguered the Mount Sinai staff.

“We know the vast majority are elderly who are being affected by this,” he said. “And knowing how wonderful and valuable it is to have that generation to look to for culture, for wisdom. Children and grandchildren are going to miss out on some wonderful years with their parents and grandparents.”

The pandemic has also stripped funeral ceremonies to a bare minimum: always held at graveside, often held without eulogies or a minyan [quorum] in attendance, and sometimes over in as little as a half-hour.

Rabbi Kalman Topp, head rabbi of Beth Jacob Congregation, an Orthodox synagogue in Beverly Hills, recently officiated a funeral that had been delayed a few days.

He said the Jewish imperative to bury quickly goes back centuries and is intended to dignify the deceased and comfort the mourner.

“A delayed burial detracts from both of those efforts,” said Topp.

The rabbi added that the absence of tahara and the use of a plastic body pouch had been traumatic for one of his congregants who had buried a family member.

That preserving life overrides virtually every commandment was hardly a comfort.

“What I attempted to convey that placing the body in the pouch was an act of *chesed*,” or kindness, Topp said, “to protect the safety of others. A last, beautiful deed that will serve as a merit for the deceased.”



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News

Community takes pride in seeing Schumer become the highest politically ranking Jew in America

By Jacob Kornbluh

As Kamala Harris made history on Tuesday becoming the first woman and first person of color to be Vice President, she also handed Senator Chuck Schumer of New York with a prize of his own – becoming the first Jew to serve as Senate Majority Leader. The Senate is split 50-50 and Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell are expected to settle on a power-sharing agreement, but Democrats will control the majority because of Harris’s role as a tie-breaking vote.

In his debut speech as leader, Schumer said that he sees his role as “an awesome responsibility” as “a descendent of victims of the Holocaust.”

For those watching Schumer on the C-SPAN feed on Wednesday, the first thing coming to mind is the story Schumer has repeatedly told Jewish audiences across the country during the past two decades.

The story happened in 1992. Then-Congressman Schumer met with constituents in Queens, after his seat was redistricted to include parts of the borough, when a woman came up to him and complimented him for having ‘more courage than any’ of the other members of Congress. A humbled, but surprised, Schumer inquired what made him so unique out of 435 members. The woman said that she watches C-SPAN religiously and every time he rises up to speak on the House floor, ‘you have the courage to wear a yarmulke.’ The New York lawmaker laughed and told the woman that she probably mistook his bald spot for a yarmulke since she’s never seen him in person.



Image by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Since that incident, which he gleefully [recounts](#) at the start of his remarks at Jewish events, Schumer rose through the ranks, from previously serving in the State Assembly to defeating former Sen. Al D'Amato in 1998 and later succeeding Sen. Harry Reid as Senate Minority Leader. On Tuesday, Schumer reached his dream position – becoming the highest politically ranking Jew in American history.

“It should be a point of pride for the Jewish community to have one of our own serve as majority leader,” said Assemblywoman Nily Rozic, a Democrat from Queens who worked closely with Schumer over the last decade. “It’s a point of *naches*.”

Stu Loeser, a New York campaign consultant who served as Schumer’s communications director in the early 2000s, said in an interview that while the neighborhood that Schumer first represented in Congress was at the start evenly divided between the Jewish and Catholic communities, it became more diverse and multiracial over the years. That inspired Schumer to “work hard” to broaden his outreach.

Loeser said that as a member of Congress, Schumer ordered his staff to find places that were facing similar issues that New York was facing and to build alliances with other members – at times across the aisle – to work together to find solutions to the issues that mostly mattered to their constituents. Loeser added that in the position that Schumer now holds, along with a Democratic-controlled House and with President Joe Biden in the White House, he

will be able to deliver to his caucus. He’ll also put Republicans in a position that it “will make it harder for them to turn down the opportunity to pass legislation that benefits their constituents” because then they will be putting “party over their own community.”

Schumer’s former aides and community leaders also expressed their confidence that the issues New Yorkers and the Jewish community care about will always be a top priority.

Schumer “is a workhorse and the hardest working man in politics,” Rozic said. “When you think of Chuck Schumer, you think of a typical New Yorker. He doesn’t back down when it comes to the needs of New York, particularly in times of hardship.”

Schumer has already promised to [continue](#) his annual tradition of visiting all of New York’s 62 counties. Loeser suggested that Schumer is “really good at getting people to pay attention to him,” but he will still remain “the same dad from New York City that he’s always been.”

Nathan Diament, the Orthodox Union’s executive director for public policy, noted that Schumer has engaged with leaders of the community – most recently on COVID relief and for security grants for nonprofit organizations and for Jewish day schools in New York. “We couldn’t have done it without Senator Schumer,” Diament said. “He was rightly very proud of having served the community in this way, and that’s the best testament to what kind of leader he is for the Jewish community.”

Rabbi Michael Miller, executive vice president and CEO of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, said his expectations are that Schumer “will utilize the influence and power that he has to do good things for the American people, for the Jewish community, for the State of Israel and for Jews around the world.”

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