



**Forward**

**WEEKEND**

**READS**

**7.15.22**

*Pictured:*  
George Michaels

# How a Jewish legislator's vote legalized abortion in New York in 1970

By Bonnie Eissner

George M. Michaels was a Jewish legislator representing a heavily Catholic district in New York when efforts to legalize abortion in the state came to a head in April 1970. Priests and nuns paced the chamber floor; Michaels' daughter-in-law and one of his sons, who was in rabbinical school, urged him to vote yes.

With tears in his eyes, knowing he would lose Democratic Party support for the next election, Michaels cast the deciding "yes" vote.

"If I am ever going to have peace in my family ... I cannot go back to [them] on the first night of Passover and tell them that George Michaels defeated this bill," he told the stunned chamber.

More than 50 years later, Michaels' son, the rabbi, and his granddaughters reflected on his legacy and the ramifications of that fateful vote. The story of how the vote came about is even more compelling in light of the end of *Roe v. Wade* and New York Gov. Kathy Hochul pledging to preserve abortion rights as states across the country race to end or restrict them.

## **At first, bowing to political pressure**

Born and raised in New York City, the son of Polish immigrants who were secular Jews, Michaels moved to Auburn, New York, a small city in the Finger Lakes region, after marrying his college sweetheart. He had served in the New York State Assembly for 10 years by 1970 when a bill to legalize abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy came up for a vote.

A more liberal version of the bill, without the 24-week limit, passed 31-26 in the state Senate on March 18 with bipartisan support. The Assembly took up the amended bill on

March 30, but it failed to pass. Michaels voted against it at the request of Cayuga County Democratic officials, even though he personally supported giving women the right to choose.

The bill's primary sponsor, Republican Constance E. Cook, maneuvered another vote on the bill on April 9 using a parliamentary procedure. The Catholic Church had ramped up opposition after being caught off guard by Senate approval in March. During hours of contentious, emotional debate, legislators spoke about their personal convictions and the pressures they faced from constituents and the church. A few members switched their votes. The bill needed 76 votes to pass and was about to go down in defeat, with an even 74 votes for it and 74 against it.

### **'I must keep peace in my family'**

Michaels was initially among those voting against the measure, but as the roll call was ending, he asked to change his vote. "I fully appreciate that this is the termination of my career," he said, pale and fighting back tears as TV cameras turned to him.

The New York Times reported that he sobbed as he told the chamber about the tension in his family, including his son, a student at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, begging him not to be the one who defeated the bill. "I must keep peace in my family," he said.

That son, Rabbi James Michaels, now a retired chaplain, remembers asking his dad a week before the abortion vote what he planned to do. His dad said he had to vote against the legislation. "I understand," the rabbi recalled telling his father, "as long as your vote isn't the one that defeats the bill."

George Michaels' daughter-in-law Sarah, who was married to his other son Lee at the time, was even more persuasive, according to family members. A college friend of Sarah's had nearly died from an illegal abortion, and as a social worker, she saw how difficult it was for single mothers to raise children they hadn't planned to have. Sarah asked her father-in-law how the vote would go, and he assured her that the abortion bill would pass that year or the next. As James Michaels recalled, she then asked him, "How many more women are going to die or be mutilated because of our dumb old legislature?"

The arrival of George Michaels' first granddaughter two years before the vote also weighed heavily on him, he told family members years after the fateful vote. His granddaughter Dania Schulman remembers him saying that he didn't want any of his granddaughters or future great-granddaughters forced into a back-alley abortion to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. "That is why he made that decision," Schulman said.

## **The end of a political career**

Ten days after the vote, on April 19, members of the Cayuga County Democratic Committee withdrew their endorsement of Michaels. He lost the Democratic primary in June.

Friends whom he and his wife had known for decades turned on them. His law firm of 40 years disbanded. He went into practice with his son Lee.

“I remember hearing stories about my grandmother and grandfather receiving really horrible hate mail,” Michaels’ oldest granddaughter, Becca Kornet, said. “They had a police detail around the house to make sure people were safe.”

Eventually, though, things turned around. Former clients returned. “His life wasn’t over,” granddaughter Anna Michaels-Boffy said. “People did think of him as a brave person.” The hate mail lasted for weeks, but the letters of praise and thanks continued for the rest of his life.

In 1971, the New York Society for Ethical Culture gave Michaels its Humanitarian Award. In accepting the honor, he refuted “the myth that I made a great personal sacrifice,” the Times reported. “I realize that I was given an opportunity that few men in or out of public life ever attain — the opportunity to shape events rather than merely react to them,” he said.

The next year the Assembly voted to repeal the abortion law, but Gov. Nelson Rockefeller vetoed the bill. In 1973, with *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court protected the right to abortion before 24 weeks.

## **‘The legislator who changed abortion law’**

The story of George Michaels’ abortion vote looms large in his family. “I don’t remember when someone told me for the first time,” said Kornet. “It was always part of everything. I mean, it’s impacted me in so many ways. For one, I’m very politically active and very active in social justice initiatives, and abortion rights are at the top.”

When Michaels died in 1992, at age 82, the Times, in its obituary, called him the “legislator who changed abortion law.” He is survived by 23 grandchildren and great-grandchildren, many of whom, Schulman said, “are so fiercely passionate about women’s rights.”

Because of Michaels and other legislators and activists, New York became and continues to be a haven for women seeking safe, legal abortions. He upheld abortion rights in defiance of a powerful church, and he chose inner peace and progressive

change over politics. A tribute to him on display at New York's Equal Rights Heritage Center in Auburn says Michaels "made history" with his vote, and asks: "What is the use of getting elected or reelected if you don't stand for something?"

# Why did a former Oath Keeper leave over Holocaust denialism? Because of his Jewish family.

By Rob Eshman

Jason Van Tatenhove testified before the Jan. 6 committee that he left the Oath Keepers, the far-right militia group that took part in the attack on the Capitol, after hearing some of its members express Holocaust denial over coffee in 2018.

“That was for me something I just could not abide.”

Why, I asked him over the phone the day after his July 13 testimony, was that the final straw?

“Because I thought of my Jewish family,” he said.

I understand life is messy and complex and no one is exactly what they seem. But I wasn't expecting a tattooed former militia member to be talking to me from a kitchen table in suburban New Jersey, alongside his Jewish aunt and cousin.

Van Tatenhove's uncle, Toki Tolkach, married Robin Mintz, a Jewish woman from northern New Jersey. Van Tatenhove himself, who is 48, grew up in Green Pond, New Jersey, where one of his best friends, from age 2, was his cousin Sarah Coen Cwiak, who is also 48.

“You know, they're married into the family,” he said, “but they're still family.”

Van Tatenhove, a former Oath Keepers spokesman, said he was living rent-free with his wife and two of his four daughters on a Montana property that belonged to one of the group's wealthy supporters.

“It’s kind of like where the who’s who of the extremist movements live,” he said.

That day in 2018, he said, four or five Oath Keepers were meeting in the small deli section in the back of Stein’s Market in the town of Eureka, near the Canadian border.

“I just kind of walked over to where they were and they were literally speaking out loud about how the Holocaust just had not happened, or if it had happened had been greatly exaggerated,” he said. “Some of the guys were just saying that the messaging had gotten backwards and that there were concentration camps for Americans.”

He went home and told his wife he could no longer work for the Oath Keepers.

“We had a family meeting,” he told me. “I didn’t know how we’re gonna survive. But we just decided as a family, that’s it, we just can’t do it. I put in my resignation.”

Van Tatenhove said he was drawn to Oath Keepers after the federal government’s 2014 standoff with Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher, and a similar 2015 confrontation at Sugar Pine Mine in Oregon. It was then that Stewart Rhodes, who founded Oath Keepers in 2009, offered Van Tatenhove a full-time job.

“They kind of started off in the early days as educational outreach, talking about constitutional issues,” Van Tatenhove said. “I definitely held my fair share of mistrust of government.”

He said there were no obvious signs he had joined a hate group. Rhodes himself has Mexican heritage, and he knew Van Tatenhove identified as queer.

“Stewart was fine with the fact I was bi or pansexual, and had no problem with it,” Van Tatenhove said.

But his Jewish relatives were never fine with the Oath Keepers.

“The first reaction was, ‘What the f—?!’ his cousin, Coen Cwiak, told me.

“It didn’t line up with who we knew him to be,” added his aunt. “We didn’t know if you’re going off the rails.”

Van Tatenhove, who moved with his mother from New Jersey to Colorado when he was 12, grew up going to Hanukkah celebrations and Passover Seders with the New Jersey relatives, who sometimes celebrated Easter and Christmas with his family.

“We kind of blended the holidays,” Van Tatenhove said.

When he joined the Oath Keepers, Coen Cwiak, “we didn’t confront him,” but “we just kind of kept an eye on things.”

Van Tatenhove sees the Oath Keepers growing racism as opportunistic. “I don’t think Stewart is racist in his core,” he said. “I think he just will cater to whatever will bring him the most money and the most influence and power, which is almost more dangerous. You know, he just has no moral anchor there.”

Over the years, conspiracy theories and racist ideology began to ricochet around the group’s social media: “the great replacement theory,” for example, which posits that people of color are vying to replace white people in spheres of power and influence in a scheme orchestrated by Jews, and charges that George Soros and Warren Buffett control the government.

“It was a lot of, ‘They’re going to come and round up all the white conservative Christians and put them into reeducation camps in deserted Walmarts,’” he said.

Looking back, Van Tatenhove said it was easy to see what lured him and others into the group. For one, it was an adventure.

“I flew to work in a Huey and got to travel all over the country,” he said, “and be in the middle of these things that got all this national attention.”

He was also in an echo chamber, surrounded by like-minded white, Christian conservatives, and immersed in alt-right social media, which he called a “blast furnace” of hate and conspiracy.

“I mean, that’s the 500-pound gorilla in the room,” he said. “The algorithms just really weaponized this type of rhetoric. And if you’re in that echo chamber, it’s hard to hear any voice outside of that.”

Now that he’s outside the blast furnace, Van Tatenhove has found connections with people he previously vilified: journalists reporting on hate groups, professors studying extremism, even a federal agent once sent to northern Montana to keep tabs on him.

“He became one of my best friends,” Van Tatenhove said. “To this day, we still talk, and our kids are still friends.”

Then there is Raphael Prober, a Washington lawyer and former board member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, who helped Van Tatenhove pro bono prepare his testimony for the committee.

It was Prober who arranged for Van Tatenhove and his cousin to visit the museum in Washington the day before his testimony this week.

There, they saw a pile of shoes taken off the bodies of murdered Jews.

“For me the smell just triggered things emotionally,” he said, apologizing for tearing up. “It was just, you know, all the shoes.”

He told his cousin afterward that the faces in the photographs of members of Hitler Youth seemed frighteningly familiar.

“I saw those same faces, those same eyes of those Nazis,” he explained. “I’ve seen them — but in these patriots, as they call themselves, these militia guys. Like it was the same expressions. It was the same.”

His cousin accompanied him the next day for moral support to the committee room. I asked if she were the woman I noticed on camera, sitting to his left, wearing a T-shirt featuring a photo of Keanu Reeves.

“It’s me,” Coen Cwiak said. “But it’s Jason’s shirt. We needed a little Keanu energy to bring humanity together.”

# **When almost nobody else would, Hank Greenberg backed a Black player fighting for free agency**

By Frederic J. Frommer

When a Black outfielder fought for his economic freedom against baseball owners a half-century ago, Hank Greenberg, the Jewish Hall of Famer, was one of a handful of former players who sided with him — even though he had been a baseball executive after he retired.

In 1970, Curt Flood challenged Major League Baseball’s reserve clause, which bound players to their teams until released or traded. His lonely crusade made Flood a pariah in the sport, and led to death threats. The Supreme Court ruled against him 50 years ago last month, but Flood’s case helped lead to free agency a few years later.

When Flood’s antitrust case started out in a federal courtroom in New York in 1970, no current player testified on his behalf, fearful of retribution.

But Greenberg, known as the “Hebrew Hammer” playing mostly for the Detroit Tigers in the 1930s and ’40s, backed Flood at the trial. So did Jackie Robinson, who had broken baseball’s color barrier in 1947, and Jim Brosnan, who rocked the baseball boat by writing a candid, behind-the-scenes book about the life of baseball players.

Flood had been a star outfielder with the St. Louis Cardinals in the 1960s. After the team traded him to the Philadelphia Phillies in 1969, Flood wrote a letter to baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn, asking that he be declared a free agent instead.

“After 12 years in the Major Leagues, I do not feel that I am a piece of property to be bought and sold irrespective of my wishes,” Flood wrote. “I believe that any system

which produces that result violates my basic rights as a citizen and is inconsistent with the laws of the United States and of the several States.”

He sat out the 1970 season and pursued his case against MLB. At Flood’s trial that May, Greenberg testified that “the reserve clause is obsolete, antiquated and definitely needs change.” His appearance against baseball owners was striking because he had been a part owner and general manager of two MLB teams himself after his playing days were over. His fellow investor with those teams, Bill Veeck, who had been the first owner to sign a Black player in the American League, also testified on Flood’s side.

“We need more harmonious relations between players and owners, and we need to repair baseball’s image with the public,” Greenberg said. “The reserve clause has been in the news since 1923, and has brought objections from players, and confused the public. We must recognize that times have changed and must go forward harmoniously and the first step, the last step, is to abolish the existing reserve clause and work out a substitute.”

Under cross-examination, he discussed the issue as a prospective owner: “I’d be happy to invest in a club tomorrow if there were no reserve clause. The owners should have some control over players, but it should be limited,” and suggested a five-year contract would be fair to both sides — close to the six years that teams currently have control of players before they can seek free agency.

Robinson, who was active in the civil rights movement, called the reserve clause one-sided in favor of the owners, and argued that it “should be modified to give the player some control over his destiny. Whenever there is a one-sided situation, you have a serious, serious problem. If the reserve clause is not modified I think you will have a serious strike by the players.”

### **A drawn-out legal battle**

A few months after Flood’s trial, Judge Irving Ben Cooper ruled against him in his antitrust challenge, which wasn’t a surprise, since the Supreme Court had granted baseball an exemption from antitrust laws in 1922.

“Judge Cooper only held that it is up to the Supreme Court to overrule the Supreme Court,” said the baseball union’s executive director, Marvin Miller, adding that his side would appeal. “I think everyone knew that it would be very difficult for a district court to overrule the Supreme Court.”

(Cooper, Miller, and an attorney for Flood, former Supreme Court justice Arthur Goldberg, were all Jewish.)

The ruling was upheld by a federal appeals court in April 1971 — the same month that Flood quit the sport after an abortive comeback effort with the Washington Senators, when he hit just .200 in 13 games. So even though his career was over, his lawsuit was heading to the main stage: the Supreme Court.

Goldberg, who had stepped down from the court in 1965 at President Lyndon B. Johnson's urging to serve as the U.S. representative to the United Nations, represented Flood at oral arguments in March 1972. But he didn't have a good day. In his book, "A Well-Paid Slave: Curt Flood's Fight for Free Agency in Professional Sports," Brad Snyder wrote that Goldberg gave a "feeble factual recitation" of Flood's career, and that Goldberg's friend, Justice William Brennan, cringed during his presentation. Goldberg betrayed his lack of baseball knowledge by referring to the several "Golden Gloves competitions" Flood had won.

In June 1972, the Supreme Court ruled 5-3 against Flood, upholding baseball's quirky antitrust exemption. Writing for the majority, Justice Harry Blackmun — who occupied Goldberg's old seat — said that although the original 1922 ruling was an aberration, "it is an aberration that has been with us now for half a century, one heretofore deemed fully entitled to the benefit of stare decisis, and one that has survived the Court's expanding concept of interstate commerce." (Stare decisis is a legal principle that means to let the decision stand.)

Flood's career and case were both over, but not the cause. Having shined a light on an archaic practice, his challenge helped build momentum for its elimination, and in 1975, an arbitrator struck down the reserve clause. Free agency soon followed.

"I doubt Curt or anyone — on or off the field in any sport — could fully contemplate the significance of the stance he took back in 1969," MLB Players Association executive director Tony Clark said in 2019, on the 50th anniversary of Flood's letter to Kuhn, "but as a child and student of the civil rights movement, Curt had a heightened sense of awareness about justice and fairness."

Years after Flood's crusade, Congress recognized his contribution to the sport when it passed the Curt Flood Act of 1998, which chiseled away at the sport's antitrust exemption by making actions affecting major league baseball players' employment subject to antitrust laws.

Flood, who died in 1997 at the age of 59, is recognized today as one of the key figures in athlete activism. As USA Today baseball columnist Bob Nightengale wrote recently:

"There is Jackie Robinson, who broke baseball's color barrier in 1947. There is Larry Doby, who did the same in the American League a few months later. And there is Curt

Flood, whose act of bravery will never be forgotten, and an integral chapter in the Civil Rights era.”

### **Bond between Greenberg and Robinson**

It was fitting that Robinson and Greenberg joined forces on behalf of another lonely player. Their careers overlapped by just one year — when Greenberg was capping his playing career as a 36-year-old first baseman for the Pittsburgh Pirates, and Robinson was a rookie with the Brooklyn Dodgers. But Greenberg, who faced antisemitism from players and fans during his career, quickly won over Robinson.

The two men collided at first base during a series in May, one month into Robinson’s trying first season. Robinson encountered countless incidents like this by malevolent opponents, but when he reached first base the next time, Greenberg told him: “I forgot to ask if you were hurt in that play.”

Robinson said he was OK.

“Stick in there,” Greenberg told him. “You’re doing fine. Keep your chin up.”

“Class tells,” Robinson said after the game. “It sticks out all over Mr. Greenberg.”

“Jackie Robinson, first Negro player in the major leagues, has picked a diamond hero — Hank Greenberg — rival first baseman of the Pittsburgh Pirates,” The Associated Press reported at the time.

In his autobiography, Greenberg recalled that during that series in Pittsburgh, his Southern teammates yelled at Robinson, “Hey coal mine, hey coal mine, hey you black coal mine, we’re going to get you! You ain’t gonna play no baseball!”

Greenberg wrote that he couldn’t help admire Robinson as he ignored the taunts:

“Jackie turned his head. He was like a prince. He kept his chin up and kept playing as hard as he could. He was something to admire that afternoon.”

“I identified with Jackie Robinson,” he added. “I had feelings for him because they had treated me the same way. Not as bad, but they made remarks about me being a sheenie and a Jew all the time.”

Four months after the court turned away Flood’s challenge, Robinson died at the age of 53. Greenberg attended the funeral at the Riverside Church in New York, along with Dodgers owner Peter O’Malley and many current and former players.

“Tears clouded the saddened eyes of Peter O’Malley, an Irishman; Hank Greenberg, a Jew; and Pee Wee Reese and Ernie Banks, baseball greats with different colored skins,” the Chicago Tribune reported.

# **Raised without Judaism, Ukraine's Conservative rabbi now leads 5 Jewish communities through war**

By Helen Chervitz

Born and raised in the Crimea in the Soviet era, Rabbi Reuven Stamov knew little of Judaism, and hardly practiced it, but still bore the brunt of antisemitism. Seeing little opportunity in Ukraine, he decided to make aliyah, and prepared by taking Hebrew classes.

As he learned the language, he befriended other Jews who embraced Zionism, but also Judaism, and he grew curious about his faith. After making aliyah in 2003, he studied to be a rabbi and was ordained at Jerusalem's Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, which is affiliated with the Conservative movement, known as Masorti Judaism outside the U.S. He spent nearly a decade in Israel, knowing his future lay elsewhere.

"I knew I would return to Ukraine and develop Conservative Judaism in my native land," said Stamov.

The Conservative movement's footprint in Ukraine had been small. Today Stamov, 48, presides over five Ukrainian Jewish communities — in Kyiv, Odesa, Dnipro, Kharkiv, and Chernivtsi — which include about 300 families.

In February, when Russia invaded Ukraine, Stamov helped dozens of those families to leave the country. And he assured that those who stayed had food, medical care and spiritual support. He and his own family went to Israel, but Stamov returned to Ukraine in time to celebrate Shavuot.

During the holiday, at Masoret, his unassuming synagogue in Kyiv, he talked with Helen Chervitz, the Forward's correspondent in Ukraine, about his drive to strengthen Jewish

life in the country in peace, and now war. He has since returned to Israel, but plans to fly back and remain in Ukraine in the fall, by which time he hopes more of the country's Conservative Jews have also decided to come home.

Translated by Chervitz, this interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Where were you when the Russians invaded on Feb. 24 and what did you decide to do?**

My wife and I were with our three daughters — ages 7, 14, and 16 — in the town of Chernivtsi, in Western Ukraine, preparing for a seminar. Far from the fighting, we were able to quickly organize, and raise money from the global Masorti movement to send people to safety abroad. We urged members of our communities to come to Chernivtsi, and from there we relocated them to Romania, Germany and Israel.

Among the evacuees were women with children. People were crying and traumatized. We organized refugee camps in Chernivtsi, where one of our congregations is located, and in other Western Ukrainian cities — Mukachevo and Lviv. We traveled for four days by bus with a group of 80 families. Some settled in Romania, and others went on to Berlin and Israel.

**You oversee five Conservative synagogues in Ukraine. And your wife, Mihal Stamov, runs several educational and cultural programs within the movement. What's become of your work since the war began?**

When the war broke out, it felt as if the world turned upside down. Our priority became getting people out of war zones, away from the shelling. People panicked, and thought Kyiv would be occupied within days.

Since most of the members of our communities went to Western Ukraine or abroad, we switched to Zoom. We engaged mental health professionals who work online, and restarted our classes on Jewish history and traditions online in March. Now we are trying to organize in-person summer camps for children and adults in Romania and Germany, where most of our members remain.

Despite the war, we have managed to host some gatherings in Europe and in Israel. Last year we won a grant from Limmud, and planned Shabbatons and seminars on Jewish culture in Odesa, Kharkiv, and Chernivtsi. Because of the war, we were able to host only one of the Shabbatons, in Odesa.

**Tell us about the Jews of Ukraine, and your congregation in particular.**

In Ukraine today, Jews aren't connected to Judaism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new generation has been born and raised by parents who could not give them a Jewish upbringing. But their heritage needs to be passed on.

I'd say 90% of Jews in Kyiv aren't affiliated with a synagogue, and many identify as atheist or agnostic. Our members are mostly young, either students or people in their 30s and early 40s. There are about 80 families in Kyiv, mostly middle- or upper-middle class professionals. Our target audience is fairly intellectual.

**I've noticed people becoming more religious during this war. Are you noticing that too?**

I see more people who used to consider themselves atheists. There are no atheists in the trenches. When I look at people in prayer nowadays, I see how sincere and soulful they are, especially when praying for peace. Judaism is an ancient religion, but it can help people cope with the challenges of any time.

**You were raised during the Soviet era — what was your Jewish life like in Ukraine?**

I was born into an absolutely secular family. We observed virtually no religious traditions. I remember my grandmother bringing matzo into the house once a year and we ate it with Easter eggs. What we knew of Judaism was what we were told by antisemites. And we knew we were Jewish by the way others treated us: We had few or no job opportunities, and if you were lucky enough to get a job you wouldn't get a promotion. My parents persuaded me to change my last name from Eisenstein to Stamov so it wouldn't tip people off to my Jewishness. Yet at the university, I did not hide my heritage.

Antisemitism subsided in the Ukraine in the 1990s. I graduated with a degree in engineering, but finding a job was impossible. I realized that what I learned in university was hopelessly outdated. I was also was curious about my faith, and wanted to explore it more deeply. So I decided to leave for Israel.

I prepared by taking Hebrew classes in Simferopol, the second-largest city in Crimea. There I met very interesting people, mostly my age — committed Zionists who were laid back about religion. Sure, they lit candles on Friday nights, but right after this, had a disco party. It all suited me.

Initially, I joined the Reform community, and studied for two years at Machon, which was the movement's school in Moscow. I then returned to Crimea as a regional religious

leader. At that time there were eight Reform communities in Crimea, and all were launched with my help.

### **Why did you switch to Conservative Judaism?**

That's where I feel I belong. I felt uncomfortable inside the Reform movement. I felt a lack of God. In 2002 I was invited to work at the Conservative movement's Rama Yahad sleepaway camp near Kyiv, where I met an activist in the movement, Gilda Katz. Conservatives observe the rules about Shabbat and kashrut, but also embrace modernity, and pluralism. Women's rights are not restricted. One of our female members, Alisa Tzipi Zilbershtein, has been ordained in New York this year, and so our congregation will soon have two rabbis.

### **How has the Conservative movement in the U.S. and the Masorti movement globally responded to the war?**

Masorti Olami — the global council of Masorti and Conservative synagogues — and the Schechter Institute collected donations. Thanks to them, we had money to establish refugee camps and bring people to safety — we're still doing that.

Ukrainian Jewish businessmen donate primarily to Orthodox synagogues. Fundraising on behalf of the Conservative movement in Ukraine is more challenging. We charge congregants a membership fee of \$10 a month. Some give more and those who cannot afford it contribute in other ways — by cleaning, doing repairs, or teaching — all of which strengthens their connection to the community. We also want to help our members become more prosperous, so we're not so dependent on donations from abroad.

### **Do you have a message for American Jews?**

I want to thank them for their ongoing support — and their warnings that we were about to be plunged into war, which many in Ukraine could not imagine would happen. Also, because Russia spreads antisemitic disinformation about Ukraine, it's very important for the American Jewish community to speak out about its support for the country.

# My mezuzah, my religion, myself

By Laura Zinn Fromm

When I first visited the Upper West Side apartment of my college friend who had become a rabbi and married early, I stared at the mezuzah on their doorpost in amazement. I was 24 and couldn't imagine sharing my life with someone so permanently — nor could I imagine announcing my Judaism so publicly.

My friend knit sweaters with intricate patterns and sipped hot tea; I ran miles to discharge my anxiety and gulped iced coffee. Still, we read the same books, lived in the same New York neighborhood and had our first children — both boys — on the same day at the same hospital.

A few months later, in December 1996, she gave me a book, “On the Doorposts of Your House: Prayers and Ceremonies for the Jewish Home,” inscribed: “To my co-mother and dear friend. May this book help you make your way in the Jewish world.”

When my father attempted suicide later that month, I turned to the book for guidance, as it offered prayers on what to do “in contemplation of death” and “illness and recovery.” For the next few years, I paged through the book to process two miscarriages, say kaddish for my father (he died in 2005 from complications of lymphoma ) and recite a psalm at his unveiling.

But it took me a decade to put up a mezuzah, consecrate our home and consider what the phrase “on the doorposts of your house” actually meant.

## **A Jewish life — but no mezuzah**

So much of my life was Jewish. My husband's family fled Nazi Germany; our two sons became b'nai mitzvah and went to Jewish sleep-away camp; I briefly served on the board of our synagogue, Temple B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills, New Jersey. Yet I had trouble proclaiming our home's Jewishness in the town that Philip Roth made famous in his novella, “Goodbye, Columbus.”

Short Hills wasn't particularly receptive to Jews during the 1950s when Roth wrote about Brenda Potemkin's life there, and it was only slightly more receptive when my parents moved there in 1971.

I'd grown up in what was informally known as the "Golden Ghetto" because it was a neighborhood hospitable to minorities (most of our neighbors were Jewish; one family was Indian). My parents weren't observant and didn't put up a mezuzah. They sent my brother and me to a private school filled with tow-headed kids who had Roman numerals after their names, kept sailboats in Jersey Shore towns and belonged to local swim and golf clubs that didn't allow Jewish members.

I did what I could to blend in, which meant looking as boyishly Protestant as I could: I ordered monogrammed belts, Blucher moccasins and pinstripe button downs from the L.L.Bean catalog; wore corduroys and crewneck sweaters; used grosgrain ribbons to pull my hair back; slipped on boat shoes without socks in fall and duck boots with ski socks in winter.

When "The Official Preppy Handbook" came out in 1980, I all but committed it to memory. Then, during a ski trip to Maine, the three friends I was with suddenly stopped talking to me. When I asked one why, she said, "It's something you can't help."

"Is it because I'm Jewish?" I asked. She looked away. She had the same last name as one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. A year later, she and the other two girls left for boarding school.

"If you forget you're a Jew, a gentile will remind you," my father sometimes said. I had been sharply reminded and to my great shame, after the ski trip, I became apprehensive about publicizing my Jewishness.

My husband and I moved back to Short Hills in 1999. Though Short Hills has a substantial Jewish community, we happened to live in a neighborhood where there were no mezuzahs, where people hung beautiful Christmas lights around their front doors and porches. Eventually, a Jewish family moved in and we became close friends.

### **A cream-colored, discreet mezuzah**

Later, some 18 years after we moved in, I bought a mezuzah on a whim, after having lunch with two friends across the street from a Judaica store. One friend was raised Orthodox and kept kosher; the other had just received a mahjong set from the store as a birthday gift.

I stopped by the store after lunch, admired the mezuzahs in the display case, and asked the store's owner if there was a ritual for hanging one up. She said her husband, the rabbi at the local Chabad, would come over and nail it up for me that afternoon, which he did.

It was cream-colored and discreet, and practically blended into our white doorpost.

When we sold our Short Hills home this winter, the buyers, who were Jewish, asked our broker if we would leave the mezuzah. Jewish tradition dictates that you leave a mezuzah behind if a Jewish family is moving in, so of course we said yes.

It both thrilled and saddened me: I had become attached to that mezuzah, as small and subtle as it was. But the apartment we were renting in New York City had a mezuzah glued to the doorpost, so I figured we would make do with that.

We did until we didn't. The apartment's mezuzah was simple wood; it looked like a child had made it. It had been painted brown, the exact color of the doorpost, and was even more inconspicuous than the one we'd left in Short Hills.

### **A mezuzah that proclaimed 'Jews live here'**

I started to yearn for a mezuzah that was bold and flashy, a mezuzah that proclaimed: "Jews live here."

We had moved back to the Upper West Side and despite (or because) of rising antisemitism, I felt more comfortable being Jewish than I ever had. We could see two synagogues from our bedroom window, and I often heard Hebrew spoken in the lobby and elevator. In the package room, when I heard one young Jewish father invite another over for Shabbat, I almost cried: "Invite us too!"

A few days after Passover, I met my rabbi friend from college for a walk in Central Park. The sun was shining and the cherry blossoms were blooming; everything looked pink and fragrant and lush. On the way home, I passed a brownstone that had pots of flowers on the steps leading up to the front door, and a large, thick, golden mezuzah. It proudly said: "Jews live here."

That was it. Two weeks later, I walked to the Jewish museum on the Upper East Side. During the last months of my father's life, he had brought us treasures from the museum's gift shop: A Jerusalem stone challah board; a white, navy and gold platter for the Jewish holidays.

My father was a radiologist who lived and worked in New Jersey. I imagined that he was on the Upper East Side to see a therapist or perhaps was courting a woman who

worked at the museum gift shop. He had otherwise not been a particularly thoughtful gift-giver — hastily written checks, a bag of bagels, six packs of Japanese beer — so I had developed a soft spot for the Jewish museum gift shop.

Behind a glass case, I saw a shiny, hammered gold-tone mezuzah. It sparkled in the sun and cost \$50. The scroll with the Shema prayer to put inside cost \$49.

I ran home and showed the mezuzah to my husband. “I know it’s glitzy but I think it’s fabulous,” I said.

“OK,” he said carefully. I ran up and down the hall to see what our neighbors had. The apartment closest to us had discreet silver-and-lucite; ours looked like Las Vegas by comparison. It glittered like a piece of fine jewelry.

The handyman came to nail up the new mezuzah. He angled it perfectly so the top slanted left towards the door.

I don’t always touch it and kiss my fingers when I enter our apartment, but every time I walk past it, I smile. Hineni, here I am. Jews live here.



JEWISH. INDEPENDENT. NONPROFIT.

## **Create a Future for Courageous Jewish Journalism**

The Forward is the most significant Jewish voice in American journalism. Our outstanding reporting on cultural, social, and political issues inspires readers of all ages and animates conversation across generations. Your support enables our critical work and contributes to a vibrant, connected global Jewish community.

The Forward is a nonprofit association and is supported by the contributions of its readers.

**To donate online visit**

**[Forward.com/donate](https://www.forward.com/donate)**

**To donate by phone, call**

**212-453-9454**