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Life

Memo to The New York Times: Hanukkah, like Judaism, is about bucking tradition

By Mira Fox

"I am not Jewish and it doesn't feel authentic to celebrate a Jewish holiday religiously," read a recent New York Times article titled "Saying Goodbye to Hanukkah." Jewish Twitter took offense, half railing against the author's interfaith background and the dangers of assimilation, and the other half upset that a woman who does not consider herself Jewish would be given a platform to opine on Jewish holiday practice

As the child of an interfaith marriage with plenty of ambivalent feelings on Hanukkah and a chaotic history of Jewish observance myself, I had a mixed reaction.

I am an active and engaged Jew now, so I obviously don't look on my own background as a dangerous symptom of Jewish decline. But I empathize with much of what the author, Sarah Prager, described when she wrote about feeling out of place in Jewish settings.

I, too, memorized Hanukkah prayers phonetically, without a clue what they meant, and my Jewish grandparents also had a Christmas tree. I liked Hanukkah because I liked feeling unique among my classmates, and the incantation over the candles felt magical – exactly because I had no idea what I was saying.

But I don't think it's an invalid choice to leave behind a practice that doesn't resonate, or to prefer Christmas.

If Prager had framed her reasons for leaving Hanukkah in the past as a simple question of choosing which set of traditions resonated, or of not feeling Jewish and thus leaving Jewish traditions behind, I would understand and respect her decision (though I still would not find it particularly newsworthy). But instead, she framed her choice as part of her "tradition of bucking tradition." She decried Hanukkah as too religious. And none of that makes sense.

For starters, Prager wrote about not wanting to force

tradition for the sake of tradition, yet she continues to celebrate Christmas and Easter because her extended family does – in other words, because it's tradition.

And then there's the long history of secular Jewish practice. There is no inherent reason Hanukkah can't be just as secular as Americanized Christmas is; it, too, has a decorative symbolic object, good food and cozy family gathering.

But what really grated at me in the essay was the basic idea that Hanukkah – and, by implication, Judaism as a whole – is too rigid and religious, not something that can be adapted to different interpretations or practices.

Not only is there a long and proud history of secular Jewish practice, but Judaism's very adaptability is what has made it a practice and identity that I have embraced as a similarly rebellious young adult. Judaism's tradition of argumentation and interpretation is exactly what makes it work for me; Jewish tradition is to buck tradition.

The story of Hanukkah is, in fact, about exactly all these ideas of rigidity and adaptation. The Maccabees, Hanukkah's heroes, were zealots who fought Hellenized Jews (who would be called assimilated in today's paradigm). Hanukkah commemorates the Maccabees' win in this divisive civil war within Judaism, one that uncomfortably parallels internal Jewish rifts today. It's a holiday that glorifies the type of unyielding practice that Prager and I both grate against – and yet, it's also a great way to continue in the strong Jewish tradition of bucking tradition.

Hanukkah itself is, after all, a holiday that is not even in the Torah; it was, instead, made by humans to fit values they wished to convey. It is, despite itself, part of the tradition of the flexibility and evolution of Jewish practice; the very fact that it has become a holiday of gifts by virtue of its proximity to Christmas shows its

adaptability to the desires and needs of American Jews.

Jewish practice has survived diaspora and persecution through adaptability, not rigidity; in other words, the Maccabees may have won that battle, but not the war.

That's what Hannukah is all about – adapting, like the time we even carved a large carrot into a *hanukkiyah*. So though this year might not be the easiest one to find a menorah, I'm sure I'll find a way; if my whittling skills aren't up to the task, I'll say the blessings over a haphazard collection of tea lights. Then, I'll make latkes for my non-Jewish roommates, with either sour cream or applesauce – they, too, can adapt the tradition – and I will consider myself to have celebrated fully, Maccabees and The New York Times be damned.

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Culture

Daveed Diggs gifts us a fresh Hanukkah song – and a puppy

By PJ Grisar

Look, the Hanukkah song book has a lot of vacancies when compared to its seasonal neighbor. “Sevimon Sov Sov Sov,” kinda slaps, but we could always use an updated anthem. Enter “Hamilton” star Daveed Diggs with a new tune that fully captures the thrills – and many disappointments – of the Festival of Lights.

The track, “Puppy for Hanukkah,” a more Jew-forward version of Sia’s Christmas-timed “Puppies are Forever,” expresses the young Diggs’ childhood yen for a canine companion.

“I want a puppy for Hanukkah,” Diggs raps over a klezmer hip-hop beat, before outlining a major cultural difference between Jews and Christians in the winter months.

Some kids write lists for they Christmas gifts, and send em’ all off to they Santas

But I don’t trip off a list for my gift

I’mma get it cause I got 8 chances

That’s right, eight nights, Festival of Lights, go hard for a week with a plus one

So y’all keep stressing be good learn lessons

But Hanukkah is the best fun.

Now, we know, not every Jewish child gets gifts each night of Hanukkah – a lot of us didn’t or, if we did, they were things like winter gloves. But just roll with it. Appreciate the groove and the knowing reference to “clarinet, no harmonica,” a necessary rhyme for Hanukkah – but also a lesson in ethnomusicology.

I think you can sense what’s coming next. In the first few evenings, no puppy is forthcoming.



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Momma came with a gift wrapped box

*It don't bark, don't bite, don't cry when I shake it, so
I'm pretty sure that it's just socks*

But you never know miracles happen.

They do! That oil lasted through a siege. Surely a puppy (probably a hypoallergenic one) is not out of the question. Well, it turns out, it is just socks. We've all been there.

But while we wait out the nights of dud gifts, we at least learn Diggs' preferred latke topping

"Sour cream is the best/Apple sauce on the side I might just get."

And he says the *brachah!* He even calls the blessing a "bop" after he auto-tunes his way through it like a pro.

"Not sure what it means," he quips, "but I learned in phonetic."

Daveed, you're *shamash* for us to handle!

The single comes with a music video airing on Disney Channel with a diverse cast of kids b-boying, spinning dreidels and even playing the clarinet. It's cute, but its biggest gift may be its representation, reaching not just Jewish kids who might feel left out of the holiday season, but Jewish kids of color, who aren't often featured in this kind of holiday offering.

This addition to the Hanukkah canon by Disney almost makes up for the uncomfortable spectacle of their original movie "Full-Court Miracle," in which Jewish day school kids co-opt hip hop culture while worshipping a Black basketball player as the second coming of Judah Maccabee.

The puppy [spoilers] is pretty cute, too.

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PJ Grisar is the Forward's culture reporter. He can be reached at Grisar@Forward.com.

Eat, Drink + Think

The secret to legendary latkes

By Rob Eshman

You want latkes that are crisp, light and just the right amount of oily? Here's the secret ingredient:

It's not tapioca.

It's not white flour, or matzo meal or grated sweet potato or peanut oil. It's not any of the stuff too many latke-makers add to their mix that end up making their latkes thicker, gummier and heavier. This is a much more clever secret, that I will share.

Ready?

OK, here it is: potatoes.

Crazy, right? Everything you need for perfect latkes is already in the perfect latke ingredient. Because like so many things in life, the answer is not in the "what," but in the "how." How you use the basic latke ingredients is far more important than what the ingredients are.

The basic latke ingredients are potatoes, onions, eggs, salt and pepper and oil for frying. Many recipes add binders – tapioca starch, flour, rice flour, potato flour – to pull everything together. I find those extra ingredients gum up the works, and adulterate the pure flavor.

My recipe uses two techniques. One rids the batter of excessive moisture, the other helps bind the ingredients. The latkes that result are light, just a little plump in the center, with a corona [pardon the expression] of crisp potato shards.

The first technique is wringing the grated potato and onion inside a tea towel. This expels all excess moisture. You do this over a bowl, and save every drop of murky liquid.

Then you let the liquid settle.

Technique #2 is key: After the liquid has settled—

it takes just a few minutes, while you heat oil in a heavy skillet – carefully pour off the liquid then scoop out the potato starch that remains at the bottom of the bowl. You'll end up with at least a tablespoon, maybe more. Now, stir that back into your mixture, and start forming your latkes.

Simple, right? Make sure you start with starchy potatoes, like Russets, and you'll have plenty of natural starch to add back to your latkes.

If you have friends in the kitchen, or kids, let them do the honors of adding the starch. It's fun to squish the stuff between your fingers. It's a bit of a food miracle, a reminder that so very often, everything we need is already at hand.

Legendary Latkes

Makes 15 three-inch latkes Total time: 30 minutes

Ingredients

4 medium Russet potatoes

1 medium onion

2 eggs

1 1/2 teaspoons salt

Freshly ground pepper

Canola or grapeseed oil

Directions

1. Pour the oil in a heavy frying pan and place on stove.
2. Grate the potatoes and onion onto a large clean kitchen towel. (You can also do this on the shredding blade of a food processor)
3. Gather up the corners of the towel and twist the potato/onion over a large bowl. Twist tight until liquid streams out. Keep twisting to get out as much liquid as possible. A friend can help, and you can do this in batches if it's easier.
4. Heat the oil to very hot. Set a couple layers of paper towels on a plate.

5. After a few minutes, gently tip the bowl to let the liquid run off. You should have a layer of potato starch at the bottom. Leave it! Add the potatoes and onion, egg, salt and pepper. Stir very well.

6. When the oil is hot, scoop out a couple tablespoons of batter into the oil and flatten slightly. You want lacy edges and a slightly thicker middle. Don't overcrowd—the oil should keep sizzling. Cook until well-browned, about 4 minutes, then flip and finish browning.

7. Remove from skillet and let drain on towel while you make more.



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News

Orthodox Jews are leaving Lakewood for a neighboring suburb. How much will they change it?

By Ari Feldman

You won't see any synagogues driving around, Jackson, N.J.

But they're there – at least 15 of them, hidden inside unassuming houses on wooded lots, according to Tzvi Herman, an Orthodox resident of the town.

Though invisible to passersby, the synagogues are signs of the sudden growth of the Orthodox community in this spacious south Jersey suburb over the past six years. Orthodox Jews require synagogues within walking distance of their homes, because they do not drive on Shabbat.

They are also signs of defiance: They were built without approval from Jackson's planning board, in quiet protest of ordinances that they say were designed to prevent Orthodox Jews from expanding into the town, such as one that bans building houses of worship on small lots.

The synagogues are an apt metaphor for the paradox of Jackson: Haredi families are moving in to escape the overdevelopment of nearby Lakewood, which is home to the second-largest yeshiva in the world.

Yet those families accuse some residents and political leaders of trying to stop them from building the infrastructure they need as observant Jews to balance religious life with suburban life.

"The Jews here don't want the overdevelopment as much as the non-Jews don't," Herman said.

The influx of Orthodox Jews seems to some Jackson residents as a harbinger of problems that have plagued other towns with large Orthodox populations: congested roads, massive multifamily developments and public school budget crises. The town is already being sued by the federal government and an Orthodox



Image by Ari Feldman

advocacy group over rules that Orthodox Jews say were designed to keep them from moving in.

Herman himself is both a symbol and an agent of change. In November, he won a term on the Jackson school board, becoming the first Orthodox resident elected to public office there. He ran in order to address what he perceives as a shortchanging of the town's Jewish students.

He believes the opposition to his candidacy, in the form of two write-in campaigns, was motivated in part by anti-Orthodox sentiment – a charge that political leaders in the town deny.

"Once my name became public, all of a sudden there were challengers," he said. "Automatically, because I'm

a religious Jew, they think my agenda is the same as up north.”

‘Uncertainty and unease’

Herman, 31, runs a home appliance store, and lives in a colonial-style home on a two-house cul-de-sac. In the summer, he says, the leaves on the trees around his backyard seclude it, and his large in-ground pool, from the neighbors completely.

It’s a far cry from where he grew up, in Midwood, Brooklyn, and also from the family’s last home, in Lakewood.

“We couldn’t ride our bikes down the block,” he said, recalling his childhood. Through the French doors, he can see the entrance to the forest path that takes him to the house, converted into a synagogue without town approval, where he prays each morning. “Over here, my seven-year-old daughter, she roams freely.”

He acknowledged that the synagogues were built without proper zoning approval, but insists they’re in a “legal gray area,” since most have families living in them full time. He cited a Supreme Court of New Jersey decision allowing religious services at the home of a rabbi in Deal, N.J. The synagogue he attends, he said, is



Image by Ari Feldman

applying for a variance to be legally operated as a synagogue.

“The zoning laws are draconian,” Herman said. “We’re simply asking for our First Amendment right to pray.”

Jackson, once a sleepy hamlet, has grown by more than 50% over the past 20 years, to an overall population of 62,000. It’s not a heavily Jewish town – the only current legal synagogue in its boundaries is a Messianic Jewish temple. But since about 2014, Herman says, about 1,600 Orthodox families have moved in, most coming from overcrowded Lakewood.

Despite the long term growth of the town overall, and a new crop of residents coming from New York City amid the pandemic, the influx of Orthodox Jews has raised fears about development in the mode of Lakewood, directly east of Jackson, where multi-family homes abound and yeshiva school buses congest the streets twice a day.

The growth and the problems associated with it are very real, said Marc Pfeiffer, the assistant director of the Bloustein Local Government Research Center at Rutgers University.

“I don’t know of another situation in the country where the norms of growth have been stressed the way it’s happening here,” he said of Lakewood and surrounding towns, including Toms River and Howell, that are seeing more Orthodox residents. “It’s creating uncertainty and unease.”

On social media, for example, loud voices have fed fears of Orthodox Jews rearranging the town’s character and finances. One group, Rise Up Ocean County, was kicked off Facebook for violating hate speech rules after an advocacy campaign by Orthodox groups.

In 2017, Jackson’s town council passed an ordinance that prevented the building of school dormitories in the township, prompting a 2017 lawsuit by Agudath Israel of America, the Orthodox advocacy and lobbying group, and a second suit this year from the Department of Justice, which both claim the ordinance was designed to prevent the building of live-in yeshivas. Jackson’s

council repealed the ordinance in May, shortly after the announcement of the DOJ suit, but the lawsuits are still ongoing. Michael Reina, Jackson's mayor, did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Todd Porter, president of the town's Republican Club, defended the dormitory ordinance and others, saying that he trusts Jackson's leaders to set responsible rules for development.

"I don't think there was some sort of nefarious plot to keep the Orthodox out of town," he said.

An 'under the radar' campaign

In Jackson and other towns that have seen large influxes of Orthodox Jews, concerns about overdevelopment line up next to concerns about the budgets of local public school systems.

The shadow of Lakewood and Ramapo, N.Y., loom large. In those towns, boards of education with a majority of members elected by the Orthodox community have limited funding to the public schools while paying millions in bussing for the expanding yeshiva population. They have done so because school boards in both states are required by state law to pay for bussing for both public and private school students.

Yet the state only reimburses local school districts based on the number of public school students. In heavily Orthodox towns such as Lakewood and Ramapo, which includes Monsey, where the number of yeshiva students can be as much as six times the number of public school students, that funding imbalance has led to budget crises and lawsuits.

Herman said he ran for a seat on the seven-member Jackson Board of Education to ensure that the board was providing state funding for services like speech therapy and special education to Lakewood yeshivas serving Orthodox students from Jackson, as it is required to do under state law.

According to Mordy Burnstein, an administrator for a Lakewood girls yeshiva who served as Herman's de facto campaign manager, there are about 2,400 school-age Orthodox students in Jackson. Jackson's public schools have about 8,300 students.

Herman's candidacy prompted some Jackson residents to worry on social media that the town would soon see its board controlled by Orthodox residents – and that this, in turn, could drain funds from the public schools.

"Remember the other candidate, Tzvi Herman, is going to be wasting all of our money busing kids to outside private schools to Lakewood," reads one woman's comment in a Facebook group for Jackson residents.

Herman fended off two vigorous write-in campaigns, which he believes were expressions of anti-Orthodox sentiment orchestrated by the town's powerful Republican Club.

The club denies any official support for Herman's opponents or for any measures designed to make the town less appealing to Orthodox Jews.

"The organization is in no way anti-Orthodox," said Porter, pointing to several Orthodox members, including a man who worked on Herman's campaign.

Herman rejects the notion that he would want to harm the public-school system or drain its budget.

"You have kids who are educated properly, it's a much better quality of life for the entire neighborhood," he said. "So it's deeply important to me and the religious community that the public school systems are strong. We're not trying to gut it."

Herman began his campaign on his own, but quickly picked up support from Burnstein, the girls' school administrator, and Avi Schnall, director of Agudath Israel in New Jersey, when his two write-in challengers emerged.

Schnall said that the local chapter of Agudath Israel threw its full weight into the effort despite being in ongoing litigation with the town, increasing its grassroots outreach efforts about the school board campaign after Herman's write-in opponents emerged.

Though the organization is a nonprofit, and legally prohibited from endorsing a political candidate, Schnall said he felt the organization could support Herman because he didn't have any official opponents on the ballot.

“In the community meetings, it wasn’t, ‘Here’s why you should support Tzvi Herman,’ it was, ‘Here’s why it’s important to have an Orthodox member on the board,’” Schnall said. “But it was never a formal endorsement.”

Still, Schnall said, “It was all done under the radar, for, let’s call it, the outside world.”

‘Tzvi is an Orthodox gentleman’

Mike Braun, a longtime elementary-school teacher, and Allison Barocas, a business manager for a large pharmaceutical company, were Herman’s write-in opponents.

Neither directly attacked Herman.

Braun said he ran to offer an educator’s perspective on the town’s tightening budget, and didn’t attempt to get on the official ballot because his school had not yet released its pandemic reopening plan, without which he couldn’t know if he would have time to serve on the board.

“I understand it looks a certain way, because Tzvi is an Orthodox gentleman,” Braun said. “That is not related to anything I did.”

Barocas did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Schnall said that he believes the two write-in campaigns were clear attempts by the town’s Republican leaders to field alternative candidates to the Orthodox Jewish candidate. He points to the fact that both campaigns were announced only after the official slate of candidates came out, and Herman was the only person who had garnered the signatures and filled out the paperwork to get his name on the ballot.

“Someone fell asleep at the wheel by not putting up a candidate,” Schnall said.

Herman received about 10,000 of the roughly 19,000 votes cast, with the two write-in candidates splitting the rest. Yet he sees his victory as a refutation of anti-Orthodox sentiment in the town.

“My election clearly shows that there’s a large percentage of Jackson that’s not interested in the

grievance politics,” he said.

Herman takes office in January, and he will have to work to convince Jackson residents that he is not in favor of the town becoming a second Lakewood. [Herman’s term will last a year, since he is filling the space of a board member who resigned earlier this year.]

He believes that Jackson needs to partner with Lakewood to lobby the state to change its funding formula for towns with large private-school populations. He estimates that within six years, there will be more Jackson children going to Lakewood yeshivas than Jackson public schools.

Jackson is already facing increasing budget woes: New Jersey’s state legislature cut state funding to Jackson’s schools by 5% in its 2019-2020 budget. [That budget increased Lakewood’s funding by nearly 64%.]

“I’m in the best position to help the township understand the shift in demographics that’s inevitable in Jackson,” he said. “If the state doesn’t change, Jackson is going to be in a similar boat as Lakewood.”

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News

A case of ‘museum-going while Black’ tests the Boston Museum of Fine Arts’ new director

By Linda Matchan

In 2015, Matthew Teitelbaum left Toronto to head one of Boston’s foremost cultural institutions, the august 150-year-old Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA). From the start, he wanted to see a significant culture shift.

He was well on his way to accomplishing that when a racial incident threatened to derail his best efforts, and intentions.

The MFA is one of the world’s most comprehensive art museums, with a global collection of about half a million works of art ranging from ancient to contemporary. Yet there was something further Teitelbaum felt the MFA was in desperate need of – diversity in its audiences and its programming. It needed exhibits and narratives that could expand its reach into Boston’s neighborhoods and communities. The building itself, with its palatial façade and massive columns flanking the exterior like soldiers, has an unwelcoming and intimidating vibe.

“I said to the folks at the MFA before I came that it wasn’t an accessible institution,” Teitelbaum said. “For me, accessible is the opportunity for people to come into the institution and to hear their voices ... I wanted it to be not only an institution for Boston but an institution of Boston.”

Two years later the MFA released a bold strategic plan, unveiled as “MFA 2020,” setting out transformational goals that included expanding audiences and engaging new and diverse communities. “We will honor all visitors,” the plan promised. “We will invite many voices.”

A lot happened quickly. Plans got underway for a “Gender Bending Fashion” exhibit about how changing gender roles are reflected in fashion. And another exhibit would explore the relationship between graffiti artists and hip-hop music.

Teitelbaum, whose father was the late Canadian Jewish painter Mashel Teitelbaum, also hired a dedicated curator of Judaica, the first full-time curator of Judaica in any American encyclopedic museum in the country (a nonspecialized museum that collects art from around the world.)

But last year something very went wrong – a high-profile racial incident in May that left some visitors feeling brazenly dishonored.

The media characterized it as “a case of museum-going while Black.” Even now, after investigations internally and by the state Attorney General’s office, exactly what happened that day remains murky. What is clear, though, is that a group of students from a Boston middle school – all students of color – visited the MFA on a chaperoned tour and said they were harassed and targeted because of the color of their skin by staff and other visitors.

They described being shadowed closely by security guards, unlike a group of white students who were also visiting that day, and said that when they told were the museum rules, a staff member used a gratuitous racist trope: “No food, no drink, no watermelon.” [The employee would later tell investigators they said “no food, no drink, no water bottles.”]

Students also said they were derided by other patrons including one who likened a student to a stripper as she danced to music in a fashion exhibit, and another who complained about “[expletive] Black kids” getting in the way.

There was citywide outrage. Led by Teitelbaum, profuse apologies to the students followed and immediate policy changes took place. The offending patrons were barred from the Museum and welcoming and orientation policies improved. The Museum signed a

memorandum of understanding with the Attorney General's office which included committing \$500,000 over three years to diversity initiatives. Already in the works were other inclusion efforts such as conversations with the community about race and inclusion, and hiring a "Chief of Learning and Community Engagement" and a director of "Belonging and Inclusion."

It was a deeply challenging time for Teitelbaum, an art scholar who came to the MFA from Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario where he was director and chief executive officer, and whose many honors include the Canadian Center for Diversity's Human Relations Award.

An appreciation for diversity was part of the canvas of his childhood. His mother Ethel is a retired Immigration Appeal Board judge. His father regularly protested outside the Art Gallery of Ontario in part because he was frustrated by what he considered its elitist stance. Teitelbaum, whose trademark look is wearing very skinny ties which he sources at flea markets, says his father's example "has led me to be skeptical of the authority of institutions."

Then, in September, another controversy erupted.

The MFA was one of four major art museums organizing a much-anticipated retrospective of the work of 20th-century Jewish artist Philip Guston. (The others were the Tate Modern in London, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.) Delayed by the pandemic, the tour was supposed to start in 2021.

Guston, who died in 1980, was the son of Jewish immigrants who fled Ukraine to avoid persecution. He was born in Montreal, and his family later moved to Los Angeles where there were regular Ku Klux Klan activities against Jews, Blacks and others. Guston famously departed from his work in abstraction and turned to soulfully dark and cartoonish figurative work; his vernacular of images included white-hooded Klansmen, and some of his paintings depicted acts of racial terror that alluded to white America's complicity in white supremacy.

The retrospective was supposed to begin its tour in 2021 and had been in the works long before the country's racial reckoning following the killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others. But in light of these events, the museums jointly announced the show would be postponed for four years, or "until a time at which we think that the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the center of Philip Guston's work can be more clearly interpreted."

The MFA got major blowback, as did the other museums. Critics charged they were being cowardly, patronizing, and censoring an important artist. A letter signed by more than 2,000 artists, curators and others protested the postponement.

"The people who run our great institutions do not want trouble," the letter said, in part. "They fear controversy. They lack faith in the intelligence of their audience. And they realize that to remind museum-goers of white supremacy today is not only to speak to them about the past, or events somewhere else. It is also to raise uncomfortable questions about museums themselves—about their class and racial foundations."

In November Teitelbaum announced another change of plans. The show would open in the spring of 2022, just six months after it was originally scheduled, and the MFA would now be the first venue.

"For me, making the decision to postpone this show was not, as some have claimed, the silencing of an artist," he wrote in a formal "Director's Message." "It is, on the contrary, a commitment to putting the Museum at the center of these conversations and creating a public space for in-depth discussions about great art and how we understand its reception and its effect."

"I think we can be more thoughtful with a bit of pause," he added in an interview "There is a need for more outside voices in our presentation – the views of other artists, of historians, to help us understand how these images have been perceived across time. This is a moment to acknowledge museums and cultural institutions work within the context of their time. To engage the right partners and voices is more important than it has ever been."

In an interview with *The Forward*, Teitelbaum acknowledged his tenure has had its challenges. “For sure!” he said, with a hint of a laugh. But he said he is moving “insistently” to make the MFA more inclusive in Boston, a city that’s historically been resistant to inclusion.

More than half the city’s population is nonwhite, yet Boston is viewed by many as clinging to insulated, parochial attitudes toward race, while denying that racism is endemic and institutionalized, even in the arts. A *Boston Globe* survey published last month found that the governing structures of the city’s cultural institutions are overwhelmingly white.

“It is amazing to me that there is even a public narrative that the [school incident] was a shocking singular event when something like that happens at every single cultural institution across the city,” said Makeeba McCreary, the MFA’s chief of learning and community engagement. “For a young person of color, Boston is fraught with moments like that, whether perceived or real.” McCreary, who had no background in museum work, said she took the job because Teitelbaum convinced her “he was absolutely ready to be courageous and take on a culture shift that is seismic. There aren’t a lot of folks who are willing to invite that disruption into their world.”

There’s no question that visitors to the MFA today have a much different experience than they would have had five years ago – and not just because parts of the museum are closed, due to COVID-19. There are new acquisitions by artists of color, women, self-taught artists and Indigenous artists. Labels are being updated to address stereotypes in images as well as images that aren’t there at all: An empty frame in the *Eve of Revolution* Gallery acknowledges those who contributed to the nation’s founding but are left out the visual record because of their race or class.

Along with new exhibits of Monet and Cezanne, there’s a groundbreaking, eye- and ear-popping show called “Writing the Future: Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Generation” which brings together assertive work by the late New York graffiti prodigy Jean-Michel Basquiat with work by his peers, connecting it to the music and

pop culture that inspired them. In conjunction with the show, the MFA welcomed two Black Boston artists-in-residence and commissioned an outdoor community mural project on the exterior of a Boston high school, and a map of other murals within walking distance of the MFA.

Another project is “Black Histories, Black Futures,” an exhibit of 20th-century work by artists of color curated entirely by teens, the result of a new partnership with Boston youth-empowerment organizations. “We were able to give the students pretty free rein [of the MFA’s collection],” Teitelbaum said. “They saw things and responded to works of art that frankly their eyes helped us to see.”

Teitelbaum’s goal of re-contextualizing parts of the MFA’s collection also applies to its *Judaica*, one of the museum’s newest areas of collecting which got a huge boost a few years ago with a gift from Oklahoma collector Lynn Schusterman who donated a much-welcomed gift of 121 decorative and ritual objects spanning three centuries; prior to this there had been only 12 at the MFA. The collection now includes art in all media including ritual items, textiles, ketubot, ancient coins, and Hanukkah lamps, and continues to grow, said Simona Di Nepi, the first full-time curator of *Judaica*. Among her acquisitions are a “subversive” Passover Hagaddah, and feminist Jewish ritual objects including a decorative arm bracelet that evokes tefillin.

“To me this is underrepresented Jewish work,” she said. “What we don’t have yet is queer [*Judaica*] – that’s the next step.”

Currently, Judaic art is displayed in nine galleries, across different periods and cultures. “The whole rationale is to integrate it throughout the galleries,” said Di Nepi. “The objects tell the world that Jewish art speaks the language of where it comes from, very much like Jews. I’m an Italian Jew and I speak Hebrew with an Italian accent. The same thing happens with objects. Objects made in a certain place speak *Judaica* with the accent of that place.”

On the face of it, the newly-acquired Kurdish Shabbat cloth may not have much in common with items in the Basquiat show, like a leather jacket tagged in spray

paint. But there is a common thread. Said Di Nepi: “The bottom line is that it’s all about inclusivity.”

“The notion of expanding beyond the traditional has been a kernel of thinking at the Museum for a long time,” Teitelbaum said. “But I come with a little bit of urgency around it. I think our communities are complex and diverse in so many ways, and yet museums have been relatively slow in developing experiences, narratives, points of engagement that truly acknowledge that. There is no singular value in having a great collection unless it’s relevant and active in the lives of the community.”

The MFA’s annual Hanukkah celebration, in partnership with the Jewish Arts Collaborative – which draws 2,000 people – was ranked by Martha Stewart as one of the eight best Hanukkah celebrations in the country.

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Culture

How ‘Big Mouth’ became bigger than me

By PJ Grisar

When we last left our heroes, a sinkhole had swallowed much of the state of Florida. They escaped unscathed, parting a tidal wave with the help of a Menopause Banshee voiced by Carol Kane. Of course it was “Big Mouth” – and a Passover episode.

The animated series, which debuted its fourth season on Netflix Dec. 4, has long had an affinity for this type of storytelling, marrying paranormal conceits with reproductive change and a dash of Yiddishkeit. Grounding all this insanity is a homegrown specificity that begins where I myself did: the Jewish milieu of Westchester County, New York.

Two of the show’s creators, Nick Kroll and Andrew Goldberg – who share first names with the main characters – went to the Solomon Schechter School of Westchester in White Plains, a 30-minute drive from my own public school in Millwood. The fictional Westchester town of Bridgeton in “Big Mouth” looks a lot like the one where I grew up, and its schoolyard dynamics are probably closer to that of my youth than that of either Kroll or Goldberg.

Bridgeton Middle School is secular, like my own Seven Bridges Middle School, but is unmistakably Jewish in its character – the kind of place where “JAP” was a known, self-effacing acronym – not a slur – and one’s social calendar and status was built around b’nai mitzvah invitations.

I would appear to be the ideal viewer for “Big Mouth;” the answer to its constant question of a target audience with its puzzling blend of important life lessons, young characters and TV-MA-caliber lewdness. I was, for a while. Now, in this latest season, I feel too close to the material and I’m ready at last to let go.

Yes, I still smile at the nods to Rye Playland – a place of pilgrimage for most Westchester tweens, replete

with myths of decapitations, drownings and impending rollercoaster collapse. But I also quibble at the show's design of the Metro-North trains that idle at non-terminal stations waiting to admit passengers.

[Animators, I, a former weekly ticket holder, am free for consultation next time.]

These nitpicks come in the same episode, "The Funeral," which should have been the successor to last season's celebrated Pesach special, "Florida."

In the previous episode, Andrew Glouberman [John Mulaney] shuns his usual Fosse choreography self-pleasure routine moments before his father receives a call telling him that Andrew's Zayde died. Andrew believes superstitiously, that his hasty masturbation caused his death.

Cut to the arrival of Uncle Skip [David Cross], who chose to drive Zayde's body from the condo in Florida up to Westchester in the back of a Jeep Rambler to save money on airfare. Yet, for someone so thrifty, Skip's choice of casket is an odd one: a polished wood and metal affair, no doubt a bit pricier than the traditional Jewish option of a simple pine box.

Later at the service at Temple Beth Amphetamine (yes), we see that Zayde was buried in a suit and was left in a side room in an open casket, not, it would seem, for identification purposes. Clearly this isn't a family hung up on halacha. That's fine, but I would think the creators would know enough not to present viewers with the image that follows.

Back in her hometown for the funeral, Jessi [Jessi Klein] hallucinates that the rabbi transforms into a kippah- and tallit-wearing "anxiety mosquito," that peppers her with agita before departing with a hearty "Shabbat Shalom." In the past, Kroll and Goldberg have revealed an awareness of the antisemitic sentiment their show generates online – and skewered it to great effect.

This makes it all the more baffling that they would feed these trolls an animation of a parasitic insect in traditional Jewish garb. Thankfully, I've yet to see any memes.

And yet, while this season – with its excursions to the

near future and expansion of an already unwieldy menagerie of Milnesque avatars of distress and mania – fell short for me, it provides in other, more urgent ways. Ways that don't cater so explicitly to me.

A new character, Natalie [Josie Totah], is perhaps the highwater mark for trans representation in adult animation, voiced and written by trans women.

I wondered how the show would handle a much-reported shift in the voiceover cast, with white Jewish actress Jenny Slate stepping down from her role as the biracial Missy Foreman-Greenwald. The result of that transition gave the character the season's best arc. On a trip to Atlanta, Missy grapples with the expectations of the Black side of her family and the discomfort of her white mom after she rejects Tom's of Maine all-in-one shampoo, conditioner, body wash – and paint-stripper, probably – to braid her hair.

Following some fourth-wall-breaking from Slate over the inappropriateness of her casting (a far better version of that "Simpsons" gaffe) and a fantastic musical number about code switching, Ayo Edebiri makes her debut as the new Missy a funhouse mirror sequence of resolved, multifarious identity that is at once moving and insanely bizarre.

I can't split hairs with these moments, as they don't speak to my experience. But judging by some of the online response, they seem to be resonating with the people they should.

Since 2017, I've wondered who this show was for before deciding it was for me – a white Jew from Westchester with a sophomoric sense of humor. This time around, "Big Mouth" expanded its universe beyond my small quarter of the world. I can't say it's not a welcome change.

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Opinion

The right demonized journalists. Now they're turning on scientists.

By Aviya Kushner

I am no longer shocked when I receive an email with a photo of my face super-imposed on an image of crematoria; like many other Jewish writers, and many other women journalists, disgusting harassment is the norm. But now, it's scientists who are becoming a primary target; a chilling new article in *The Boston Globe* detailed the mental-health consequences on epidemiologists, who while trying to save us are being subjected to relentless threats.

The threat faced by scientists and journalists coalesced for me in a recent, heart-wrenching op-ed by Univision anchor Jorge Ramos, who was ejected from a news conference by President Trump in 2015. "We journalists should have been tougher on Mr. Trump, questioning his every lie and insult. We should not have let him get away with his racism and xenophobia," Ramos writes. "We should never again allow someone to create an alternative reality in order to seize the presidency."

While Ramos primarily addresses journalists in his piece, there's a connection between his Op-Ed and the *Boston Globe's* reporting on the harassment of epidemiologists, and it's this: Everyday citizens need to stand up for those whose job it is to disseminate knowledge.

As the prominent historian and Yale University professor Timothy Snyder points out in his 2017 book "Twenty Lessons About Tyranny from the Twentieth Century," one of the goals of authoritarians is to discredit sources of information, such as scientists and journalists, so that they – authoritarians – are the only source of information.

"To abandon facts is to abandon freedom," Snyder warns. "If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power because there is no basis upon which to do so."

We are currently living through an attack not just on

facts but the idea of knowledge. And we are also in the thick of a parallel, years-long attempt to convince Americans that violent threats, and violence, are inevitable – and acceptable.

Just a few short years ago, Americans watched in horror as the Islamic State beheaded journalists. Then, it was impossible to imagine an American President repeatedly reviving Stalin's language – "enemy of the people" – to describe the free press, a term which has its own antisemitic history. As Neil Gregor, history professor at the University of Southampton, noted in his book "How to Read Hitler," the manner in which Nazis described "journalists" and "Jews" were often interchangeable: "When Hitler mentions the malign influence of the press he is also thinking of Jews," Gregor writes.

Today, we are witnessing an ever-expanding definition of "malign influence," with scientists at the top of the list. In 2020, Dr. Anthony Fauci has been threatened with beheading.

Fortunately, Fauci is continuing his work. But others haven't. The *Boston Globe* reports that Dr. Caroline Buckee, a Harvard epidemiologist who published over a dozen papers on the coronavirus, suspended her Twitter account after her feed, most of which was pandemic advice and research, "triggered a cascade of sexist and personal attacks that threatened her and her family."

While we may have felt powerless to stop the beheading of journalist heroes like Steven Satloff and James Foley, we are not powerless now.

Everyday citizens must come up with ways to support knowledge. If you can afford it, subscribe to multiple sources of news. Recognize that if you don't fund information, it may not be there. Give subscriptions to

reputable news sources as gifts and donate subscriptions to high schools. Encourage students you know to study history, whether they are required to or not; the study of history has declined everywhere except at top research universities, but history isn't a luxury.

And when you give to a food bank, consider pairing your donation with giving to an "information bank". Think of supporting local news and public radio, or organizations that protect journalists.

You can also help by sharing legitimate scientific information with your networks, and openly expressing gratitude and respect for scientists whenever possible. Be the counterpoint to the hordes – yes, hordes – of people harassing epidemiologists.

Write a letter to your local paper expressing thanks for the people working seven days a week on vaccines. Send a handwritten card to the infectious-disease specialist answering questions on local radio, and hope it drowns out the hate-mail they have likely received. Buy books by scientists for your personal library; prominently display them in your home. Promote curiosity by buying scientific games for children.

It's strange to consider that knowledge needs a defense, but it does.

Ein somchin al hanes, the Talmud insists: Don't rely on miracles. When you personally champion science and defend those who devote their lives to the pursuit of truth, the life you save may be your own. As Hanukkah begins, make your defense of knowledge your gift to the world.

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Aviya Kushner is The Forward's language columnist and the author of The Grammar of God [Spiegel & Grau] and Wolf Lamb Bomb [forthcoming, Orison Books]. Follow her on Twitter @AviyaKushner

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

News

'I'm considered a traitor.' Orthodox Jewish Biden voters are feeling the heat

By Dahlia Scheindlin

Some of the most moving conversations I have had recently were with voters who left their political home on the right, including Orthodox Jews, and voted for Joe Biden. Why did their stories make such an impression on me? Their reasons for rejecting Trump weren't unusual. They eschewed his character, his policies, his populism and divisiveness, his cruelty towards the oppressed or weaker groups in America – just like most voters who rejected Trump.

But their voices rang in my ears. Each bore the wrath of their closest communities, or at the very least faced conflict within them.

- Shmuly Yanklowitz, a 39-year old Orthodox rabbi in Scottsdale, near Phoenix, lived in a caravan hilltop yeshiva in the West Bank in his 20s. Over the years, he built a life committed to liberal causes, running Jewish education and social justice programs. He voted for Biden.

- Keith Mines, 61, is a retired U.S. diplomat who comes from Kansas and Utah and has Mormon roots. He served in Special Forces in the Army – "all the ingredients of a Republican" – but became skeptical of Republican leadership during the second Iraq War. A self-described Reagan Republican in the past, he said he'd now be a Romney or McCain Republican. He shuffled his vote in recent cycles between Democrats to a third-party candidate in 2016, but came out heavily for Biden in 2020. The complications of shifting one's political outlook are not only a Jewish problem.

- Malka Simkovich, an Orthodox Jewish professor of Jewish Studies who is also my second cousin, lives in

a Modern Orthodox community where many support President Donald Trump. She is 38 and said she has moved leftward from that starting point, voting Democrat in the 2020 presidential race for the first time. At this point, she said, she feels at home neither in the Republican nor the Democratic Party.

Keith stopped engaging with friends on these issues, including with his Army buddies and his in-laws. Shmuly said he was a “punching bag for Jewish Trumpers.” But it was worse than that. “In Orthodoxy,” he said, “I’m considered a traitor.”

Malka absorbed accusations that she was unappreciative of all that the Trump administration had done for Jews and for Israel.

Each at some point was forced to confront what their political, religious, family and social communities really stood for.

According to a J Street survey, nearly 80% of Orthodox Jews voted for Trump. “I’m depressed that you only know two religious American Jews who are pro-Biden,” Malka wrote to me. “It concerns me that some Jews who support Trump are willing to overlook his treatment of other minorities.”

Malka worried that Trump treated Jews as separate from the American political community, whose loyalty could be secured through special-interest favors.

Shmuly summarized the attitude of some Jews as a matter of loyalty to Trump. “You’re a traitor if you’re not robustly pro-Trump, because if you love your people, you’re pro-Trump, everything we need, he will provide.” But Judaism for him is first of all caring for the weak. “One of the most central Jewish values is to stand with the marginalized and the oppressed and raise a voice of conscience against injustice,” he said.

Keith felt that the current incarnation of Republican populism pushed him even further from the GOP. After working on Venezuela for three years at the State Department, he concluded that the idea of a “socialist catastrophe” there was misleading, and clarifying.

“The real problem is populism,” he said. For Trump, “his whole political philosophy is dividing people against

each other, galvanizing support around one group in opposition to everyone else.” He worried that the Trump road leads to civil war.

These voters share disappointment with their political homes – dissonance, distance, and maybe loneliness. These are not rebels who have fled their environment. Precisely for that reason, I wonder if they might be all the more alone.

Shmuly described his response to anger from Orthodox Jews. “One of the reasons it hurts personally so much is, I can tap into the world. I lived in Haredi world, and the religious Zionist world. I totally can see where they’re coming from,” he said, referring more broadly to his support for progressive policies.

He also believes there are many Orthodox rabbis with similarly progressive views who do not make their views public. “That would be incredibly discrediting to their leadership and standing.”

Which is harder, I asked Shmuly: To suffer the hurtful criticism and alienation right inside one’s own community, or to stay silent and avoid considerable personal and professional risk? Shmuly fell silent for a long pause. Finally he said he sympathizes with those “who feel so strongly about their moral compass, [but they are] so silent in their voice,” due to pressures of their communities, donors or rabbinical authorities who might affect their careers.

I admire these three for making their views public, for confronting the communities they hold most dear. Growing up in New York of the 1970s and 80s, I felt out of step politically. I gravitated leftward, as the country celebrated the Reagan years and the Jewish community seemed content to glorify Israel while priding itself on liberal values in America. Rather than stay and argue, I left. Living in Israel might sound tough for left-wingers, but we find each other, and we have made one another our home.

Shmuly said he knows American Orthodox Jews who are moving away as well. “I have so many friends, colleagues who have left Orthodoxy over [the Trump] years,” he said. “The teachers they looked to for moral guidance, all of a sudden either fell silent out of fear,

or celebrated what was for them the antithesis of all that is good.”

If everyone had stuck to traditional party affiliations, or if independents never changed their minds, Trump would not have won in 2016, nor lost in 2020. If America is to avoid a reversion to Trumpism, crossover voters like these have our fate in their hands.

Where will those who are searching for new political communities go?

The American left today feels so much more robust, and much more left, than when I was growing up, which I celebrate. Black Lives Matter was a watershed – it captured a zeitgeist I did not experience. There is now a full menu of Jewish left-wing activism, from J Street to If Not Now, all the way to Jewish Voices for Peace, and a vast array of organizations in between. Left-wing causes are advancing, on the left. But that’s no longer enough.

The discussion over America’s fate has become so toxic the two sides cannot break out of themselves. Keith, the former diplomat, said, “People really hate each other...that frightens me, I’ve seen that in Afghanistan, Iraq, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Frankly, people are educated, trained, to have disgust for the other side.”

He views the vitriol as a bipartisan syndrome: “On the Democrat side, they have a hard time looking at Trump voters as anything other than crazy.”

Who breaks the cycle, and what if no one does?

The question itself is a luxury. America may have avoided the much-feared civil war, but the deeper contest is far from over, and allies can emerge unpredictably. Keith grew up in Kansas and went to school in Utah, his roots are Mormon. But his vote changed with his experiences and critical perspective.

Hannah Berman is a 78-year old Orthodox Jewish voter in Woodmere, Long Island, with a column at the Five Towns Jewish Times. She voted for Trump almost entirely based on American domestic policy issues – she is not an automatic, Israel-focused Trump or GOP supporter, and she supported Obama in 2008. Though

disappointed by the 2020 results, she told me that “If [Biden] is declared president, [then] he’s my president,” The leftward direction of the Democratic Party is “upsetting, unnerving,” but her vote has moved over time, and can move again.

In a recent New York Times oped, Wajahat Ali argued against solicitous interactions with Trump voters: “It’s not worth it.” He talked and listened; the interlocutors did not change their minds. But it sounds like his only real goal was to convince them; in that case, anything short of a St. Paul-like conversion was a failure.

But in a series of long interviews I’ve conducted with Israeli Jews who shifted to the left – many of them also gave up religious for secular life – very few point to a moment that changed everything, not even a lecture by a columnist at a liberal newspaper. Instead, they recalled events that marked points in transitions that took years. Nearly all told me about exposure to new people, new friends, new ideas, new communities.

Instead of proselytizing to opponents – a distinctly un-Jewish activity – liberals of any persuasion should be open to anyone asking questions, perhaps seeking a new political home or those who stay put and open needed questions at home. Either way, the public imperative is to embrace them and listen or talk, as equals. Liberals, left-wingers, compassionate, peace-loving activists should do that best. It’s up to us to stop the cycle.

If people come with questions, even if they voted for the unthinkable, we should welcome them, not triumphantly, but gratefully. After all, there is no victory yet. Without new alliances, I’m not sure I want to stick around to see January 20, 2025.