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Pence’s debate fly has a Talmudic ancestor

By PJ Grisar

Yesterday, a fly breached a plexiglass barrier amid a miasma of droplets and planted itself firmly on Vice President Mike Pence’s head for two full minutes as he nattered on about law enforcement during the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate. Surely you noticed, have seen the memes, the takes and the instant Twitter account – but did you relate it to an instance in the Talmud?

While Pence trumpeted the president’s relocation of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and tried to score points by mentioning Trump’s Jewish relatives, we couldn’t help but think of another second-in-command who suffered his own infamous brush with a winged insect.

The Talmud relates that the general Titus, the Emperor Vespasian’s heir, had less respect for Jerusalem than Pence does. He did some stuff there that would make Pence’s head explode.

After conquering the city, “the wicked Titus, who insulted and blasphemed God on High,” took a prostitute into the Temple, entered the Holy of Holies with her and used a Torah scroll for their duvet. The general also caused some property damage, rending the curtain partition between the Sanctuary and Holy of Holies with his sword, causing blood to spew forth from it. God made that bloodbath happen to wig our guy out. Instead, Titus thought he killed God and told everyone about it.

Anyway, onto the insect: Titus was on a boat one day when a wave “rose up against him and threatened to drown him.”

“It seems to me that their God, the God of Israel, has power only in water,” Titus said. “Pharaoh rose against them and He drowned him in water... Here too, He has risen up against me to drown me in water. If He is really mighty, let Him go up on dry land and there wage war against me.”

A Divine Voice responded by saying, essentially, “Okay, man. Ever heard of a gnat? Go on dry land and take that thing on if you think you’re so tough.” Titus did. When he was there on terra firma, a gnat appeared and flew up his nostril and picked at his brain for seven years.

Pence, a committed Evangelical Christian would never knowingly blaspheme God – I mean, he’s been less than respectful to Jews in the past, like when he invited a Messianic Rabbi to pray for victims of the deadliest antisemitic act in American history – but he is, above anything, a man of faith.

But sometimes God uses his smallest creatures to send a message. He did it with locusts and, some say, He pulled a similar gnat-brain trick on Nimrod after he tried to build a tower tall enough to reach heaven. What might Hashem have against Pence? Well, perhaps he resents Pence for using his faith to excuse the Trump administration’s policy of separating children from their parents, for its exacerbation of a pandemic and for Pence’s own championing of conversion therapy.

And we should note, compared to Titus and Nimrod, this fly-on-the-hair thing is kid’s stuff – more of a warning than a punishment. When Titus finally died, they pried open his head and found the gnat was the size of a sparrow or a pigeon and had a copper mouth and iron claws. We think Pence can deal with a little bug (though that inflamed eye was more concerning.)

But back to the story: Titus was walking by a blacksmith shop one day when the sound of the hammering caused the gnat to stop buzzing and chewing. Titus told his people to recruit a blacksmith to hammer near him every day.

“He would give four dinars as payment to a gentile blacksmith,” the Talmud reports, “and to a Jew he would simply say: ‘It is enough for you that you see your enemy in so much pain.’”

PJ Grisar is the Forward’s culture reporter. He can be reached at Grisar@Forward.com.
A Jewish poet of survival, Louise Glück is an incredibly timely Nobel choice

By Aviya Kushner

The poet Louise Glück, who just won the Nobel Prize in Literature, has been very apprehensive about using the word “poet” – especially in relation to herself. In her lone collection of essays, “Proofs and Theories,” she describes her vocation in “Education of a Poet” – originally a 1989 lecture at the Guggenheim Museum – by repeatedly using the word “writer” instead of “poet.”

“I use the word “writer” deliberately,” Glück writes. “‘Poet’ must be used cautiously; it names an aspiration, not an occupation. In other words: not a noun for a passport.”

That phrase – “not a noun for a passport” – has always struck me as a very Jewish way of understanding the world. It hints at internalizing the possible need to flee and imagines that a person might need to come up with a legitimate reason why she deserves to survive.

But all of Glück’s work, both the poetry and the prose, addresses survival.

It’s this engagement with the question of how to survive – and the searing honesty of admitting it is a problem we all face – that often makes Glück readers extremely passionate in their admiration. In the late 90’s, for instance, a Cambridge bookstore had a huge sign in the window with the words of Louise Glück’s famous poem “The Wild Iris” taking up the entire display case.

That poem begins with these unforgettable lines:

At the end of my suffering
there was a door.

That was the title poem of “The Wild Iris,” a collection that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993; the collection addresses the pain of depression and the recovery from it, and the poems are written in the voices of flowers. Each Glück collection is its own world; each has been structured in a unique shape, with a clarity and purpose to its order.

“Vita Nova,” or “New Life,” published in 2001, takes on the tradition of Virgil and Dante, and the challenges of following a master, but also directly addresses survival once again. Its first line reads:

“You saved me, you should remember me.”

But Glück also had a very particular poetic challenge in each book – something she faced down herself as she wrote. As she writes in “Education of a Poet”:

“Each book I’ve written has culminated in a conscious diagnostic act, a swearing off. After ‘Firstborn,’ the task was to make latinate suspended sentences, and to figure out a way to end a poem without sealing it shut.”

For other books, she tells us, “I wanted to learn a longer breath. And to write without the nouns central to that second book; I had done about as much as I could with moon and pond. What I wanted, after ‘Descending Figure,’ was a poem less perfect, less stately; I wanted a present tense that referred to something more fluent than the archetypal present.”

In some ways, Glück had an archetypal American Jewish upbringing – or at least one familiar to those who read biographies of Jewish writers who grew up around the same time. Glück’s paternal grandparents, Hungarian Jews, emigrated to the United States, and owned a grocery store in New York. That sounds a bit like Bernard Malamud’s story, one generation removed – Malamud’s father was a grocer, and that greatly affected his fiction.

Glück describes, in “Education of a Poet” how she was raised to “recognize and honor and aspire to glorious achievement” – which struck me as a Jewish educational philosophy.
Many poets have personal stories of Glück’s kindness and devotion to poets; I have my own. Glück has been an important friend to poets, and has long been close to Robert Pinsky, a major Jewish American poet. A longtime teacher of poetry, Glück herself was famously mentored by the Jewish American poet Stanley Kunitz, and has written movingly about how Kunitz guided her, and most importantly, told her the truth about her work.

For new readers and longtime readers, one of the great pleasures of Glück’s work is following her progression as a poet and seeing her continue to create new challenges for herself, decades into a major career, and then conquer them completely. At this moment in time when all of us are thinking about survival, Glück’s body of work seems especially essential — and her selection as Nobel Laureate is a ray of truth.

Mazal tov, Louise!

-Aviya Kushner is The Forward’s language columnist and the author of The Grammar of God (Spiegel & Grau) and the forthcoming poetry collection Wolf Lamb Bomb (Orison Books, April 2021). Follow her on Twitter @Aviya Kushner

This 102-year-old activist was born into the last pandemic. Now she has one message: Vote!

By Irene Katz Connelly

The snapshot showed an elderly woman doing what thousands of Americans are doing this week: mailing her ballot for the presidential election.

Yet it also captured the surreal nature of being a citizen at this precise moment in American history. The voter in question – 102-year-old Beatrice Lumpkin – was born in 1918, a year when a global pandemic was raging and women lacked the right to vote. She could never have predicted that in 2020, she would don a DIY hazmat suit to cast her ballot.

For Lumpkin, a lifelong union organizer whose mailbox selfie went viral earlier this week, voting is a sacred tradition. She hasn’t missed an election since she cast her first vote for Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1940. And not even the second global pandemic of her lifetime could make her skip this year’s.

“I sent in [for it] the first day I could, and I sent it back the second day I got it,” she said of her ballot, assuring me that she’d also tracked its journey through the postal system until it arrived in the right hands.

That veneration for the ballot box didn’t come from nowhere. As Lumpkin put it in an interview and in her 2013 autobiography “Joy in the Struggle,” her sense of civic duty is a testament both to her decades-long career as an activist and the Jewish immigrant milieu into which she was born just over a century ago.

Lumpkin spent her formative years in a working-class Jewish neighborhood in the East Bronx. Like almost all their neighbors, her parents were Eastern European.
immigrants who worked in the garment industry, first in factories (including the notorious Triangle Shirtwaist Factory) and then as owners of a small hand-laundry business. Before coming to America, they’d been active members in the Jewish Socialist Bund; in America, they subscribed not to the Forverts but to its Russian Communist rival, Di Varhayt. Lumpkin picked up her leftist tendencies from the stories her parents told of strikes in Tsarist Russia — as well as from her first-hand observations of the meager returns their back-breaking work in America brought them.

Lumpkin has no memories of the Spanish Flu, but it affected her family deeply: Her younger brother caught an unrelated illness and died during the pandemic, a tragedy Lumpkin attributed partly to the care he received at an overburdened city hospital.

“My whole life would have been different if I had a brother close to me in age,” Lumpkin said, noting that many families have suffered similar tragedies in recent months as the coronavirus pandemic has forced hospitals to divert resources from patients with other illnesses.

The Great Depression put an end to the family’s laundry business, but their ensuing financial instability sparked Lumpkin’s political awakening. As a teenager, she joined the Young Communist League (YCL), a political group that dispatched her to pro-union and anti-fascist picket lines. In 1935, 17-year-old Lumpkin was one of 10,000 demonstrators protesting the display of a Nazi flag on the the SS Bremen, a German ocean liner. The flag was eventually torn down, and the incident garnered so much attention that Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels complained about it.

But the YCL was also a social outlet. Lumpkin took her first train ride on a field trip with the group and recalled frequent trips with her colleagues to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where admission was free and concerts were frequent.

“We’d go the whole day, and sit among the marble and listen to great music,” she said.

Lumpkin maintained her YCL membership throughout her stint at Hunter College. She graduated in 1939, after taking a year off to organize laundry workers as a staffer for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a union federation. The next few years were busy ones: she worked as an automat bus girl, a typist, and, during WWII, as a radio technician. She got married, gave birth to two children, and got divorced. She got married again, this time to Frank Lumpkin, a Black steelworker who would be her constant companion until his death in 2010.

“He liked everything I liked, or at least he put a good show,” Lumpkin wrote in her autobiography. That included organizing: One of their first challenges as a married couple came when a police officer clubbed Frank during a demonstration against racist admissions policies on Lake Erie cruise ships.

In 1949, the Lumpkins moved to Chicago, where Beatrice embarked on yet another career. For the next several decades, she taught math in the city’s public schools and at Malcolm X College. In the 1960s, students and civil rights activists demanded that educators start teaching Black history and reading Black authors, long ignored in the classroom. Battles over curricula were largely focused on humanities fields, but Lumpkin started researching the history of mathematics in Egypt. Eventually she came to believe that while contemporary historians attributed most early mathematical discoveries to Greco-Roman civilization, ancient Egyptians and several other
non-European societies deserved more credit. Her research resulted in “Senefer, Young Genius in Old Egypt,” a children’s book about math, as well as series of lectures persuading other teachers to devote classroom time to the “multicultural roots of mathematics.”

You might think after such a career, a centenarian might take a moment (or a year) to rest on her laurels. But you’d be wrong. Martin Ritter, a political organizer with the Chicago Teachers Union [CTU], said that, though Lumpkin retired years ago, she’s a mainstay at union events, always willing to attend a rally and often imploring fellow union-members to attend demonstrations for related social justice causes. An elected Retiree Delegate, she acts as a “moral voice” at monthly union meetings, to which she often arrives via public transportation. When she gets up to speak, Rittersaid, no one enforces the two-minute talking limit.

“Everyone shuts up, and she has command of the floor,” he said.

There may be fewer in-person meetings these days, but Lumpkin isn’t exempt from the work-from-home grind, either.

“I’ve been on a lot of Zoom meetings,” Lumpkin said when asked about her quarantine routine. “I’m quite active in the retiree movement, which means fighting to expand Medicare, lower the price of prescription drugs, that’s a huge issue.”

For Lumpkin, accustomed to organizing on the street, online activism is a big change. So when she gets a chance to return to her roots, she takes it: Over the summer, when the CTU organized socially-distanced car caravan demonstrations to protest police violence, she was all-in.

“I no longer drive,” she noted. “But if I have the offer, I put on my PPE and get into a properly sanitized car.”

The PPE in question is a custom-made, battery-powered hood that includes a fan and a HEPA filter to ensure that Lumpkin is breathing purified air. It was designed by her grandson Soren Kyale, a science teacher in the Chicago Public Schools — and a proud member of the union to which she once belonged.

Lumpkin admitted that Democratic candidate Joe Biden wasn’t her first pick – in the primary she enthusiastically voted for Bernie Sanders, who brought socialist causes into the mainstream.

But, she said, “There’s no question that everything [Sanders] stands for requires the election of Joe Biden, and the main part of that is that Biden supports our right…to join a union.”

Lumpkin has long been worried about cutbacks to voting rights, but this election has her especially worried that voter suppression could enable what she calls “a fascist takeover” in the United States. Which is why, she said, her message to new fans was simple: get out and vote.

“Racism lives on, antisemitism lives on,” she said. “It’s always important for Jews to vote.”
For the homeless, Sukkot is year-round

By Rob Eshman

Sukkot came early to Venice, Calif., this year. The fall Jewish holiday rolled in around June.

That’s when I first noticed full-fledged huts popping up in my neighborhood. They were dead ringers for the temporary shelters Jews put up to mark Sukkot, with bamboo or fabric walls, and roofs that included palm fronds, bamboo stalks and tree branches. The city’s spreading homeless encampments used to be composed mostly of tents and tarps. Now the message homeless men and women is sending seems to be: If you won’t build us enough shelters, we will.

There are 40,000 homeless people in the City of Angels, 66,000 in Los Angeles County. That county figure is up 12.7% from last year, as we near the end of the second term of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, who was elected in 2013 on a promise to confront the problem.

This despite city voters in 2016 having approved a $1.2 billion housing bond program known as Proposition HHH, which somehow has produced just a few hundred units of affordable housing. An audit by Ron Galperin, the City Controller, reported that costs per unit reached $701,000, far more than the projected $350,000.

While Garcetti’s “A Bridge Home” program has provided 1,800 shelter beds with services, U.S. District Judge David Carter has ordered the city and county to find shelter for 6,000 people now living in encampments near freeways. The state’s ambitious Project Roomkey, designed to house people in empty hotel rooms, is winding down after reaching 30% of its goal.

It’s all too little, too slow. On the streets of Los Angeles, our inability to deal with the economic, health and housing needs of increasing numbers of men and women translates into a tragic Sukkot.

A mixture of blue vinyl tents and four-walled huts have sprung up along Rose Avenue, just a chain-link fence apart from the fairways of the Penmar public golf course. People are sleeping in cars, minivans and dilapidated mobile homes lining many L.A. streets, and they have taken over public parking spaces along Ballona Creek Wetlands Preserve, where garbage cans overflow. More huts line Venice Boulevard as it dead-ends at the beach boardwalk.

Aisha Rogers lives in one of those shelters. I called out to her on Sunday, the second day of Sukkot, and waited while she dressed to come outside. She is in her early 40s, with smooth light brown skin, and wore shorts and a long white T-shirt, with a bright turquoise scarf wrapped around her head, and a black one that she kept fidgeting into a mask.

Rogers told me she’d constructed her shelter in June, using e heavy-duty plastic sheeting she took from a coronavirus testing facility.

“There’s a deeper story behind some of the homelessness things here,” she said, unspooling a conspiratorial theory that was a little hard to follow. “There’s a lot about human trafficking that goes along with this, and there’s a system or way that they do things, and they make you think that you’re just going to be homeless. It’s very slick and it’s very psychologically strategic.”

About 67% of the county’s homeless have symptoms of mental illness and addiction, and Rogers, bright and articulate, is fighting her share of demons.

She told me that the city was crisscrossed with underground tunnels that facilitated human trafficking. She at first said she was born in the Camp Pendleton Marine base near San Diego and was sex trafficked from infancy. Later, she said she had been raised in a stable, middle-class home with a father who was an officer in the Los Angeles Police Department. She said she has three adult children.

Rogers’s bathroom is a camp toilet she empties directly into the storm drains. She washes in a basin filled with
bottled water. She told me that she had housing until sometime last year, when she lost her job at Red Lobster. I couldn’t verify her employment claim, though a recent study showed about half of L.A.’s homeless people had been recently employed. She said she gets by on government support, food donations and “blessings from God.”

She pointed to two broken wicker chairs outside her sukkah. One was painted with a Star of David and said, “Bless.” The other was painted with a chai — “a letter from the Jewish alphabet,” she explained — and the word, “Faith.”

“Are you Jewish?” I asked.

“I love Jesus,” she said, “and Jesus was Jewish.”

Rogers’s hut is surrounded by expensive Venice homes. While I was there, young people raced by on e-scooters. High-end cars turned into the packed parking lot of an Erewhon grocery just beyond the encampment, where a wheatgrass and CBD shot will set you back $8. She said the neighbors and police don’t bother her, and social-service workers only come by “to gather information.”

How much of her story is true I can’t say. The undeniable fact is that there are many sukkahs like hers around the city. With the full economic impact of the pandemic yet to come – evictions are still on hold in California – there are bound to be more.

“Building affordable housing prevents homelessness,” said Rabbi Noah Farkas of Valley Beth Shalom synagogue in Encino, who is also the chair of Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority budget committee.

But Farkas said that city and county leaders have simply failed to produce enough affordable units fast enough. He is now trying to fast-track the building of affordable housing on synagogue, church and mosque parking lots. It could result in thousands of new units, but not for two or three years – if the state legislature passes the proposal.

The huts we build on Sukkot are meant to be symbolic, to remind us of a time we Jews wandered homeless in the desert, relying only on the grace of God to get us home. These L.A. sukkahs symbolize, if anything, how badly our elected leaders have failed us, and how far we, as a society, have fallen.

Did a maskless, post-hospital Trump violate Jewish medical ethics?

By Michael Janofsky

Hero or heel?

On the one hand, there was President Trump, COVID-19-stricken, but waving to his adoring fans from inside a black limousine on Sunday, a photo-op joyride as a break in his three-day stay at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

Returning to the White House a day later, he proclaimed in a Tweet he was back in his role as maskless leader, ready to get on with leading the free world.

On the other hand, there are those 210,000 dead Americans, nearly 7.5 million cases of infection and who knows how many more people may be endangered by heeding his message to not let COVID-19 “dominate your life.”

So what’s the priority here for a true national leader, fearlessness or forbearance?

Contemplating the choice, Paul Wolpe said he was reminded of Moses, whose lessons on leadership may be instructive for those still evaluating their choices as the next election draws near.

“In my view, he does not represent the Jewish view of leadership,” said Wolpe a professor in the departments of medicine, pediatrics, psychiatry, neuroscience and biological behavior, and sociology at Emory University in Atlanta and director of the school’s Center for Ethics.

Moses, Wolpe said, tried to be all things to all people, even if reluctantly, until his father-in-law, Jethro, implored him to seek outside help, “capable men from all the people–men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain,” according to the Book of Exodus.
“We have a president who won’t do that,” Wolpe said. “Service, rather than self-aggrandizement. True leaders are people who serve and are not in it for themselves. Moses tries to turn down his leadership. He talks about how people won’t follow me and, ‘Who am I to do this?’ There’s a humility there that great leaders demonstrate, and the opposite of that is a kind of arrogance and narcissism. That you need to show that you’re invulnerable to things like a virus is not great leadership.”

In such a case, he added “what we need is good modeling for how to behave in a pandemic. That’s what great leadership would have shown.”

But keep in mind those reassuring Tweets. Over the last day or so, Trump has insisted that he’s ready for action again, hyping the economy, ripping Democrats and promising “THE BEST IS YET TO COME!” Back at the White House, virus or not, he’s eager to get to work and get back to the campaign, which has turned inside out since he became ill last week.

While Joe Biden, his Democratic opponent, spent months of careful self-segregation at his home in Delaware, Trump was dropping into battleground states for long, rousing, mask-free speeches in front of largely mask-free crowds, mocking Biden for wearing one. Now, Trump is hunkered down at the White House as Biden moves around the country as a masked man.

While some of his most avid fans see Trump's short hospital stay as the "miracle in Maryland," Wolpe argued that his Tweets represent “empty” and “vacuous” promises without “modeling things that would actually end the epidemic and allow people hope for the future”

“That kind of leadership is empty leadership,” he said of the recent Tweets. “It ends up being purely symbolic and not substantive. We want leaders to act, not just engage in rhetoric. That’s not leadership.”

Wolpe, who is the older brother of David Wolpe, senior rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, also had a word for voters who view Trump through the single lens of Israel.

Despite Trump’s efforts in moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, blessing Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights and working with Arab nations to forge formal relations with Israel, Wolpe contends that America has been weakened under Trump, and that’s bad for Israel.

“Lots of Jews like him for his stance on Israel and forgive other faults because of that stance,” Wolpe said. “But Jews being one-issue voters is dangerous not only for American Jewry but for Israel, itself. A diminished, weakened United States, which I believe Trump has created, is ultimately dangerous for Israel, whatever his Israel policies are.”

“In my view,” he said, “a leader is supposed to set an example, and in the midst of a pandemic, the example you should set is proper preventative measures and then, if you get the virus proper, taking care of yourself as well as bringing in others to support and supplement you. Unfortunately, our leader has done none of those things.”

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Michael Janofsky is an editor and writer in Los Angeles
Culture

Long live Zayde Wisdom, the NHL’s new most Yiddishkeit player

By PJ Grisar

A lot of our zaydes are right-wingers. Many are wise. But not like this.

On Wednesday, Philadelphia’s hockey team, the Flyers, drafted a young man with the improbably old and Jewish name of Zayde Wisdom in their second round picks.

It’s the second bit of good news this week for the 18-year-old Toronto native, who is neither a zayde in the Yiddish sense nor, as far as we can tell, Jewish.

Yesterday, Wisdom scooped up the E.J. McGuire Award of Excellence, an honor presented to a player who “best exemplifies commitment to excellence through strength of character, competitiveness, and athleticism.”

Wisdom, who is currently a second-year forward for the Kingston Frontenacs, has racked up impressive stats on the ice, coming second in his team for goals, assists and points. He will join the Flyers as a right wing in 2021.

Well-regarded for his work ethic and consistent, strength-to-strength improvement, we’re thrilled that Wisdom will get to skate for the house that Gritty built — er, rather, was found in the rubble of. But our real question is: just how much does the National Hockey League’s new most Yiddishkeit player live up to his name?

If this profile from The Athletic is to be trusted, he is in fact wise beyond his years.

“I want you to doubt me,” Wisdom said in the article.

That’s zayde wisdom for sure, but not of the sort my own zayde dispenses. He’d rather I take him at his word.

Life

A prophet in his own city: Jacob Kornbluh, the Hasidic reporter standing up for social-distancing

By Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt

A group of about a hundred Hasidic men and boys milled about on a dark street in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Boro Park, a gleam of fire in the distance. Women watched from balconies above the street at the crowd that had gathered — in violation of New York City’s social-distancing guidelines — to celebrate the minor Jewish holiday Lag B’Omer.

Jacob Kornbluh, a reporter for Jewish Insider who is himself Hasidic and lives in the neighborhood, was passing the crowd on his way home when a man recognized him — and started screaming “Muser, muser!” Traitor.

Others started chiming in: In cellphone videos captured both by Kornbluh and other passersby, and then circulated in Orthodox WhatsApp groups, the mob chants at Kornbluh as he passes through. Muser, muser! The rage is almost palpable; it feels like those men might reach through the screen and grab you by the neck.

For Kornbluh, the incident was the most intense of a weeks-long campaign against him by neighbors and others in the Orthodox community.

Since the start of the pandemic, Kornbluh has been tweeting to his 17,000 followers about coronavirus developments in Boro Park, and reporting violations when necessary — even as he himself was battling the virus at home.

He is one of several prominent Hasidim who have faced harsh criticism and even threats of violence during the pandemic for urging Orthodox Jews to abide by social-distancing rules and reporting those who don’t to the authorities.

Watching the video of the crowd taunting Kornbluh
A prophet in his own city: Jacob Kornbluh, the Hasidic reporter standing up for social-distancing

and watching the larger saga unfold via Twitter these past months – is painful for anyone who cares about the Orthodox world. It is a personal kind of pain for me, both because I have considered Kornbluh a friend for the past seven years, and because I, too, am an Orthodox Jewish journalist often writing about the failings of my community. I, too, have gotten used to being called a traitor.

Kornbluh, who turned 39 last week, is a fast-thinking, fast-talking reporter with a velvet yarmulke and peyos whose byline, tweets and physical presence have become fixtures of the Jewish world. Pre-pandemic, if you walked into any major Jewish event in New York City, you’d undoubtedly see him (and, depending on your social status, might or might not make it into his “spotted” list in the next morning’s Insider newsletter). He and I are often seated together at conferences or charity dinners, the only two in Orthodox uniform alongside the bevvy of colleagues in jeans.

After I saw the Lag B’Omer video, which had been shared on frum WhatsApp groups, I called Kornbluh to check how he’s doing.

“Rebbetzinnn,” he drawled. That’s how he always greets me – I happen to be married to a rabbi, but it’s not even about that: it’s a half-traditional, half-jesting frum address to a woman.

“How are you doing?” I asked. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine,” he said in his usual calm demeanor. Because nothing – not even an angry mob – fazes Kornbluh.

The most famous Hasidic journalist in America

Kornbluh’s English is British with a tinge of Yiddish: he grew up in a Belzer Hasidic family in the Stamford Hill neighborhood of London, the fifth of seven children. He spoke mostly Yiddish with his father, a writer and local community activist, English with his mother, who worked as a wig-maker and chef. “Both of my parents are very booksmart,” he said. “So I read a lot, and I listened to the radio and read newspapers all the time.”

At 16, Kornbluh was sent to yeshiva in Israel; at 20, he moved to Brooklyn, was introduced to and married a woman from Williamsburg, and started working at a hardware store, then behind a kosher deli-counter in Williamsburg, another Hasidic enclave in Brooklyn.

Throughout, he was inhaling news voraciously. “In Shabbos in shul, I was always the one leading the conversation about political events,” he said. When Twitter launched in 2008, Kornbluh finally found an outlet for his political interests. “It was my first opportunity to start communicating with others, sharing my views,” he said. “I started writing, even though my English was bad.”

By then, Kornbluh was running his own business – a pizza shop in Boro Park. But on the side, he began blogging about the 2008 presidential election in the United States, and the elections for Israel’s Knesset. In 2011, he started getting more engaged on the New York political scene, tweeting, blogging and engaging in conversations with local elected officials.

By 2013, as the race for mayor took off, Kornbluh had sold his pizza shop to his brothers and decided to try his hand at journalism – to “run around to all the free events, press conferences, candidate forums and campaign launches,” as he recalled in our recent conversation. “I live-tweeted the events, got to know the candidates on a more personal level.” That year, he got hired as a political reporter for Yeshiva World News, and a few months later, moved on to Jewish news site JP Updates, where he covered New York City Hall.

At public hearings and AIPAC conferences alike, he was always an unusual sight. “People see this Hasidic guy with a long jacket, and they’re thinking, is he a lobbyist? A political junkie? No, I’m actually conducting interviews, reporting on this,” he said. Back home in Boro Park, at shul and on the street, there was a different sort of discomfort. “It was very hard for my community to digest that one of them is out there, posting pictures that include women, asking hard questions,” he said.

“I don’t have a high school diploma, no degrees,” Kornbluh told me. “I learned on my own from reading. When I needed a word, I googled it. I am self-made, because I am so passionate about it, that I really wanted to do it.”

He quickly earned the attention of readers – and
respect from sources. David Greenfield, a former member of the New York City Council who is now chief executive of Met Council, a Jewish charity serving New York’s needy, described Kornbluh as a reporter of integrity who is careful to protect his sources.

“We have had people from the Hasidic community break into politics,” noted Greenfield, who is also Orthodox. “But Jacob is the first to break into political journalism. I saw him once in the supermarket, back when he was just a blogger, and I told him, ‘You are going to become the most famous Hasidic journalist in America.’”

In October 2015, Kornbluh moved on to Jewish Insider, which aspired to be the Politico of the Jewish world, with a must-read morning briefing. “The fact that for the past five years, I’ve written for a national Jewish publication, not an Orthodox one, helped me,” he said. “It’s not like I work for a Hasidic publication where I have to adhere to certain rules, where I couldn’t profile a woman, for example.”

Kornbluh reports on Jewish politics, from New York to Washington, D.C. to Jerusalem. He isn’t usually focused on the Orthodox beat, but he does regularly comment on community issues, on Twitter and elsewhere. “At the same time, outside, I am in this position where I can shine a positive light on my community,” he said, “not only tell the stories you read in the New York Post, the sex abusers and the slumlords.”

Kornbluh has five children, yet seems to essentially work 24/6 [his phone is of course off for Shabbos]. He seems to know just about everyone, and to live-tweet events as easily as he breathes.

“He always says ‘yes,’ to every opportunity,” said Almog Elijis, a spokeswoman for the Israeli Consulate in New York. “He always asks lots of questions, and I’ve never met someone who has so much insight on everything.”

David Lobl, a New York political consultant and former aide to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, recalled a 2014 trip to Israel, when Kornbluh was among the gaggle of reporters on the governor’s plane. “It didn’t matter that Jacob was with all these high-powered journalists from The New York Times and the AP,” Lobl said. “He was still Jacob from JP Updates, who instead of going drinking with the other reporters went to the Kotel and to Meah Shearim.”

Until the coronavirus hit, Kornbluh tried to compartmentalize his work and his community. “I do this six days a week,” Kornbluh told me, referring to his journalism. “But there’s always the seventh day, when you have a different role, as a member of the Hasidic community and not as a journalist.”

**Enemies of the people**

Then came the pandemic.

In March, when some Hasidic shuls and schools were slower than secular institutions to shut down, Kornbluh was a strong voice on Twitter and on community WhatsApp groups urging people to take social distancing seriously. “I informed the community about those guidelines,” he later explained to me. “I communicated with local officials about the issues raised by the community, and also about how very challenging it is for us to actually practice those guidelines.”

Early on, Kornbluh got sick himself – for three weeks, he chronicled his illness and recovery on Twitter. (His test later showed negative for antibodies.) One by one, Kornbluh watched family members, neighbors, and friends contract the virus – in Boro Park, in Williamsburg, in Lakewood and back in his hometown of Stamford Hill. Eight of his relatives and friends died.

Over Passover, he walked by his own synagogue and was shocked to see 40 men davening inside, despite it having been officially closed. Kornbluh filed a complaint via a city hotline, and shared a video of himself on WhatsApp confronting a man leaving the shul.

This was when he was first called a “moser” – an informer, a traitor. His picture and name (among those of two others) were featured on a *pashkevil*, an electronic flyer, circulated in extremist Hasidic circles, warning community members about the consequences of informing authorities. On Twitter, one account, “Heimishe Niyes,” shared the flyer alongside a quote from Maimonides, stating that it is permissible to kill a moser.
“It’s uncomfortable to walk in the streets,” he said. “I get dirty looks, and haters targeting me on Twitter and WhatsApp. I have not gotten to the point where I was physically threatened, but I was uncomfortable last week,” he added, referring to the time he was accosted near the Lag b’Omer bonfire. “I notified police, and I was given assurances that I’ll be protected.”

The targeting of journalists regarding the pandemic, of course, is not limited to Orthodox circles – it has cropped up at “reopen the economy” rallies and other settings, and is an increasingly common battle cry on the far right. A video recently went viral in which Kevin Vesey, a reporter for News 12 Long Island, was harassed by pro-Trump protesters calling him “fake news,” a “traitor” and an “enemy of the people,”

“I was practically chased by people who refused to wear masks in the middle of a pandemic,” Vesey later told Brian Stelter of CNN’s “Reliable Sources.” “All the while, I was there to tell THEIR story.” The president afterwards praised the protesters in the video as “great people.”

“People can’t get enough of this,” he tweeted.

**A fear society, not a free society**

The last two months have served as a telling window into the challenges journalists and whistleblowers face in the Orthodox community. It is a more public and widespread version of what has played out for years: survivors of sexual abuse who are silenced; parents who complain about yeshivas’ limited or nonexistent secular education who are censored.

When community members share evidence of misbehavior, in chat groups and on social media, they are often dismissed. “Those are just fringe extremists,” someone might post. Or, “Why don’t you talk about those of us who are following the rules?”

I know because I am often the one sharing such evidence on social media, and occasionally reporting about it in the Forward. I do so largely because I believe it is essential that critiques and introspection come from Orthodox Jews themselves, not only from outside.

And I see the reactions as something of a litmus test for the democratic health of our community. I think of Natan Sharansky’s famous “town-square test” – if a person cannot walk into the middle of the town square and express her views without fear, then that person is living in “a fear society, not a free society.”

That’s how it sometimes is in the Orthodox world, especially in the era of coronavirus.

In Orthodox communities across the United States, medical professionals and social activists alike have been frustrated by some religious leaders’ failures to speak strongly about medical guidelines – last week, Orthodox Jewish nurse and Boro Park resident Blimi Marcus posted a letter addressed to Agudath Israel leadership: “Every hour that you delayed in using your collective power and voice, you infected more and more people.” But Marcus is a rare lone voice – in small online groups, while individuals express concern about local synagogues rushing to reopen, most are too afraid to say anything about it publicly.

“My kids will get thrown out of school,” one father texted me. “I can lose my job,” wrote one nurse who was afraid to speak up. One critical tweet can elicit a flurry of phone calls from neighbors, urging the dissenter to keep their opinions to themselves. A genuine criticism of a public figure is quickly declared “motzi shem ra” – the sin of slander. Pre-pandemic, there was already a general fear of being shamed for speaking out, for not conforming to groupthink – the fear of being shunned at shul the next day, on the carpool line, in the community WhatsApp group. But now, the stakes of either speaking up or staying silent seem all the higher.

In my eight years as an Orthodox journalist writing mainly about Orthodox life for non-Orthodox publications, I have lived this every day. When you’re a member of the very society you’re reporting on, every word is laden with responsibility. Personal and professional are always mixed.

It means that when you go to a wedding, you’ll likely find yourself standing on line at the smorgasbord next to the president of the organization you just criticized. When you walk to your seat on the synagogue balcony, you’ll have to nod to the politician whose statements
you’ve shred apart on Twitter. And it’s a good thing, actually – knowing one’s sources and subjects as human beings, knowing one might see them in the supermarket or at shul, helps ensure that one always thinks about the impact of one’s writing on one’s subjects. That kind of empathy is essential to good journalism.

Compared to Kornbluh, I have some distance from the insular neighborhoods of Brooklyn; I am not Hasidic, and I live in Manhattan, where no one comments on whether my wig length is appropriate. But there is a more sinister level to much of the criticism: in a society so concerned with female modesty, a visible and vocal woman can be seen as particularly threatening.

Over the years it’s become my normal. Occasional calls for violence [one memorable note was sent to my grandparents’ address]. Phone calls from powerful people to my rabbi-husband – you know your wife is the biggest obstacle to your career, it’s time you rein her in. Harsh emails from organizational leaders and spokespeople tsk-tsking me for falling out of line. Don’t you know your responsibility, which is to say, we thought you were one of us. (My responsibility as a public-facing Orthodox woman is evidently to extol the values of Shabbos, but with a smile, with a sprinkle of modernishe, ideally with a GIF.) You’re airing our dirty laundry. (Somehow, no one ever confronts those who dirtied that laundry in the first place.) Let’s take care of it behind closed doors. (Nothing important is ever accomplished behind closed doors.)

“When the threats increase, when they target you on a daily basis, when there’s a coordinated effort, many people get deterred and stop doing what they’re doing,” Kornbluh said. “At one point, people can break.”

But Kornbluh said he has learned how to cope with the vitriol. “When someone reaches out on WhatsApp - either engage them in serious conversation, or if you see they’re not there for that, ignore,” he advised. “And if someone calls you in the middle of the night, just don’t pick up.”

A prophet in his own city

This pandemic has clarified cleavages within many Orthodox communities, exacerbating tensions that have been simmering for years – moderates versus extremists, those who acknowledge science versus those who dismiss it, rabbis who called for strict social-distancing versus rabbis who were late to shut down, who looked for loopholes to allow people to still gather.

We saw inklings of this tension in 2018, during the measles outbreak that landed 20 Orthodox children across New York state in intensive-care units, while some key leaders remained silent about the safety of vaccinations. For months now, some fringe extremists have refused to follow public-health guidelines. In turn, some community organizations have ignored that misbehavior – while individuals like Kornbluh who ring the alarm bells are ostracized and even accused of stoking anti-Semitism.

One day, we will return to the rhythm of our previous lives, to our minyanim and our yeshivas and our wedding halls. But the question of how we treat whistleblowers, of how we deal with Orthodox journalists reporting on Orthodox communities, will remain.

Since I started working as a journalist in 2012, writing for liberal Haaretz no less, I would often hear a lamenting refrain: “But why did you have to take this to a secular publication? Why can’t you keep this inside?” Alas, there is no place to practice serious journalism “inside.” There is not a single independent Orthodox publication in the United States that would allow a serious critique of an Orthodox institution or practice – the kind that pains you to write, the kind that you lose sleep over, the kind that involves actual questions of those in power.

And so, we continue writing wherever we can. Because, as the saying goes, “There is no such thing as a prophet in his own city.”

Except, perhaps, for Jacob Kornbluh.

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