



Forward

WEEKEND READS

5.20.22

Culture

99 years ago, she was born on the Lower East Side (and she still remembers everything)

By Laurie Gwen Shapiro

I'm not positive why I asked my Aunt Paula what she thought about Don Rickles and Nikita Khrushchev. I guess because Rickles and Khrushchev looked alike. To backtrack (easy to do when an article is three sentences in), I'd asked my auntie, who just turned 99, permission to publish a story of her (mostly) 20th-century recollections. Everyone who turns 99 should have their recollections published, although don't ask me to help you with it because I would never get any shopping done.

I had a few notes but no checklist of questions, and yet, Aunt Paula was unfazed by anything I asked, no matter how much of a non sequitur it seemed to be. Paula Goldstein ("Aunt Peshie" in the family) is unfazed by anything, which has a lot to do with why she is 99. This snowbird lives in a condo in Florida but migrates north when the weather warms. After so many Zoom visits, I could actually spend real time with her in her sparkling clean New Jersey apartment she keeps to be close to her daughter. She gave me a seltzer, and I launched in.

Nixon?

"A crook. I never liked him! How could I? He was a Republican!"

JFK?

"A bit of a flirter. We all know he liked women, but I think he couldn't help the attention. He was so impossibly handsome. Every woman in America was in love with him."

Don Rickles?

She made a face. "Such an obnoxious man! Maybe some people like that type of humor. I

guess I was not one of them. Jack Benny, yes. Fred Allen, good. Those guys were hilarious. George Burns and Gracie Allen were also hilarious. Of course, if you're talking about all-time comedians, it doesn't get better than Sid Caesar. Maybe Bill Maher." [Bill Maher?] As for the famous Oscars slap, she sides with Chris Rock. "That was wrong. How do you defend assault?"

And Khrushchev?

"I have him right here!" she said. She headed to a shelf, grabbed a wooden matryoshka doll with a chubby bald man, and handed him to me. "I visited Russia once, in the 1970s, and I brought back lots of tchotchkes. This is Khrushchev. If you open him, there's Stalin, and inside Stalin is Lenin."

I had never held three dictators at once, I said.

Aunt Paula laughed and sat back down.

"Are those New Balance?" I asked, pointing to her sneakers.

"Yes, I wore my Pumas out." In her new sneaks and her black leggings, she opts for daily walks, which keep her 5'3" nonagenarian frame fit. [My aunt amends this with, "I was 5'3" – Now, sadly, I am more like 5 foot!"]

It was fun to interview someone who I've been close to since I was a child, and I felt honored to learn even more about my aunt. Even if I first approached her in a way that was sometimes irreverent, I think she was gratified to know that her memories were valued. Eventually, we settled on a chronological approach to getting her memories down. We began with her reminiscences of the ten-story Forward Building on East Broadway.

"It was the tallest building in the neighborhood, like the North Star of the Lower East Side. If you got lost, you just looked for the building. When I was a very young girl, my parents' tenement apartment was 103 Monroe St. When we lived in the back part and then the front, which was a slightly improved living situation, my parents installed a small bathroom right in the living room."

The Forward Building was also near her schools, PS 2 and PS 177, and Seward Park High School. "Not to mention Hebrew school," she said.

I was surprised girls were sent to Hebrew school. "Yes, unfortunately, twice a week," she

said. “Of course, the girls in our family were expected to read Hebrew. We came from rabbinical stock, with great yicchus, pedigree. All the women in our family could read Hebrew fluently.” [My great-great-grandfather Chaim Yaakov Shapira was the chief Dayan [chief judge] of Jerusalem. According to elaborate charts, Paula and I are direct descendants of Rashi via two of his daughters – as well as the Maharal of Prague. But pedigree didn’t pay the rent.]

“My parents had emigrated to New York, partly for the Abba to escape conscription in the Turkish war, partly because he had become less religious,” Paula said. “My father was part of a long unbroken lineage, and studying to be a rabbi, but he didn’t believe as much as he was supposed to believe, and decided he wanted to be a pharmacist. In Jerusalem, my mother said, we were something. But in Manhattan, we were as poor as they came.”

The Forward, though, was a simple pleasure even immigrants could afford.

“I used to buy the Forverts for my parents because they read that religiously, as it aligned with their socialist politics. They would give me a few pennies, and I would wander down to the candy store on Market Street to get the newspaper and then bring it back. But they didn’t read Der Morgen Zhurnal, another Jewish paper that was too conservative for their taste. The Morgen Freiheit, a communist paper, was also not for them. So they just read their Forverts back to front. They sometimes shared the ‘Bintel Brief’ at dinner for family discussion. On weekends, the newspaper printed special pictures in sepia. We all loved looking at them.

“On Election Day, The Forverts would have a big screen set up on the front of their building. Then, when it got dark, the whole neighborhood would come and look and see the results of the election projected against the building’s wall. But before the results were ready, they had cartoons of Mickey Mouse for the kinder, the children. After the mothers and children went home, the men would wait for the projections.”

Even my aunt marvels at the changes she has lived to see.

“Back in those days, there were no streetlights,” she said. “Just crossing the street was dangerous. There weren’t that many cars on the Lower East Side, but horses and buggies were everywhere. And you had the businesses attached to buggies, like the knife sharpener and the iceman, that kind of thing. Eventually, we got streetlights, which were a major help.”

Paula doesn’t romanticize tenement life too much, nor did my father, who died in 2020 just

before his 100th birthday. Still, she holds a special place for Coney Island, reachable from the Lower East Side by subway. “As a family, we traveled there once a year, departing from East Broadway. As immigrants, it was quite an adventure without a car. My mother carried a huge shopping bag full of food and towels. We rode the BMT subway in our bathing suits under our clothes. It was luxurious to sit in the sun, bake a bit, and stroll on the boardwalk. We didn’t have the money for the rides, but that was fine. After returning home, we were exhausted but satisfied.”

Paula smiled broadly, remembering my immigrant grandmother when she came back from the beach. “She always sighed loudly and said ‘home sweet home.’ We were tired, and even a tenement bed was enough.”

There were charity escapes too. Over 600 impoverished children from the Lower East Side and other immigrant neighborhoods could attend summer camp in Mountainville, New York, in the Catskills of Orange County. Camp Felicia was run by the Ethical Culture Society for the very young. Camp Madison was run by the Lower East Side’s Madison House Settlement up in Tomkins Corners, New York, for older kids who outgrew Camp Felicia. Paula has many fond memories of these trips to the Catskills.

One of my aunt’s earliest memories is of Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic. Don’t get too excited! There are no great details because Aunt Paula was 4 at the time.

“The only thing I can recall is people being excited at the dinner table, especially your father, who was 7,” she said. “I may be able to do better with other events. I clearly recall the crash of 1929 and my parents talking about people jumping out of windows and committing suicide after losing their life savings. Big shots selling apples. As it was, we were already in a poor financial state, but after the crash, we were in a disastrous financial situation.”

After he moved back in with me to the Lower East Side, my father once told me about my grandmother, Ida, chopping wood with an ax at a construction site being demolished in our neighborhood. Paula nodded, after taking a long sip of water. “It’s true,” she said. “For stoves that burn coal or wood. It was free if you chopped it. Around that time, we had to rely on home relief, and well, that felt awful for parents and children. I hated the clothes provided for us. Fortunately, Ima had run a sewing school back in Jerusalem when Abba was a yeshiva scholar and could make me dresses on her machine. Eventually, she returned to work managing a bridal shop on Clinton Street.”

Paula also remembers the time in the 1930s when Lindbergh’s baby was kidnapped. “A

man named Bruno Hauptmann was accused of it, and it was a horrible situation,” she said. “We talked about it at the dinner table in Yiddish because it was so sad. Although he claimed not to have been involved, no one believed him.” She pauses for a second. “I saw Eleanor Roosevelt once! In the Lower East Side! Is that good?”

[You bet!]

In 1934, when Aunt Paula was 11, the long and skinny Sara Delano Roosevelt Park opened on the Lower East Side, stretching over four blocks. It was the largest park for children the city had ever built, and it was named after the president’s mother, the “First Mother,” who was about to celebrate her 80th birthday. Eleanor Roosevelt headed down there from her Upper East Side digs, dutifully representing her overbearing mother-in-law. Accounts from the time mention rows of schoolgirls dressed in white middy shirts standing at attention by basketball hoops and volleyball nets. [Two years later, a week before the 1936 election, there was a bigger gathering of 20,000 with the president there, but Paula was sure she was there at the first ceremony in 1934. I asked if it was Sara there then. “No! Eleanor.”]

Paula also remembers the radio crackling with static when she heard the news that Amelia Earhart had disappeared somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. “I was a big fan. She was so inspiring to all my classmates, and we followed the story until we gave up hope.”

As Amelia Earhart’s biographer, I am startled that she remembers this so well. I check my phone for the day of the week in 1937. Amelia Earhart disappeared on a Friday, and my now-very-secular family celebrated Shabbos then. That must have been another lively tenement dinner conversation over challah and brisket.

Litvaks don’t mess with nonsense, especially my family, who were once part of a stern scholarly group labeled the Misnagdim who doubted much of Hasidic interpretation. No conspiracy theories for them! “The government didn’t know what had happened, and we decided as a family that Amelia probably ended up underwater,” she said.

Paula and I moved on to talk about the end of the Great Depression.

“This is a painful time for me, Laurie,” Paula said. “I’m not exactly sure what year it was, but we had a home inspection at our house. Your father was bedridden after a terrible infection that spread, and your uncle Sol, who was so much older than us, had his own family to support. My parents had small-time jobs and I was old enough to work and add income to the family, and this stern woman told my family I had to get a job. I couldn’t attend City College [the midtown branch] during the day if we wanted to keep receiving

money from the government. It was a big deal to get into the daytime college. Your grades had to be stellar, and I did well in school. My parents were very ashamed that I had to go through that disappointment. I now had to go to college at night and get a job during the day, which was not a positive experience. I worked as a teenage clerk in a button factory in the Garment District, on West 39th St., at a firm called Harlem-Adler.”

She admitted that she was furious at her lot but movies offered an escape from anger.

Paula’s favorite film star before and during the war was that blonde Adonis, Gene Raymond. In the war, he was even a decorated B-17 pilot. “The most gorgeous thing the world had ever seen,” one contemporary called him. Since 1937, he had been married to brunette movie star Jeanette MacDonald. She named her first son, Gene, after him. I was sucked into a deep Wikipedia read while fact-checking this part of our discussion, as I didn’t know anything about this forgotten heartthrob. Yes, Raymond was married to Jeanette MacDonald. Yes, he was a pilot. But did Aunt Paula know Jeanette MacDonald allegedly caught him in bed with drummer Buddy Rich? While she was pregnant with Nelson Eddy’s baby? Who knew nearly-90-year-old gossip could be so juicy?

Several friends who heard I was writing about Paula asked if she remembered the Third Avenue El coming down in 1955. She couldn’t (she was living in Queens at the time, a stay-at-home mom), but Paula certainly remembered riding the elevated railroad in Manhattan as soon as she was able to do so.

“It was such a fun experience,” she said. “Sometimes, the train would circle around the curb, and I could peek into the windows of people living nearby. It could be a bit shocking!” She remembers babysitting for a young relative in the Bronx one time, and a station was closed, so she had to travel to Chambers Street, not her stop. It was after midnight, and no one knew where she was. “There was no texting! A police officer met me and escorted me to my home when I got out of the station. My mother had called the police.” (I laughed. My grandmother, born in the 19th century, Aunt Paula’s mother, was my ancient-looking babysitter in the 1970s. She did not play around!)

“I was 18 in 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked,” Paula told me. “Of course, everyone knows it was a surprise attack. We were diplomatically negotiating with the Japanese, and then suddenly, we were under attack. At least that’s how I remember it. Did you know that we were talking to them?” (I actually didn’t. That night I read more. In November, the Japanese prime minister proposed to Roosevelt that they meet in person soon, either in Honolulu or Juneau, Alaska, to discuss Japan’s war in China.)

“It was a Sunday, I think. My parents were upset to the point of tears. Because we had two boys in the family, they were patriotic but naturally concerned. We survived the war without losing our family members because one of them, your father, was too ill to be drafted. In fact, after an operation, your father spent six months in the hospital, and we thought he would never walk again. My family arranged for him to be listed 4-F [a draft classification for men deemed unfit for military service for physical, mental, or moral reasons]. Your uncle Sol was too old to be drafted.

“But I served as a USO hostess at the ritzy Temple Emanuel on Fifth Avenue during the war. What an honor! A job application had to be submitted, and I had to dress nicely for an interview. I took the subway uptown several times a week and danced with the soldiers, many of whom were married or had girlfriends. Before they were deployed, this was a pleasant experience for them. The hostesses would flirt with them and have enjoyable conversations, but we weren’t allowed to date them. You had to be careful not to fall in love with a handsome soldier. We’d welcome them, serve dinner, and dance. Some asked, ‘Will you write to me?’

“While I abided by the rules, not everyone did, and believe me, I met some handsome soldiers. We all felt like we were helping the war effort.”

“It must have been tough to realize that some of the men you danced with didn’t make it,” I said, and Paula nodded.

“My grandchildren, so used to getting things instantly, are amazed that there were so many restrictions during the war. In those days, you couldn’t buy a washing machine, you couldn’t buy a phone, or you couldn’t buy lots of different things. We used ration cards to purchase certain foods, but only in specific quantities. Gasoline, butter, sugar, and many other things were limited, even milk and coffee. Nylon, silk, rubber, and tires were nearly impossible to find.”

I was extra curious about the stockings, as I had read silk stockings were unavailable during the war, so some people painted them on.

“Well,” said Paula, “I repaired any runs I had with a special gadget. A hole couldn’t be repaired, but a run could be, so I didn’t have to have them mended.”

And her hair? How did she wear it in the war years?

“After having a pageboy haircut as a child, I kept my hair short because it was easier to

manage, and I didn't look as cute with long hair." But when the Andrews Sisters were ruling the charts, Paula used to go to the beauty parlor, and they would tease her hair to the skies.

Paula had teased hair when she turned 21 in May 1944 and headed to the polls for the first time to cast a vote in a presidential election.

She was a proud girl of the staunchly Democratic Lower East Side, and she pulled a lever for Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Recalling wartime brought back some painful memories during our meeting. "The most devastating global event in my lifetime was the Holocaust. How could this have happened? So many people were killed. Why, because one evil person wanted to get rid of them? Those who remember must bear witness. I find it inconceivable to believe anyone who witnessed what fascism could do to humanity could vote for Trump. Did you learn the lessons of the Holocaust? Trump's idea of a good guy is Putin. That alone is appalling. I am a 99-year-old woman, and I know a few things, like right from wrong. I want my great-grandchildren to know where I stood on Trump."

Next came a happier stretch of interview. Aunt Paula's face broke into a smile at the memory of the favorite New York mayor of her lifetime, Fiorello LaGuardia. Paula described him as lovable. LaGuardia's mother was Jewish, and his father was a lapsed Catholic turned Episcopalian. The short and paunchy LaGuardia (nicknamed the Little Flower) tried his best to serve as a father figure for anguished New Yorkers. During the summer newspaper strike in 1945, he was especially comforting. The traumatic war was almost over when he decided to read "Little Orphan Annie" and "Dick Tracy" as part of his regular Sunday radio newscast on WNYC. This was also a fun way to score a political point about the union letting New Yorkers down during need. And Mayor LaGuardia certainly read "Dick Tracy" enthusiastically. "Say children, what does it all mean? It means that dirty money never brings any luck! No, dirty money always brings sorrow and sadness and misery and disgrace." LaGuardia's signature phrase "What does it all mean?" was sampled by hip hop trio De La Soul in 1989.

Paula remembered that in 1940 LaGuardia cleared up all the pushcarts, and moved longtime sellers into the city-run Essex Street Market, with four buildings and 475 vendors. A swankier and hipper light-filled Essex Market complex across the street from the old WPA-era complex attracts a younger generation and is part of this legacy.

And an even better memory for Paula was the end of the war.

“Oh! People were so excited when we found out. It was possibly the greatest joy I ever experienced. I was at home with my family and heard the news on the radio about the crowds at Times Square. But it was almost as festive on East Broadway. We had this man downstairs on the street, sort of a loon, but he was walking up and down the street and yelling repeatedly. ‘The war is over! The war is over!’ Before you knew it, he had followers marching down the block with him, laughing and crying.”

“Things got better after the war, giving us a sense of peace,” Paula said. She laughed for a second before she explained. “As you could not get a phone during the war, we finally got one after it ended, but it was a troublesome party line. One phone line was shared by multiple people in different apartments! You couldn’t make a call if the other party was on the phone. You had to wait until your neighbor was finished talking before making your call. Not easy to believe now, I’m sure.”

My svelte and fashionable aunt was married in 1948 to Sid Goldstein, a handsome would-be architect from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, who had been an air mechanic in WWII. They met at a political event held in her parents’ apartment when they were away for the day. “Sid and I got married at Broadway Mansion, a wedding hall across the street. I walked down tenement steps and across East Broadway in my bridal gown. At first, we lived in my parents’ place on East Broadway, and my son Gene lived there for his first year. It was challenging to get an apartment after the war. Still, eventually, we managed to find a cheap place in Queens, a starter apartment. I was often back on the Lower East Side to visit my parents, who eventually got a lovely co-op apartment through the Ladies Garment Workers’ union.”

[I live in that apartment now with my family.]

Paula remembers visiting her old neighborhood in the summer of 1953 when Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed. “The Rosenbergs lived in Knickerbocker Village, a middle-class Lower East Side complex where one of my childhood friends moved into when it first opened up in the 1930s. I felt sick thinking about the children they would leave behind. What were their children’s ages? Perhaps 6 and 10.” [A quick fact check on my phone confirmed my aunt’s guess.]

When Paula and I started talking about the 1960s, she had another flood of memories, especially on the day Kennedy was shot.

“All day long, we watched. Laurie, it was such a somber day,” she said. “When Roosevelt died, we learned it on the radio. But with Kennedy’s death, we saw everything Jackie saw.

She was sitting next to him, and then when they had the funeral, with his small children saluting his dead body, that was very difficult to watch. But trust me, everybody was watching.”

Times were changing, and Paula’s look changed too; she was pretty stylish, but she kept up with more than just clothing. Silently, she supported her eldest son’s political protests, especially against the 1970 Kent State massacre. “Gene had to be careful, as he wanted to be a dentist and had applied to medical school. But he was so angry. And for good reason.”

Her most painful memory was when her husband Sid, an up-and-coming architect at I.M. Pei, died from lupus in 1970. Even today, it is not something she wants to dwell upon.

It was a crushing mental blow, and with four kids, a monetary setback too. As a housewife, she had taken the odd bookkeeping job. However, now a widowed mother of four, she used the college degree she had earned in night classes. She found full-time work at a Manhattan clothing company, Charles Greenberg and Sons. She started as a bookkeeper and worked her way up to a human resources manager.

Like many who have lost a life partner, darkness hit at odd times, and friends and family encouraged her to travel for a mental escape.

“The first airplane ride I took was a few years after my husband Sid died,” she said. “My first flight was on El Al to Israel. I visited where my parents grew up, in the extremely religious enclave at Mea Shearim. When I visited, it was a much more Orthodox neighborhood than when the Aba and the Ima arrived from Lithuania at the end of the 1800s. It was fascinating, and I met so many relatives. We had very little direct loss during the Holocaust because our family moved to Jerusalem at the end of the 19th century. Ever since then, I’ve been traveling. Meeting interesting people and venturing to far-flung places have helped keep loneliness at bay. I traveled to Russia, China, Spain, France, England, Wales and Scotland.”

She had been deeply in love with Sid and could not bring herself to date new people. Until she was in a better place, her children’s accomplishments would provide whatever joy she might have.

The second eldest of her three sons, Stuart Goldstein, then a student at Stony Brook, decided to take up squash in the early 1970s. My cousin “Stuie” had honed his quickness via table tennis and became one of the top squash players in the world and a minor celebrity. “I attended all of his games, of course. It was thrilling to be there. The speed, the

power. It was wild. A new chapter in my life.” As an athlete’s mom, a favorite moment was when Stu beat the legendary ten-time North American champion, Sharif Khan.

The Forward recently profiled his daughter Dani G. Waldman, who also became a world champion athlete. In this year’s Tokyo Olympics, she was a showjumper.

Paula says she takes great pride in all of her four children. Gene, the dentist; Stu, who entered real estate after his athletic career; Eric, the architect; and her baby girl Cora, who became a children’s clothing designer and is now a grandmother herself.

“I consider my family the most precious thing in my life. I have four children, eleven grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren, so I have brought into this world 21 people. That’s a lot of people. A village.”

I have strong memories of my aunt in the 1980s when she was the walking nut I am now. Paula’s son Gene, the dentist, gave her a book about walking and she walked all over New York City back then, often strolling from her daughter’s apartment at 93rd Street to Penn Station.

We had talked a lot already, but my indefatigable aunt said she did not need a break. She was going strong by the time we got on to a new century and then 9/11. “I was in the living room, and I had the TV on, and I saw the plane fly into that second tower, and it collapsed. I saw it on TV. Wow, that was terrible. I think plenty of Americans remember that day without me rehashing it.”

She says she enjoys being connected to her grandchildren on social media, especially Facebook. “I keep up as best I can, and I certainly don’t mind all our progress in my lifetime. Of course, I love having my own telephone line and a refrigerator, air-conditioning, and TV. I even tried out that Wordle game. I think about the future, not the past, and I am excited about my 100th birthday ‘to-do’ my kids claim they are having for me.”

My aunt still manages to get her steps in every day. “Walking keeps me fit, and I have stayed vigilant about masks and vaccines as the pandemic lingers. I was just vaccinated again.”

Aunt Paula lost one of her two sisters from complications of COVID last year after she was stuck in an assisted living facility. “This might sound strange, but I miss fighting with Chavie. [My Aunt Eva’s Yiddish name.] We were very close. Even when we argued, it was just sisterly stuff. I wish I could speak to her every day. Fortunately, I have my baby sister,

Esther, to call.” (Her “baby” sister, my equally vivacious Aunt Esther, is 91.) She shared her room with two younger sisters when living in a tenement.

I checked my watch, and we had been talking for four hours. I had to wind things up if I was hoping to catch my train back to Manhattan.

But I had one last question. And it meant a lot to me to ask.

“Go ahead!”

What was the most crucial lesson my aunt could impart to the Forward’s readers?

She didn’t hesitate.

“That protecting democracy is everyone’s job, including those who are better off and feel removed from humble beginnings. Democracy must be protected for our children, our grandchildren, and the future of our country. We all need to vote! Vote Democrat. Remember how poorly your family was treated as immigrants! Look at your privileged lives now. Empathize. Help, don’t hinder immigrants’ lives. Support a women’s right to govern her own body. Be kind.”

Laurie Gwen Shapiro’s most recent book is “The Stowaway: A Young Man’s Extraordinary Adventure to Antarctica.”

News

On the Supreme Court docket, a Jewish pro-life group gets a Christian megaphone

By Louis Keene

After the Supreme Court agreed to hear the abortion case that is now roiling the nation, one of the groups that weighed in was a small nonprofit called the Jewish Pro-Life Foundation.

In an official filing to the court called an amicus brief, the foundation cited the Torah, telling the court that “Jewish law prohibits abortion and Judaism obligates us to protect innocent life in the womb.”

Most American Jews disagree with that position – 4 out of 5 support abortion rights according to a recent Pew poll – and while Jewish law on the matter is complicated, it actually requires abortion in some circumstances.

But what made the brief especially unusual was the organization that wrote and paid for it: a Christian nonprofit called the Justice Foundation. One court observer called it “quite irregular” for a Christian group to work with a Jewish group in this way. But the Jewish woman who says she sought out the partnership feels only gratitude for the assistance that allowed her to put her views before the court.

It was one of four amicus briefs filed by the Texas-based organization, whose stated mission is “to restore proper respect for God’s word and law to American jurisprudence.”

A few other Jewish parties added their names to the brief, including the Coalition for Jewish Values, an Orthodox organization founded during the Trump administration that promotes conservative viewpoints.

But the engine of the brief was the Jewish Pro-Life Foundation and its founder, Cecily Routman, who said in an interview that she enlisted the Justice Foundation’s help after she

was unable to find a Jewish lawyer to do the filing. She said she outlined the main points of her argument and Justice Foundation attorney Allan Parker wrote the brief – taking no money for it and covering more than \$1,000 in printing costs.

The Justice Foundation, she said, is made up of “Israel-loving, Jewish-loving Christian people.”

“You know, historically, good Christian people have helped us in many ways,” Routman, 63, said. “So they’re helping us again.”

Very few amicus briefs come to influence the outcome of a Supreme Court decision, but *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, the case in which the court seems poised to overturn the landmark 1973 abortion ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, has attracted an unusually high number – 140. Even when they don’t sway the justices, amicus briefs carry a symbolic heft, and may be quoted by justices in their questioning of lawyers, or in their opinions and dissents. Depending on the case, briefs with the imprimatur of a religious group can be particularly compelling.

Joshua Matz, partner at Kaplan Hecker & Fink, a public interest litigation firm that files several amicus briefs at the Supreme Court each year, said that it was typical for different religious groups to partner on an amicus brief – pro-choice Catholics worked with the National Council of Jewish Women on a brief supporting *Jackson*, for example. And firms who submit briefs will often represent their clients pro bono. But this brief, purporting to represent Jewish beliefs but written and funded by a Christian group, Matz said, was different.

“A lawyer’s job in an amicus brief is to present their client’s voice and arguments,” Matz said. “But what happened here seems quite irregular. If this brief was proposed, researched, written, filed, and otherwise conceptualized and orchestrated entirely by a Christian group, one might reasonably question who is actually speaking here.”

But Routman is far from a passive observer on the brief, and she takes credit for conceptualizing it. She is a dedicated pro-life advocate whose nonprofit is not only her full-time job – it’s also the primary expression of her Judaism.

‘Saving Jewish Lives, Healing Jewish Hearts’

Routman, a resident of Sewickley, Pennsylvania, outside Pittsburgh, grew up in the area in what she called a “normal, Jewish suburban household,” in which her dad prayed every day

and the family went to synagogue every week. She was taught the mainstream Jewish position on abortion – which is that abortion may be permitted in certain circumstances.

Later in life, she said, a combination of “personal anguish, this sense of aimlessness and unhappiness with the secular world and materialism” caused her to reexamine her beliefs on the matter. She found more pro-life advocacy online.

It was hearing a Jewish woman on the radio say that abortion bans violated her religious freedom that pushed Routman to found her own nonprofit in 2006.

In the decade and a half since, she has almost single-handedly created a deep repository of pro-life education and advocacy resources, which includes a YouTube channel and a pro-life meme bank. An eight-person team runs the organization, according to its website, with Routman’s husband as treasurer.

The Jewish Pro-Life Foundation reported receipts of \$12,465 in 2020. Routman, who said she runs it full-time and depends on an inheritance for financial support, does not take a salary.

That Jews as a group lean heavily pro-choice does not discourage her. On the contrary: she sees part of her role as counteracting their activism.

“When Jews are very out in the public as pro-abortion advocates, Judaism is seen as a religion that believes in killing children, and it foments antisemitism,” Routman said. “So we’re happy to be on the other side of it.”

But being in the Jewish minority on the issue comes with a downside: it made it hard to find a Jewish lawyer to take her case forward.

Making a match

As Routman tells it, the seeds of the partnership were sown at the March for Life, a pro-life rally in Washington where she connected with the Justice Foundation’s Israel liaison. A year later, after her friend who runs the Jewish Coalition For Religious Liberty – a pro-life group that filed its own Dobbs amicus brief – told Routman she should file her own brief, she asked her Justice Foundation contact for help.

“I mentioned to her that I needed an attorney to file a brief for us at the Supreme Court,” Routman recalled, “and she said, ‘Well, we might be able to file that for you. Why don’t you

send along the draft?”

Though anyone can file an amicus brief at the Supreme Court, each brief must also have a “counsel of record,” a lawyer admitted to the court’s bar. It was an easy call for Justice Foundation co-founder Allan Parker, a member of the bar. He also agreed to pay the printing fees required to file the brief, which he said came out to around a couple thousand dollars.

“I felt very honored that they would ask us to do it,” Parker said.

The Justice Foundation – which does not affiliate with any Christian denomination, though Parker is an ordained Baptist minister – reported \$763,511 in receipts in 2019, according to its most recent IRS filing, and expended about \$53,882 in grants to other individuals and groups.

Routman, who said she sought divine inspiration for the task, then wrote her arguments: Judaism is a religion that holds life sacred, abortion is antithetical to Torah principles, and Jewish people have a moral authority on sanctity of life issues because of their experience in the Holocaust.

“All I know is, I stood in front of my computer, and I prayed to Hashem,” Routman said, referring to God. “And I said, ‘What do you want the court to read? What do you want the court to know? What do you want to tell the Supreme Court of the United States about unborn life in the womb and how precious it is and how Jews are asked to protect and defend innocent life?’ And that brief got written.”

Parker said he based the brief on her memo.

“The Justice Foundation did all of the writing and brief preparation of the brief that was submitted to the court,” he said, adding, “The bulk of the material that was given to us came from them.”

The brief draws from Jewish rabbinic leaders from Maimonides to Moshe Feinstein. But Christian influences also made their way into its arguments. Its primary source is not legal precedent but the Hebrew Bible, and its biblical translations are from the New International Version – one of the most popular Christian versions of the Bible – and the Complete Jewish Bible, a Messianic translation.

The brief also invokes the belief that life begins at conception, an idea that does not

originate in Jewish thought. But that idea – and the essence of the brief – sounds like Routman, who traveled to Washington to represent her foundation as a counter-protestor at the Jewish Rally for Abortion Justice.

Yet Routman in turn was influenced by pro-life education that was largely developed by the Christian right. Even the brief's comparison of abortions to the Holocaust dates back to the 1970s and the National Right to Life, an organization that was originally Catholic.

'Makes perfect sense'

Routman acknowledged people might be surprised to see a Christian group filing a brief for a Jewish one. But she said her Jewish organization's partnership with Christians was a natural fit.

Most of the Christian pro-life citations, she said, came from "our Tanach," referring to the Hebrew Bible. And she found she had more in common with pro-life Christians than with pro-choice Jews.

"It only makes perfect sense," she said, "because they respect and appreciate the Old Testament more than so many Jews do today."

Parker agreed that the foundations shared theological roots.

"We all live in a society that is based on Judeo-Christian tradition," Parker said. "And its respect for the law comes from the Judeo-Christian background, which obviously means the Christian part is based on the Judaism part."

Because of the brief, Routman said, her organization has begun to gain acceptance in what she called "the traditional pro-life movement." Her articles have been published in pro-life media, and she was invited to lead a prayer at a Christian pro-life event on December 1, the day the Supreme Court heard oral arguments on Dobbs.

"When I started our group in 2006 I felt isolated and alone," Routman said. "And one of the reasons I wanted to start it was I wanted to connect with other Jews who had similar sentiments as I did. So now, I'm not lonely at all. I'm busy every minute of every day connecting, talking, dialoguing, making new friends."

Louis Keene is a staff reporter at the Forward. He can be reached at keene@forward.com or on Twitter [@thislouis](https://twitter.com/thislouis).

Culture

What is the great replacement theory and what does it say about Jews?

By Samuel Breslow

Rooted in xenophobic fears of a multicultural future, the great replacement theory has been gaining ground in conservative and far-right circles, motivating some of the world's deadliest mass shootings, including the one Saturday in Buffalo, New York, that killed 10 people at a supermarket, apparently targeted because it serves a predominantly Black neighborhood.

Those who espouse the theory feel threatened by people of color and Jews, with the latter held responsible for imagined plans to diminish the power of white Christians. The theory is now moving into the mainstream, with members of Congress, national media figures and others spouting its tenets.

Below, a primer on the theory – where it came from, how it spreads and what it means for American Jews and others.

What is the great replacement theory?

There are several versions of the great replacement theory, and they vary in their virulence. But at its core, it posits that elites are plotting to use immigration and the demographic shifts it causes to dilute the political and cultural influence of white, ethnically European Christians.

The theory notes that birth rates are higher among many immigrant groups, and hold that people of color will ultimately replace and subjugate the current white majority. It ignores the well-known demography principle that birth rates fall as standards of living increase.

In many versions, including the one espoused by the Buffalo shooter, Jews are pegged as the elites masterminding the plot.

What did the Buffalo shooter say about Jews?

Antisemitism is a central theme of great replacement theory. It is peppered throughout the Buffalo shooter's screed, which mentions Jews more than 100 times.

In a Q&A in the document, he identifies proudly as an antisemite and as a supporter of neo-Nazism. He misquotes the Jewish sacred texts, writing:

"The Talmud [or the rabbi's holy book] teaches Jews that they are God's chosen people and they are permitted to hate and exploit the goyim, and to allow pedophilia. Jews will tell you that they do not support these any more, but in reality this is what they all seek."

He continues: "For our self-preservation, the Jews must be removed from our Western civilizations, in any way possible."

The gunman also leaned heavily into notorious antisemitic tropes about Jews controlling financial institutions and the media. "The real war I'm advocating for is the gentiles vs the Jews," he wrote in a disturbing echo of the Holocaust. "We outnumber them 100x, and they are not strong by themselves. But by their Jewish ways, they turn us against each other. When you realize this you will know that the Jews are the biggest problem the Western world has ever had. They must be called out and killed, if they are lucky they will be exiled. We can not show any sympathy towards them again."

How did the theory arise?

Fears of demographic change have a long and sordid history, tracing from eugenics in the early 20th century to the "white genocide" theory promulgated by antisemite David Lane in the 1990s. In Nazi Germany, the Lebensborn program aimed to increase the number of Aryans by encouraging unmarried women to give birth to children who were given up for adoption to be raised by SS members.

But the great replacement theory's modern incarnation can be traced to the work of French writer Renaud Camus, who coined the term "great replacement" in a 2011 book.

Why has it spread so widely?

The great replacement theory spread globally in the past decade, festering on social media on platforms like Reddit, 4chan and 8chan. A 2019 report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue identified the steady growth of tweets referencing the theory over a 5-year span,

with 1.5 million in total.

Right-wing commentators and politicians have noticed the activity on social media, described by political editor Chris Stirewalt as “a focus group for pure outrage,” and begun incorporating it into their messaging.

They have often repackaged it into a seemingly milder form, leaving out explicit racial and antisemitic language to make it more palatable to a mainstream audience. In this form, it functions not only as a dog whistle but as a normalization pathway and as a gateway to more extreme variants audiences may seek out later.

What does Tucker Carlson have to do with it?

Foremost among the great replacement theory’s proprietors, Fox News pundit Tucker Carlson embraced it by name in a 2019 segment on his show.

“This is a voting rights question,” he said, stoking the fears of white viewers who feel threatened by immigrants. “I have less political power because they’re importing a brand new electorate. Why should I sit back and take that? The power that I have as an American guaranteed at birth is one man, one vote, and they’re diluting it. No, they are not allowed to do that. Why are we putting up with this?”

Although there is no direct evidence the shooter followed Carlson, his screed includes a section titled “diversity is weak” that closely mirrors themes on Carlson’s show.

How many people believe in the theory?

It’s not just the fringes. A poll released just last week by the Associated Press and NORC found that around a third of Americans, including nearly half of Republicans, agreed with the statement, “There is a group of people in this country who are trying to replace native-born Americans with immigrants who agree with their political views.”

How are American Jews reacting?

The shooting brought back painful memories for many American Jews of the 2018 attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in which a lone shooter motivated by antisemitic conspiracy theories killed 11 people and injured an additional six. It was the deadliest antisemitic hate crime in U.S. history.

It also recalls the 2017 Unite the Right rally at the University of Virginia, in which white supremacists chanted “Jews will not replace us.”

Many Jews expressed anguish at the hate crime, anger at its facilitators and solidarity with the Black community.

Michael W. Twitty, a Black Jewish chef and writer, tweeted: “We’re not garbage. We’re not expendable. Our lives should matter, how votes should matter. Our protest should matter. I’m so exhausted from crying and feeling helpless. Please Hashem, protect me and all of us from these demonic individuals. I don’t know what else to say. I’m scared.”

News

‘Whose religious freedom?’: Scenes from a Jewish rally for abortion rights

By Arno Rosenfeld

The “Jewish Rally for Abortion Justice” drew roughly 1,500 Jews to the National Mall Tuesday, where rabbis and activists proclaimed that the anti-abortion movement does not have a monopoly on faith.

Organized by the National Council of Jewish Women, the crowd drew from Jewish communities as far away as Chicago.

“Whose religious freedom are you trying to protect?” NCJW chief Sheila Katz asked of those who are seeking to outlaw abortion. “Not ours.”

The rally had been planned months before the leak earlier this month of a draft Supreme Court opinion that showed a majority of justices poised to overturn Roe, the 1973 decision that found a constitutional right to abortion. But registration exploded after Politico published the draft.

Renee Bracey Sherman, founder of We Testify, said that when she had an abortion the nurse who helped her through the process was an Orthodox Jew. “People of faith – Jewish people – support and love people who have abortions,” Sherman told the crowd.

Despite other opportunities to protest over the last two weeks, many in attendance said that it was important to show up at an explicitly Jewish event. Here are what some of them had to say.

‘It’s in the Bible’

Andrea Barron wandered through the crowd at the Jewish Rally for Abortion Justice on the National Mall Tuesday morning carrying a handmade sign that read: “Jewish Women for

Abortion Rights: It's in the Bible.”

“It's very important that people know it's in the Bible,” said Barron, who lives just outside Washington, D.C.

Barron said she brings her sign to the Supreme Court twice a week, where she hands out a flyer to anti-abortion protesters with information about Jewish views on abortion. She found a more sympathetic audience at the gathering on Tuesday, on a grassy field in the shadow of the Capitol.

‘Central to my morals’

“My Judaism is really central to my morals,” said Jake, 20, who attended with other members of George Mason University's Hillel and declined to provide a last name. “Fighting with Jews – and as a faith group – is really important.”

‘There wasn't going to be any antisemitism’

Susanne Perla said that she supported abortion rights but was turned off by the inclusion of what she described as anti-Israel groups at some other feminist events, like the Women's March in 2017.

“I figured that here I can express my opinion with this group and there wasn't going to be any antisemitism,” said Perla, who attended the rally with her husband and teenage daughter.

Several women waved signs from Hadassah, the Jewish women's group that co-sponsored the rally, reading: Pro-Choice, Pro-Woman, Pro-Israel.

‘Religious rights’

Amanda Herring, director of Jewish life at the Edlavitch JCC in Washington brought a shofar and her 16-month-old son Abraham to the event. She blew the shofar as the crowd applauded various speakers.

“Jewish law says that a woman's life takes priority over a potential life,” said Herring, 32. “I'm protecting my Jewish religious rights and protecting women.

‘A Jewish value’

Michelle Rechtman, a communications major at The George Washington University, said the Jewish nature of the gathering showed “that religious freedom should represent all religions.”

“Abortion is a Jewish value and a right,” said Rechtman, 21.

‘Opinions of the Torah’

A handful of counter-protesters affiliated with the Jewish Pro-Life Foundation walked around the periphery of the crowd carrying signs and trailed by police. “This rally does not express opinions of the Torah,” one of the signs read.

‘Some way, shape or form’

Others said the fact it was a Jewish event was not central to their participation. Carolyn Bow, 57, took a 6 a.m. train from Richmond, Virginia to attend the rally with a Jewish friend. “I wanted to come up in some way, shape or form,” said Bow, who was raised Catholic.

‘Doing everything’

Tessa Spear, 18, traveled from Brooklyn, New York, on a bus with members of Congregation Beth Elohim. “I wanted to feel like I was doing everything I could because it’s really important,” said Spear. “It is not important for me that it’s specifically a Jewish event but I think that’s great because it pushes back against religious positions around ‘pro-life.’”

Arno Rosenfeld is a staff writer for the Forward, where he covers U.S. politics and American Jewish institutions. You can reach him at arno@forward.com and follow him on Twitter [@arnorosenfeld](https://twitter.com/arnorosenfeld).

Culture

'Wishing it was all a bad dream': A family copes one year after the Mount Meron disaster

By Hillel Kuttler

Seeing bags of marshmallows in the supermarket stopped Michal Reit in her tracks.

"That's when it hit me: It will be a whole year," said the American-born Israeli mother of six. Like Reit, observant Jews across Israel typically celebrate Lag B'Omer, which begins on Wednesday evening, by building bonfires, roasting marshmallows and potatoes and making pilgrimages to Mount Meron. It's the burial site in the Galilee of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, an ancient sage, and the place that, a year ago on the holiday, her son was one of hundreds trampled in a crowd surge that killed 45 men and boys.

It was the most deadly civil disaster in the history of the State of Israel. More than 150 others were injured that night, several critically, including the Reits' son Yossi, now 16, who remains only minimally conscious in a Jerusalem pediatric hospital.

Two friends with whom Yossi went to Meron were injured and recovered. Yossi was airlifted to Haifa's Rambam Hospital, where he spent two months in intensive care. The Reits learned what happened when a paramedic called after finding their number in Yossi's cell phone.

In preparation for Yossi's discharge and return home next month, Michal and her husband Yechiel are renovating their basement for his new bedroom and installing an elevator so he can be part of family life upstairs.

The basement includes another bedroom and a kitchenette for the full-time caregiver Yossi requires, they said.

God's will

The Reit parents, Brooklyn natives who moved to Israel in 2005, don't assign blame for their son's condition, though many have said proper precautions could have prevented the disaster. But the Reits accept what happened that night as God's will.

"We're not looking to fault people. God rules the world. Obviously, this was a gezeira on us and on Yossi," Michal Reit said, using the Hebrew word for decree. "It helps me to say that there's a reason this happened to us and Yossi. We might not understand it."

"Yes, there is pain. A lot. There is sadness. There is wishing it was all a bad dream. And of course there is davening [praying] and pleading to change things," she wrote in an email to friends and relatives shortly after Yossi was injured. "But there is no anger, there is no questioning and there CERTAINLY is no demanding to know whose fault it is or expecting someone to be punished for what happened."

The message went on: "Thinking this way is as easy for us as not eating a cheeseburger."

Disability payments will cover nearly all of the caregiver's salary. The Reits, who live in Ramat Beit Shemesh in central Israel, said they would appreciate the government reimbursing some of the renovation costs but aren't counting on it. Yossi also will require a hospital bed in their home and a device to hold him upright for hours at a time to prevent pneumonia and the loss of bone density.

The Knesset this week approved payments of 500,000 shekels, the equivalent of \$144,000, to each of the 45 deceased victims' families. No such payments will go to those injured.

Too many on the mountain

In the tragedy's aftermath, critics accused police and event organizers of lax crowd control and overlooking dangerous conditions.

New safety measures instituted at Meron this Lag B'Omer include limiting attendance to 16,000 people at a time, with a maximum stay of four hours per person under an honor system.

A state commission of inquiry, led by the Supreme Court's former president, Miriam Naor – who died in January – issued interim findings in November calling for removing safety hazards, reducing congestion and prohibiting ad-hoc encampments on the mountain that encroach on the public's access.

In typical years, hundreds of thousands of people visit Mount Meron on Lag B'Omer, which was closed in 2020 because of the pandemic. Last year, also because of the pandemic, the numbers were smaller, with estimates ranging between 50,000 and 100,000.

“The number of people wishing to arrive [there] is much larger than the number of participants that the mountain can safely contain at the same time,” the commission concluded.

‘A wonderful boy’

The new precautions come too late for Yossi. His parents are sober about his future but thankful he’s alive and, after being on a ventilator and undergoing a tracheostomy, breathes on his own. Upon reaching Rambam Hospital two hours after getting the paramedic’s call, they were struck by the shoeprint marks on Yossi’s right forearm and lines across his face from being trampled.

“Yossi looked terrible,” said Yechiel Reit. He hadn’t wanted to go into the hospital room. A social worker urged him to enter. If Yossi passed away, she told him, “you’ll regret it.”

Michal went in, too. She noticed his bare head, concerned that he might die not wearing his kippah. She thought of his playing music too loudly, being stubborn and not always helping around the house – “Yossi was – is – a wonderful boy, but he’s a teenager,” she said.

She also recalled his goodness: the time he got upset when a first grade classmate was picked on, and how he posted pictures of rabbinic leaders on his bedroom wall to motivate him to get moving in the morning.

That first night in the hospital, she recited Psalm 121 – “I will lift my eyes to the mountain. From where will my help come?” – and held Yossi’s hand.

“I told him I’m sorry,” she recalled.

She considered the Meron victims’ loved ones who didn’t have that moment, who went to the national forensic institute to identify their bodies. “I was grateful. At least I got to be with him. We were so fortunate compared to those families who didn’t have a chance to say goodbye,” she said.

Yechiel, an emergency medicine physician, considered his son’s diagnosis of anoxic brain damage, caused by going into cardiac arrest at Meron. Yossi was starved of oxygen. “He

was not expected to survive. It was very touch-and-go. The numbers were not compatible with life. His ICP, intracranial pressure, was higher than his MAP, mean arterial pressure,” Yechiel said.

He pivoted to the present.

“We don’t know his prognosis. Statistically, it doesn’t look good,” Yechiel said. “We’re hopeful. We daven. We hope that God will be kind to us, have mercy on us.”

Writer/editor Hillel Kuttler can be reached at hk@HillelTheScribeCommunications.com.



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