

Forward

WEEKEND READS

12.17.21



Culture

In the cream cheese fiasco of 2021, a new suspect emerges – is it the water?

By Andrew Silverstein

While Manhattan bagel shops are scrambling to meet their schmear demands, for Paul Denise, the Superintendent of Public Works in Lowville, New York, the cream cheese crisis of 2021 reflects a much larger concern: balancing competing water needs in his community.

Lowville, a village of 3,200 people near the Canadian border, is home to one of the nation's largest cream-cheese factories. The Kraft Heinz plant, which supplies New York City with its tubs of Philadelphia, has at times in the last months used more than 80% of the municipality's water to meet soaring cream-cheese demands.

To ensure that Lowville has enough water for essential activities, its board of trustees in November took the drastic step of regulating the plant's water access. The reduction of water use combined with peak season for New York's largest user, Junior's, the Brooklyn cheesecake giant, to form a significant factor in the bagel-spread shortage.

Since The New York Times reported a citywide cream cheese shortage earlier this month, the media has struggled to explain the sudden shortfall. Bloomberg reported nationwide cream cheese production had fallen 6.2% in October, while at-home consumption has increased 18% in the past year. Still, mysteriously, only New York City foodservice providers who buy in bulk have suffered shortages, while the city's store shelves are well-stocked with packaged Philadelphia. Somehow, no other dairy product has been affected.

A variety of theories has cropped up: unnamed unvaccinated truck drivers; labor shortages in unspecified plants; and a cyberattack on a Wisconsin cheese producer a full seven weeks ago. The Guardian suggested New Yorkers themselves were at fault: the result of laying it on too thick. And on cue, Republicans took to Twitter to blame President Biden.

Combined with global supply chain problems and high inflation as the economy recovers from COVID-19, the vague reasons for the crisis have sowed fear and uncertainty. If today it's my bagel order, what will come tomorrow?

However, New York's cream cheese woes don't reflect cracks in the overall economy. They are a result of nationwide consumers stocking their kitchens with New York bagels and cheesecakes, and a local issue that predates COVID. Lowville, the upstate New York village where most New York bagel shops get their spread, doesn't have enough water.

A Million Gallons of Water Per Day

According to a Kraft Heinz representative quoted in The New York Times, the company is shipping out 35% more product to foodservice partners than last year. "Exceptional increases in production volumes during the pandemic based on customer demands," Kraft Heinz explained in an October statement to local television station WNYN-TV, "has led to a corresponding increase in our water usage."

Starting in the summer, the plant began to use a significant portion of the 1.5 million gallons of water the Lewis County community is permitted to draw daily from the watershed. "When they were pulling 1.1 [to] 1.2 [million gallons], that didn't leave very much for the rest of the village," said Superintendent Denise. The North Country village has sometimes asked residents not to water their lawns or wash their cars.

One day in August, Kraft used over 85% of the municipality's daily water allotment, dropping the local reserves to a dangerously low level. Lowville declared a water emergency. "If they drain that tank, that tank ultimately supplies the Lewis County General Hospital," Denise said.

The problem is not new. In 2019, the Wall Street Journal reported that an increase in string cheese production was eating up over 80% of Lowville's daily water usage. Local politicians tread carefully around the issue. The factory is so central to the village life they celebrate a yearly cream cheese festival. Kraft Heinz is Lewis County's biggest private employer and the largest purchaser of milk from local dairy farms. A plant closure would be devastating for the rural community.

When a water warning was announced in October, elected officials finally took action. As of Nov. 1, Kraft Heinz must pay surcharges for excess use, and if water levels dip too low, the village will reduce water flow to the factory. According to Denise, since then, the Lowville

creamery has been using around 800,000 gallons a day, down from the 950,000 to 1.3 million gallons used daily in the prior months.

Around this time, Don Merkelson of F & H Dairy in Brooklyn said Kraft Heinz started missing orders and sending in light shipments. Merkelson normally receives a 40,000-pound load every two weeks, which he then distributes to between 50 and 100 local bagel shops. “This weekend, we went to Costco and picked up some three-pound loaves of cream cheese just to keep people going,” he said over the phone.

Merkelson believes his competitors are also mainly supplied by Kraft. “Most bagel stores prefer to use that brand,” he said, estimating that about 75% of New York bagel shops use Philadelphia. Kosher shops, he said, are the exception.

Kraft Heinz didn’t respond to emails asking if the reduction in water use may be causing the cream cheese shortage. But Andrew Novakovic, an agricultural economist at Cornell University, believes it to be an important factor in the crisis.

“Many commercial facilities have their own water supply,” Novakovic wrote in an email, explaining that “It is often the case that a small municipality cannot accommodate a large scale, modern plant.”

On a phone call, Lowville Mayor Joseph Beagle resisted the idea that his village didn’t have enough water supply to meet demand. “There is no supply issue as far as water goes,” he said. Instead, he points to overall labor shortages in Lewis County. The drop in Kraft’s water usage, he says, comes from reducing waste and the colder weather helping cooling processes. Superintendent Denise believes Kraft keeps water use below the new limits to avoid negative local news coverage. Both officials and others in the community said the factory was tight-lipped about their production. Workers refused interviews.

In normal times, the upstate plant could satisfy New York City’s cream cheese appetite without running the village dry, but this year has seen a dramatic increase in demand. While the media focus has been on bagel shops struggling to schmear, they represent only a segment of the local bulk cream cheese market.

A Perfect Storm for Cream Cheese

In an interview with Gothamist, Alan Rosen, the owner of Junior’s, said the Brooklyn cheesecake giant is going through 120,000 to 160,000 pounds a week of Philadelphia

cream cheese. That is six to eight times the amount F & H purchases to stock dozens of bagel shops. Much of that scarce cream cheese gets shipped out of the New York area in the form of Junior's cheesecakes.

Junior's opened in 1950 as a single Brooklyn restaurant. These days, they sell cheesecakes in 8,000 supermarkets nationwide, have four restaurants, and a booming online order business. Their cheesecakes are available in Japan, France and South Korea. In 2019, both of their Times Square locations ranked in the top 10 of the nation's independent restaurants in terms of the number of meals served according to the publication Business Rankings Annual. COVID-19 shuttered the restaurants, but supermarket and online cheesecake sales increased.

"People were looking for comfort food," Rosen said by phone. "We didn't have a down year."

Diners have returned en masse to Junior's restaurants, while retail sales have held steady, now amounting to 40% of overall revenue. The Brooklyn entrepreneur estimates business is up 55% from 2019. Since his cheesecakes are made of 85% cream cheese, Rosen says he goes through 4-million pounds of cream cheese a year – a large share of that during the holiday season.

The creamy dessert is not just found at Hanukkah parties, Thanksgiving dinners and corporate gift baskets; the Jewish cake has become a Christmas staple.

"We do about half our mail order-business in November and December," the third-generation owner explained.

When Junior's peak season coincided with the water supply reduction, that might have been the perfect storm. In the past two weeks, Junior's has had intermittent production stops at their New Jersey factory as their supply of Philadelphia from Lowville has fallen short.

"We can be contributing to our own problem," reflected Rosen in discussing his recent growth, but he pushed back when asked if he is making it hard for local bagel shops to get their hands on supply. "I don't think you can blame me for this. But nice try," he said.

Indeed, overall cream cheese demand is up and Junior's is not the only New York brand which has expanded in the national market. Goldbelly, which ships food nationwide and

features such New York institutions as Russ & Daughters, Zaros Family Bakery and Ess-a-Bagel, increased revenue by 300% during 2020. Still, Junior's is by far the largest user in New York. "I don't think anyone in the area can touch us," Rosen claimed, adding that Junior's is one of "the top three users of cream cheese in the country."

Rosen doesn't plan on slowing down. He hopes to turn his family business into a billion-dollar company. He's not worried that future supply issues will affect growth. "Kraft is a great partner. And we're not concerned in the long run," he said. Mayor Beagle is also optimistic the local Kraft Heinz factory can increase productivity. The village will add new wells to provide added water capacity starting by next summer.

Lowville may be able to solve their freshwater deficit, but according to professor Novakovic, "In places of the world where climate change reduces water availability, this will definitely be a future factor."

The cream cheese crisis of 2021 will surely pass, even if the entire Midwest starts noshing on New York cheesecakes and bagels like Upper West Side Jews. Inflation and supply chain issues will also be resolved, but water scarcity may not.

Andrew Silverstein writes about New York City and is co-founder of Streetwise New York Tours.

Opinion

American Jews – on the left and the right – got Trump’s Israel legacy all wrong

By Ari Hoffman

The release of former President Donald Trump’s explosive interviews with Israeli journalist Barak Ravid and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s visit to the United Arab Emirates should comprise a wake-up call to American Jews: both Trump’s stalwart admirers and implacable foes are getting the story wrong.

Trump’s achievements in the Middle East are far greater than the left will ever admit, and his behavior in and out of office is far worse than the right will ever acknowledge. More Jewish liberals need to celebrate what Trump accomplished internationally, and more Jewish conservatives need to distance themselves from what he says as he does so.

Bennett’s official state visit to the United Arab Emirates does not constitute mere symbolism: it was an astonishing development. To those who grew up with only the tenuous peace Jordan and Egypt maintained with Israel, the warmth is most welcome. The images of a kippah-clad Bennett inspecting Emirati honor guards feels photoshopped, but it wasn’t.

Arab states increasingly embracing Israel is the new reality, and Trump’s Abraham Accords deserve the credit. The Accords have succeeded beyond anyone’s wildest expectations, with flights, commerce and people skipping from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem throughout the Arab world. The UAE expects to do \$1 trillion in trade with Israel by 2031, and before the latest lockdown, one airline alone was planning 123 flights between Tel Aviv and Dubai.

This new landscape that the Trump Administration helped bring about demonstrates that support for Israel combined with a willingness to think unconventionally and challenge the usual State Department script can pay real dividends. But in contrast, in the Ravid interviews, Trump demonstrated everything that makes him untrustworthy, unstable and

unfit for the office he held.

At Mar-a-Lago, and on the record, the former President said “Fuck him” in reference to former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu’s congratulating Biden on his electoral victory. The Big Lie of a stolen election was not just a domestic matter: it was something on which Trump sought deference from foreign leaders as well as his own domestic allies. Trump also expressed skepticism that Israelis were serious about peace at all – and seemed paranoid that Israeli officials were instead manipulating him for their own ends.

Trump’s claim that “if not for me, Israel would be destroyed by now,” should offend Zionist sensibilities to the core. No longer is Jewish survival a matter to be decided by presidents and premiers abroad, nor do Israeli politicians need to grovel at their feet.

The juxtaposition of the Ravid interview and the state visit highlights that both Trump’s supporters and his detractors continue to misread the former president’s impact on the Middle East.

For those on the right, Trump’s interview should undercut his reputation as a bosom buddy of Netanyahu and a warrior for the Jewish people. His obscenity-laced tirade is an indication that there are no ends in Trump world, only means. Those who criticized former President Barack Obama for his role in a failed relationship with Bibi should reckon with evidence of a far nastier breach.

But those on the left have soul searching to do as well. Bennett’s successful visit to the UAE is just the latest confirmation that the Abraham Accords have been an astounding success, generating not only cold civility but the real warmth of peace. Claims that moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem would hinder peace have proved to be almost eerily wrong: in fact, the move did not preclude a spate of agreements with the U.A.E., Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco and Oman that have reset Israel’s place in the world.

During his visit, Bennett met with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, the Emirati Crown Prince, for four hours in the latter’s private palace, where they discussed both Iran and ties between their two countries. These tangible results dwarf the fruitless “peace” negotiations that marked the Obama years, and are what happens on the far side of real peace agreements.

The inability to see Trump clearly – both from his left and his right – is a symptom of a

broader selective blindness in our culture. When seeing everything through the lens of tribe and identity politics, too many people don't see anything clearly at all.

Trump's enemies can't stop excommunicating everyone who voted for him long enough to notice that Democrats are hemorrhaging Asian and Hispanic voters at alarming rates, or that their cultural commitments like 'defund the police' have become electoral poison. The left obsesses too much over Trump possibly ending democracy, and not enough that he might win in a landslide in 2024 if Biden continues to flounder.

The right is also in danger of failing to see what is in front of its eyes as well. Biden's struggles do not constitute a case for Trump, and the party's continued fealty to the 45th President does not help but hurts them, both morally and strategically. Just as Americans chose Trump in 2016, so too they chose Biden in 2020 because they wanted to turn the page. Taking that hint is the smart move if Republicans want to win back the White House in 2024 rather than relitigate 2020.

In a time of hardening political binaries, Jews should remain stubborn free agents and swing voters. We are not obligated to show political allegiance to a particular party, but should take help from everywhere and bigotry from nowhere. You can celebrate the Abraham Accords without being a die-hard Trumper, and you can criticize the former president without 'switching teams'. Our loyalty is to Jewish history, not the vagaries of a career in the limelight.

Our politics often forces us to take sides, a binary choice that is the product of a two-party system and a hyperpolarized moment. But as an individual voter, inconsistency can be an indicator of savvy and strength, of seeing the importance of both the zig and the zag.

Israel doesn't need Donald Trump to save it, and American Jews don't need to be shock troops of the right or left. There is another way, if we are willing to go our own way. The better we see the whole picture, the brighter our horizon will look.

Ari Hoffman is a contributing columnist for the Forward, where he writes about politics and culture. He is an adjunct assistant professor at New York University, and has a doctorate in English Literature from Harvard and a law degree from Stanford.

News

'The president doesn't like you guys now': The inside story of Trump's rage against Netanyahu

By Jacob Kornbluh

A new Hebrew book published on Sunday by Israeli journalist Barak Ravid gives a behind-the-scenes look at what is now being revealed as a rocky U.S.-Israel relationship during the Trump administration, but one that led to normalization deals between Israel and the Arab world.

"F**k him," former President Donald Trump said about former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In an interview featured in the book, titled "Trump's Peace: The Abraham Accords and the Reshaping of the Middle East," Trump expressed his disappointment at the "disloyalty" Netanyahu showed when he followed protocol and congratulated Joe Biden for his victory in November.

On November 7, 2020, hours after the media called the election for Biden, Netanyahu tweeted his congratulations to Biden. Five hours later, Netanyahu issued a video statement that was seen by Trump as the "ultimate betrayal." The rage was first reported by journalist Michael Wolff.

In an interview with Ravid at Mar-a-Lago in April, Trump said the video was a step too far. "He was very early – like, earlier than most," he said, after initially suggesting Netanyahu was the first foreign leader to recognize Biden's victory. "And not only did he congratulate him, he did it on tape."

Despite his call to Biden after the elections, Netanyahu walked on eggshells to avoid a public rift with Trump. Even after Trump left office, Netanyahu avoided appearing too friendly with Biden. Netanyahu reacted in a diplomatic manner when the profane remarks were first reported on Friday. "I highly appreciate President Trump's big contribution to Israel and its security," he said in a statement to the media. "I also appreciate the

importance of the strong alliance between Israel and the U.S. and therefore it was important for me to congratulate the incoming president.” The book also features on-the-record conversations with Trump’s inner circle and the people who were key in carrying out his policies.

How it became so personal

In an interview with the Forward on Sunday, Ravid said Trump and Netanyahu cultivated an image of this bromance, with no daylight between them, that was essential to their domestic political standing. “It was strategic for both of them to project this closeness and friendship for their base,” he said.

After the second election in 2019, when Netanyahu failed once again to garner a majority to form a government, Trump told reporters, “Our relationship is with Israel.”

“That was the beginning of a change of attitude by Trump,” Ravid said. Trump, he suggested, felt that the moving of the embassy to Jerusalem, the recognition of the Golan Heights and his Mideast policy were a boon for Netanyahu that didn’t produce the results he wanted to see.

In the two-hour-long interview with Ravid, Trump indicated that he was expecting from Netanyahu to do the very least to help him in his own re-election bid. “I think that when Trump speaks about loyalty, I don’t think that he speaks only about the congratulations to Biden,” Ravid explained. “It was a broader expectation that Netanyahu would give him the same political support domestically that he gave him in Israel.”

Ravid said he was surprised Trump used the profane term, which was said after 30 minutes talking about the Israeli leader. “It wasn’t like that it came out of nowhere,” he said.

To annex or not to annex?

The furor over the November call was just the straw that broke the camel’s back, Ravid writes in the book. Trump had already shared his grievances about Netanyahu’s refusal to go along with the idea of an “ultimate deal” with the Palestinians and expressed his frustration that he had to postpone the rollout of his Middle East peace plan due to Netanyahu’s failure to form a government after several rounds of elections. When the plan was unveiled at the White House on January 28, 2020, Netanyahu caused an uproar by

suggesting the U.S. initiative was a green light for annexing the occupied West Bank.

“What the hell was that?” Trump yelled at his aides when Netanyahu left the White House that day. A former administration official said Netanyahu treated Trump “like a flowerpot” at that ceremony for his political benefit. A miscommunication between Trump’s senior aides and U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman led Netanyahu to believe the administration was retracting from their initial approval. Jared Kushner, who according to Ravid, was surprised to learn on the eve of the inauguration that he was tasked by his father-in-law to work on Middle East peace, made it clear to Netanyahu: “This is not the plan.”

“There’s no way you are doing this,” Kushner recounted what he told the Israeli leader.

Avi Berkowitz, who served as Mideast peace envoy, told Ravid the relationship between the Trump administration and Israel deteriorated significantly since then. When former Israeli Ambassador to D.C. Ron Dermer requested to speak directly to Trump, Berkowitz told him, “The president doesn’t like you guys now.”

A month later, Dermer met with Kushner at the White House but was thrown out for saying Netanyahu was now doubting whether he could trust the Trump administration. “Don’t be mistaken to think that everything that happened in the past three years was for you. We did it because we were serious about peace,” Kushner screamed at Dermer, Ravid writes. “To say such a thing about us is disgusting. Get out.”

The issue came up again after the March 2020 election that resulted in a rotation agreement between Netanyahu and Blue and White leader Benny Gantz. The administration used the disagreements between the two partners over annexation as a reason to push the can down the road. In internal discussions at the White House, Trump reportedly sided with Kushner over Friedman, who advocated for the move to take place before the July 1st deadline that was set by the Israeli government. “They were very firm on stopping this,” Ravid noted.

Netanyahu was furious that his partners managed to convince the administration that annexation was not an Israeli consensus. “The final four days of June were the closest point in the relationship between Netanyahu and the Trump administration,” Ravid writes. Netanyahu threatened to go it alone without U.S. approval. “This will be the biggest mistake you have ever made,” Kushner told him. “Trump will come out against you.”

Berkowitz, who visited Israel to deliver the news, found “an angry and grouchy Netanyahu,” who berated him and accused him of leaking to the media. When Netanyahu repeated his threat, Berkowitz told him such a move would come with a political and a diplomatic price. “It’s almost certain Trump will tweet against you,” he said, adding that the administration would also refrain from helping Israel at the International Criminal Court in Hague.

“The president will criticize such a pro-Israel move so close to the election?” Netanyahu wondered. Berkowitz responded in the affirmative. “The president doesn’t really like you these days,” he said. “You will take your best friend and turn him into an enemy.”

The right thing at the right time

Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the de facto leader of the United Arab Emirates, then came to the rescue, Ravid writes.

On June 30, Berkowitz had another meeting with Netanyahu in which he tossed out the idea of normalizing relations with the Emirates as an alternative. Netanyahu, who was inclined to go ahead with annexation, agreed to think about it.

The UAE Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba, who was already in talks with the White House about the matter since March 2019, simultaneously offered to turn it into reality. Following a month of indirect talks and negotiations over the wording, the administration brought the two sides to agree on suspending annexation for at least three years in favor of formal relations between the UAE and Israel, Ravid writes.

At one point, Dermer tried to tweak the deal, saying Netanyahu is insisting on getting at least three Arab countries to agree to normalize relations. “Tell Ron that one country is all he’s getting, and if he doesn’t want it, let him go f**k himself,” Kushner told Berkowitz, according to Ravid.

“The UAE had their own interest to move ahead with normalization with Israel to prevent a crisis in the region and preserve a two-state solution,” Ravid said. “But they brought the ladder that allowed both the White House and Netanyahu to climb down from the tree.” The day before the announcement was to take place, Netanyahu tried backing out of the deal, Ravid writes. But the Americans made it certain the train had left the station.

Not taking it lightly

The book also sheds a light on the U.S. assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Quds Force and one of the most influential figures in the Middle East, who was killed on January 3, 2020 in an airstrike at Baghdad's international airport.

In his interview with Ravid, Trump revealed that he was actually disappointed with Israel's handling of the incident. "Israel didn't do the right thing," Trump said without elaborating. Former U.S. officials confirmed to Ravid that Trump was expecting a more active role by Israel, and was disappointed that Netanyahu appeared reluctant to carry out the attack. "Trump was mad at Netanyahu and said that the Israelis are willing to fight Iran until the last American soldier stands," a U.S. official was quoted as saying.

An attempt by Netanyahu to smooth things out with Trump over the matter was unsuccessful, Ravid writes. Trump was convinced that Netanyahu used him to get rid of the Iranian commander without paying a price. Trump also dismissed the notion that the secret documents related to Iran's nuclear and missile program that was seized by the Mossad caused the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. He mocked them as old and irrelevant drawings. "I would withdraw from the nuclear deal even if Bibi hadn't existed," Trump told Ravid. "I did it. He didn't convince me the same way he didn't manage to convince Obama from the other side."

In his interview with Ravid, Trump suggested that American Jews are not pro-Israel as in the past. "Look at The New York Times," he remarked, "they hate Israel. And Jews run The New York Times – the Sulzberger family."

Where credit is due

"The Abraham Accords were a huge achievement of Trump and they wouldn't have happened were somebody else in the White House, Republican or Democrat," Ravid told the Forward. "The fact that Trump was willing to, on the one hand, stop Netanyahu from annexing the West Bank, and on the other hand, give tangibles to those Arab countries in order to move ahead with normalization, that is something that I'm not sure that other presidents would have been able to do."

Ravid suggested that Netanyahu will likely seek to reach out directly to Trump to put an end to the matter. The two leaders in exile may find themselves working with each other again in a few years if their comeback plans work out accordingly.

Jacob Kornbluh is the Forward's senior political reporter. Follow him on Twitter @jacobkornbluh or email kornbluh@forward.com.

Culture

The original 'West Side Story' was Jewish – would it have been a better musical?

By Eliya Smith

It starts in an alley. An angsty Italian gang creeps onstage in a “stylized prologue showing the restlessness of the youths.” It’s New York City in the 1950s, and, as the plot progresses, warring ethnic groups articulate their frustrations via song and dance. Children die preventable deaths; everyone sings; the audience thinks soberly about prejudice and peace.

I am referring to a musical called “GANG BANG! [working title].” It will, of course, eventually become one of the most popular musicals of all time, known by a much sleeker name. But for now, it’s merely a fuzzy sketch of an unwritten production about two gangs: one Gentile, and one Jewish.

Before Leonard Bernstein composed any music, before Jerome Robbins choreographed a step, before Arthur Laurents completed a single draft of a full book, before Stephen Sondheim would even join the team – before “West Side Story” was the production it became – this group of Jewish men initially conceived of a musical that meditated on religious intolerance, specifically centered around antisemitism.

This “Jewish version” of “West Side Story” didn’t get very far: by the time the first draft of the musical was complete, the Jewish characters had become Puerto Rican. But evidence remains in the form of anecdotes, and, more materially, two treatments [scene-by-scene summaries of the action, including occasional suggestions for song, dance, character, or style choices].

These documents, created by Arthur Laurents and accessible at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, provide a peek at a version of this musical that might have been. In this pair of treatments, Italian Romeo and Jewish Juliet meet at a street festival.

“It’s Easter and Passover,” Laurents writes; “holiday time when the boys are free and have too much free time.” As in the original Shakespeare, the teenagers do not initially recognize the threat presented by the other’s background, because religion, like family names and unlike race, is not always visually apparent. The innocence of the initial meeting ends when the lovers each learn the other belongs to an enemy clan.

Unlike Maria, who lives permanently in the eponymous West Side, Jewish Juliet has traveled to the Lower East Side to join family for Passover. The creators reportedly planned to make Juliet a Holocaust survivor. In the eyes of a young reader, who has only ever encountered Holocaust survivors as paragons of elderly wisdom, it is jarring to imagine one so young and naïve. This Juliet might be haunted by the atrocities of a genocidal war, but she remains somehow able to believe that, despite the sectarian violence afflicting her community, her romance will succeed.

The most conspicuously Jewish segment in the story is the Passover Seder, set early in the show’s final act. In the second draft – mercifully retitled “ROMEO” instead of “GANG BANG” – the holiday becomes the setting for a turbulent musical scene. Romeo, having killed Tybalt in a previous scene, is on the run; the action cuts between the Seder and Romeo’s flight from police.

As the scene reaches a climax, biblical high drama undergirds the intensity of the onstage action: The Jewish family, unaware that their son has died, discusses the tenth plague – death of the first born. Romeo hides while the Capulets search for matzoh, an activity that is “gay and joyous and done with much laughing and squealing.” As the jubilation reaches its peak, the police enter to announce Tybalt’s murder.

Perhaps the concept for the musical was, at this early stage, too embryonic; or perhaps the choice to make the musical religious meant it would inevitably invoke the melodrama of faith in a way that seemed sort of hokey. In either case, this scene seems destined for bathos. The premise is overwrought, obvious and clunky.

In the subsequent scenes, the fighting escalates; both gangs seek vengeance, display prejudice. The gang members trade insults: “Dirty wop” is followed by “dirty kike.” When a character called Tante (Shakespeare’s nurse; mush this word around in your mouth enough and it becomes “Anita”) attempts to interfere with the lethal trajectory of fate, the Italian gang members “finally make a crack about Tante and her being Jewish.”

By the end of the musical, as in Shakespeare’s original, both lovers lie dead. “The lights

dim, the scenery disappears except for the pallet with the two lovers and, if we want to use Easter Sunday, we can have church bells,” Laurents muses. On second thought, he adds, “this might be a little bit too much.”

*

Would “West Side Story” have been a better musical if it had stuck with the Jewish plot? Certainly the musical’s Jewish creators, in writing about a Jewish community instead of a Puerto Rican one, could have crafted a more accurate, respectful depiction of the culture they sought to dramatize. Others have pointed out the ineptitude of their attempts to write authentically about a demographic they were not part of, and in fact knew barely anything about.

But there’s something about the attitude the early drafts take toward religion that, I suspect, may have fundamentally impeded the musical’s ability to land so compellingly with audiences.

“Jewish ‘West Side Story’” suggests that religion of any kind makes its adherents inherently susceptible to prejudice. Juliet’s Jewish family members – who, perhaps due to the creators’ own backgrounds, are more focal than Romeo’s Italian kin – oppose ethnic mixing, and seem to subscribe to stereotypically essentializing ideas. At one point, the Capulets tell Juliet she must return home, “and anyway, that love is doomed – because Romeo is an Italian.” [Though, to be fair, they add “and a murderer,” which seems a more reasonable grievance.]

It is difficult, given the identities of the creators, not to read a slightly personal element to the depiction of the Jewish families. It’s as though these men harbor a grudge against their own communities, resenting a pre-war generation’s retrograde attachment to demarcations they felt separated Jews from the rest of white America. The creators draft a fantasy of escaping from the confines of this upbringing, and then place that attempt within a plot that dramatizes the violent consequences of such escape. Tradition, in this framing, is bad, but flouting it is dangerous.

Unlike the tradition-bound families and insular gangs, the voices of morality in the musical have divested from their factions entirely. The romantic leads are purely in love and therefore able to see past hate: “The difference in religion,” notes Laurents in a description of what he has titled “BALCONY SCENE (FIRE ESCAPE),” “should not matter to either of them.” And the wise Doc, who functions as mediator between the two gangs, is described

as having “no religion.” This choice seems to imply a moral superiority in abstaining from faith. The takeaway: Religious difference separates, and so to remove that rift, remove the religion.

That the “Jewish version” did not allow for a particularly capacious commentary on identity might also be symptomatic of the precarity of Jewish identity at the time. Jewish theater historian Warren Hoffman writes in his book “The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical” that during the development of this musical, “The racial and ethnic landscape of the United States, particularly the country’s white landscape, was quickly changing as the team was writing.”

As American anti-Black racism accelerated, Ashkenazi Jews and other previously non-white groups with European lineage were permitted an unprecedented entree into whiteness. Around this time, in other words, European Jews may have recently become too white to serve as prototypes of the racially oppressed.

In replacing the Jews, then, “West Side Story” became an explosive allegory about race, with a more modern, appealingly liberal, and neatly universalizable message. The “West Side Story” that eventually met its audience tried to say something along the lines of: Do not eradicate difference; tolerate it, admire it, celebrate it. However shoddy its depiction of the populations it centered, what it tried to say about their differences evidently felt electric – at least to some audiences – at the time. For the purposes of creating a broadly appealing musical, the kind that met the success “West Side Story” did, the decision to remove the Jews was likely crucial.

*

By the next of Laurents’ treatments, the Jewish gang has been quietly swapped out for a Puerto Rican one. Some of the names have begun to shift, too: Benvolio becomes Benny, Tybalt becomes Bernardo. Juliet is still Juliet, but Tante is Anita. The musical is creeping toward its final form.

When the violence accelerates, Doc – now, interestingly, described as “possibly a Jew” – tries vainly to stop the coming rumble.” Doc isn’t white enough to be a gentile, meaning he is sympathetic to the experiences of prejudice the Puerto Rican characters face. But he is just white enough to garner acceptance from the white characters. When the musical centered around religion, Doc had none; now that it focuses on race, “none” is no longer a possibility. Jewishness, in its midcentury position of liminal whiteness, has become the

ethnicity of mediation.

It's easy to feel that consequential choices like these in the story of the development of a hit are made with full awareness of their impact. That the creators had a canny intuition for the zeitgeist, and could sense that a message of racial tolerance would resonate with audiences better than one about religious difference. But according to Laurents' biography, the creators abandoned the Jewish plot simply because they realized someone else had already written it: "Abie's Irish Rose," a play from the 1920s, dealt similarly with Jewish-gentile intermarriage.

Paging through these drafts – some of them photocopies, some the actual paper Laurents typed into – in a silent reading room in Lincoln Center, I was overcome, more than anything else, by a sense of the documents' vitality. At the time these treatments were created, the musical was so far from complete it seemed to be visibly evolving between drafts, even within them. The pages are littered with little typos, misspellings, and punctuation errors.

Often, Laurents types faster than he thinks – lacking a modern backspace bar, he revises his vision mid-sentence. In one addendum, Laurents broods, directionless, over the characters' names. "I think we should not try to get names reminiscent of the originals. I do not like Judy for Juliet anymore than I like Ricki for Romeo. I think both are too flip-sounding and lack poetic softness." He suggests "Ruth" or "Ruthanna" for the female lead, but worries that "they begin with 'R' – which is inverting for no apparent reason." This, he decides, could be dangerous, because "people might think there was a definite reason."

Not all artistic choices, however successfully implemented, are deliberate. Sometimes, people simply want to make something new. After all, these drafts are unpolished and intimate, intended for internal circulation among the creators. At one point, Laurents writes, playfully: "The indication of musical numbers is, in places, the roughest of the above. I would like suggestions from the musical genius dept. on this as soon as possible."

These documents provide only a glimpse of an early version of what would become a fixture of the musical theater canon. Just some Jewish artists jotting down passing thoughts that would shape, eventually, into one of the most successful and culturally indelible musicals in American history.

Eliya Smith is an editorial fellow at the Forward. Follow her online at [@elijasmith](#).

Opinion

Our preschool welcomed Santa – and exiled my Jewish daughter

By Meg Keene

As told to Nora Berman; edited for length and clarity.

The phone lit up with an unexpected text message: it was from a staff member at my daughter's preschool.

I was confused as to why they would be texting now, when the entire class was supposed to be in the middle of their holiday party.

“The party has started,” the text said. “Your daughter is in a backroom alone with a teacher so she doesn't have to interact with Santa. You might want to pick her up.”

Imagine a 3-year-old sitting in a classroom with a teacher while all of her friends and classmates are celebrating at a holiday party down the hall: this is apparently the best solution to make sure that non-Christian students feel included at the holiday party.

I genuinely think that the owner of this preschool was trying to do the right thing and respect my family's wishes. But in the end, when it came to a choice between having all children feel included versus centering Christmas, Christmas won. It usually does in America.

Before I had kids, my relationship with the “holiday season” was pretty neutral. Having converted to Judaism almost 2 decades ago, I didn't have the same memories of isolation my husband had from growing up as the only Jewish kid in a large high school. Christmas felt generically happy, and yet also not a real part of my present life. As Jews, we do other things, and it's fine.

However, as the kids got older, it started getting more difficult. Once they hit two years-old, they began to be invited to “holiday parties” where Santa would inevitably pop up all in

red and white. Unless you are enrolled in a Head Start program or have access to a publicly funded preschool in your area, many preschools in the United States are private, which means they have no legal limitations on religious observance. All you can do is appeal to their better natures, or try to afford a Jewish private school.

At my eldest child's preschool, we got through previous Christmas seasons relatively unscathed. There was a holiday party, but Santa would only drop by during the final five minutes, giving us ample time to leave before his arrival. His preschool teacher didn't personally know any other Jews, but she knew that we were Jewish, and was totally cool with our request to have "minimal Santa." The teacher additionally tried to keep the class crafts from being explicitly Christmas-y – yes to paper snowflakes and no to red and green decorations.

Everything changed when we placed our second child, our daughter, in a "nicer" preschool, one that was allegedly more aware and tolerant. They emphasized their focus on diversity and inclusion, and billed themselves as being particularly sensitive around issues of race, gender and religion. I really liked the owner of the preschool and found her to be thoughtful and caring. I even reached out to thank her for not including Santa on the holiday party invite, and shared how we had previously had to dash out of events before Santa arrived, which we were so happy to not have to do this year. This message was my first mistake.

"No, Santa's coming."

Further conversations revealed that not only was Santa coming to the holiday party, but Santa was the party.

I explained to the preschool owner that I just wasn't comfortable with having my daughter listen to a fictional Santa read her a story, while being told by her teacher and classmates that Santa is real. One of my reasons for my discomfort is the implied, often direct threat from other parents that your tiny child needs to make sure not to reveal that Santa doesn't exist.

"How can you justify telling your child Santa isn't real?" is an aggrieved question I get asked often, as if by telling my child the truth about Santa that I have ruined the holiday season for other children forever.

The pressure around Santa is enormous, and the weight of upholding the Santa Claus myth

often gets unfairly placed on the small shoulders of children whose parents have told them the truth.

In the aftermath of this holiday party debacle, it was clear that the school viewed us as both a problem and responsible for finding a solution to our own child's inclusion. We were negatively compared to other non-Christian families who "didn't have an issue" with Santa. Those that are not bothered by the dominant culture are often held up as the positive example of a "good family," whereas those of us that push for more inclusive education are seen as making trouble.

As a possible "compromise," I was encouraged to come in (and take time off of work) to teach about Hanukkah, an option I declined. It's baffling to me that the onus of making the classroom a more inclusive place falls on minority parents ourselves, and not the educators, but it's a story I've unfortunately heard repeatedly from Jewish friends.

I know that alternative ways of celebrating are possible – ones that truly do include everyone. My son's elementary school held a pageant one Dec., the theme of which was "Light in the Darkness." The staff had researched many different cultures and their celebrations during this midwinter period, and the pageant story focused on all of the different cross-cultural narratives that display the innate human instinct to seek out and celebrate light. The kids performed songs from around the world, including Christmas and Hanukkah songs, that were all about finding and nurturing light in the darkness.

Coming away from this pageant, I felt part of the school community. It was strikingly opposed to the small and angry feeling of "You ruined our Christmas by making us include you," that I've become accustomed to.

How amazing would it be if culturally Christian schools and teachers saw this time of year as an opportunity to enrich and broaden the perspectives of their students rather than blaming concerned Jewish parents for "taking away Santa?"

I know at least one child who doesn't want to spend another holiday party alone.

Meg Keene is the Founder of Niqeva, a community for ambitious Jewish women, which she runs as part of Practical Business School. Meg is the Editor-in-chief of A Practical Wedding, which she founded in 2008. She has written two bestselling wedding books. Meg's work has been referenced in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, NPR, and The Atlantic, among many other publications. She currently resides in Marin County, CA where she and her husband are raising two Jewish kids.

News

‘I’ll have what he’s having’: Told he had little time left, my rabbi-dad wanted a last meal at Katz’s deli

By Avi Dresner

There was no way my father, 92 and with stage 4 metastatic colon cancer, could wait in the 40-minute line for what we knew would be his last meal at Katz’s Deli, so we dropped my sister off and went to park. Miraculously, after a single circling, we found a parking spot a block from the famous deli’s door.

Dad also cannot go an hour without a bathroom break, but the angels were with us again: a Marshall’s with not only a public restroom but an elevator to get to it was stationed halfway between our car and our lunch. Inside Katz’s, the security guard checking vaccination cards took one look at dad hunched over his walker and let us through.

“We’re all going to be there someday,” the guard said. He might have added, “If we’re lucky.”

This pilgrimage to the temple of pastrami was among a handful of items on the bucket list that my father, Rabbi Israel S. Dresner, drew up within 24 hours of the doctors telling him last month that he would not make it to his 93rd birthday in April.

He wanted to see one final Broadway show, so my sister, Tamar, took him to “Book of Mormon” the day before Thanksgiving. He wanted to daven one more time at Central Synagogue in Manhattan, which is where we went after Katz’s. And he wanted one final pastrami on rye at this venerable institution of the old Jewish Lower East Side, where dad was born, on Fifth Street between Avenues C and D.

Despite his age, Tamar and I were devastated by the finality of the doctor’s prognosis. It’s only human to want more time. Dad, on the other hand, was stoic. A lifelong history and geography buff, who has always preferred the intellectual to the emotional, he spent the

entire visit telling the nurse all about the Philippines, where she was from, and the oncologist all about Lebanon, where he was born.

He didn't ask a single question about the disease. He was ready – and ready to fill whatever weeks he had left, as he had filled the nine decades before.

My dad, known as Sy, was born a few blocks from Katz's on the Lower East Side, and grew up in Brooklyn. He served in the Army during the Korean War and on New Jersey pulpits for 37 years. He was a pioneering civil rights crusader, who organized the largest mass arrests of rabbis and interfaith clergy in American history, and was close to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who asked him to deliver the prayer at the foot of the Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in 1965.

That afternoon at Katz's, I thought about all of the photos we have of Dad and King as I took in the hundreds of floor-to-ceiling portraits of actors, athletes, politicians and other celebrities that adorn the deli's walls.

We'd been going to Katz's since the 1970s, when the Lower East Side was seedier than a loaf of Jewish rye. We returned pretty regularly for father-son time up through my bar mitzvah in 1982, and in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when I was a young – and poor – adult living in Manhattan.

Like my dad, through all those decades, Katz's never seemed to change. As we walked in last week, we were handed the same raffle-ticket style stubs on which the deli men record the orders at each station of the kosher-style cross. We walked by the old "Send A Salami To Your Boy In The Army" signs, and took a table near a photo of Rob Reiner, who transformed Katz's from New York institution to international tourist destination with "When Harry Met Sally."

It's in that 1989 film, of course, where Reiner's own mother brilliantly responds to Meg Ryan's scene-stealing fake orgasm with the immortal line, "I'll have what she's having." That's basically what I'd been thinking since Dad's diagnosis: I hope I can approach my own death with similar equanimity and dignity.

It's not just the bucket list. Dad has also worked alongside Tamar and me over the past weeks to plan his own funeral, including who should speak and what tallit and kippah he should be buried in. We have recorded him offering blessings for my 9- and 10-year old sons' future bnei mitzvah, and have begun to draft his death notice together. We even

picked out his casket together from the funeral home's website.

When we asked what he wanted his last Broadway show to be, Dad immediately responded, "Book of Mormon." He thought the show would be about Mormonism in the same way that he thought "Black Panther" would be about the Black Panther Movement. He loved it anyway.

From Katz's, we headed uptown for the high but haimish Broadway musical-level production that is Kabbalat Shabbat services at Central Synagogue, where Rabbi Angela Buchdahl had generously offered to honor him on what just happened to be International Human Rights Day. She surprised us by introducing him with a slideshow of photographs of Dad and Dr. King, and reading from one of the telegrams King sent Dad in jail after my father's arrest in Tallahassee during the first Interfaith Clergy Freedom Ride in 1961.

"You are the valiant ones. All America went to jail with you. Our spiritual limitations are shown by your physical incarceration," it says. "Your heroism is the nonviolent movement's witness to a world that has seen too little of the spirit and purpose of the prophets and disciples.

"Today it is your valiant act that touches the conscience of Americans of good will. Your example is a judgement and an inspiration to each of us."

I looked up at the gold lettered Hebrew words above Central's ark: da lifnei mi atah omed; know before whom you stand. Similar words were on the synagogue's program: da mai'ayin batah u l'an atah holeich; know where you have come from and where you are going.

The next item on Dad's bucket list is a visit to his parents' graves – a fitting final stop, as that is where his physical journey will end, too. When my time comes, whenever it may be, I hope to have what he's having now.

Avi Dresner is a writer, and executive producer of the forthcoming documentary, "The Rabbi & The Reverend."



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