



**WEEKEND READS**

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***Forward***

# New York state declares a Hasidic school's education inadequate

By Lauren Markoe

In an unprecedented step, New York state has determined that a Brooklyn Hasidic boys' school is failing to provide a basic education to its students.

The decision, made by Education Commissioner Betty Rosa last week, and first reported by The New York Times Wednesday morning, marks the first time the state has declared a Hasidic school out of compliance.

The ruling came in response to a lawsuit filed by Beatrice Weber, who sent three sons to the school, Yeshiva Mesivta Arugath Habosem in Williamsburg, and attested that the school had failed to provide them with a basic secular education. Yeshivas often offer little instruction in reading, math and science, and standardized test scores show that the vast majority of their students fail to meet minimum competencies.

New York City education officials had recommended that the school be found in compliance. Mayor Eric Adams, who won election last year with the endorsements of several Orthodox voting blocs, said on the campaign trail in 2021 said he was "impressed" by the education offered at the yeshiva he had visited.

Weber, who heads Yaffed, a nonprofit that seeks to improve secular education in yeshivas, told the Forward she has mixed feelings about the ruling. "On the one hand I'm thrilled that the state stood up to the

recommendations of the BOE," she said, referring to the city's board of education.

The education offered at the school is not substantially equivalent to what public schools require, she said, and "we all know that."

But she said the ruling also left it to the city to work with the school to improve its secular studies, and the city has "been shown to be so untrustworthy," she said.

Hasidic schools have historically been reluctant to allow public education officials through their doors, fearing they will insist on watering down religious coursework and introducing secular ideas many Hasidic parents want their children to avoid.

The ruling is the first since the New York State Board of Regents last month approved rules to compel private schools, including yeshivas, to show that they offer a basic secular education.

That unanimous vote came on the heels of a New York Times investigation that showed that more than 100 Hasidic boys' schools in Brooklyn and the Hudson Valley received at least \$1 billion in public funding in the past four years while failing to provide adequate instruction in secular subjects.

The state's decision may invite more lawsuits against yeshivas, and signals that private schools may face a harder time avoiding scrutiny of their curricula in the future.

# Behind the swankiest new hotel on the Lower East Side, a swanky Jewish history

By Andrew Silverstein

It's become cliché to comment on the irony of how the hardscrabble Jewish Lower East Side has become a fashionable district. But it's hard not to say anything about that as I sip a \$22 negroni served by a white jacket bow tie-wearing waiter at the Swan Room, the bar at the neighborhood's newest high-end hotel, Nine Orchard. After all, the hotel is just blocks away from the cramped quarters where my family once hunched over sewing machines by day and laid their heads at night.

If there is one place in the old Jewish Lower East Side that seems destined to a life of luxury, it's here. Nine Orchard, which opened in June, is a new incarnation of the old Jarmulowsky Bank building, a 12-story 1912 Beaux Art tower designed by the firm Rouse & Goldstone. When Jewish immigrant Sender Jarmulowsky announced the construction of his building in a 1911 trade magazine, he promised it would be the East Side's "first strictly high-class tall bank and office building."

The building at the corner of Orchard and Canal has caught up with the neighborhood's other Beaux Art tower: the Jewish Daily Forward building, this publication's former headquarters, built the same year. An engraved bust of Karl Marx

above the door illustrated the newspaper's politics at the time of construction.

The two towers came to dominate the local skyline, floating their opposing ideologies over the modest tenements. "You have this capitalist bank doing a dance with the socialist Forward building just a few blocks away," said architectural historian Andrew Dolkart. "It's one of the most spectacular juxtapositions of a building that you can see in New York."

In 2006, the Forward Building, called "the people's temple," became luxury condos, while the Jarmulowsky Bank building, known as the "temple of capitalism," was still half abandoned and covered in graffiti. The banking hall then housed Happy Shabu Shabu, a Japanese hot pot restaurant with a \$5.99 lunch special.

In 2011, DLJ Real Estate Capital Partners purchased the bank building and the adjacent property for \$41 million. For years, rumors swirled about a condo conversion and an Ace Hotel. A decade and an extensive renovation later, Nine Orchard finally opened.

In the interim, this part of the Lower East Side abutting Chinatown gentrified, with

boutiques, bars, cafes and galleries popping up on almost every corner. The transformed area in front of Jarmulowsky Bank building has been dubbed “Dimes Square,” a reference to the trendy local restaurant Dimes. Twitter exploded earlier this year, when New York media types, somewhat ironically, claimed that this micro-neighborhood, with its mix of millennial skaters and literary cocktail sippers, defined COVID-era downtown New York cool.

The more polished and mature 116-room hotel is a late arrival to the scene. Rooms go for over \$600 a night. The Swan Room occupies the original two-story bank hall; the teller booths have been replaced by plush velvety couches. After decades of neglect, the hall has been restored to its original grandeur. The high vaulted ceilings, columns, stone carvings, large windows and classic clock beg comparison to Grand Central Terminal, which opened a year after the bank building.

For the renovation, DLJ went with an obvious choice, Ron Castellano, the architect who redesigned the Forward Building. Studio Castellano’s finest work is found on the roof, where they installed a 60-foot tempietto, a domed structure based on photos of the building’s original temple-like roof structure that was removed in 1991. The work inside and out is impeccable and goes well beyond the landmark preservation requirements.

Nine Orchard may have restored the building’s glory, but one thing it doesn’t convey is its Jewishness. The New York Times has noted that Jarmulowsky was a “Polish immigrant,” but articles in the Times, The New Yorker, Conde Nast Traveler and Vogue all fail to mention the hotel’s Jewish connection.

After visiting the hotel, I’m not surprised. The Forward building still displays large Hebrew letters spelling out “Forverts” in Yiddish. The nearby apartment building on the site of the old Streits Matzo factory pays homage to the kosher bakers in its lobby art. But, aside from the engraved Jarmulowsky name, the bank building never had an outwardly Jewish identity, and though the commissioned art and exquisite decorations in the hotel might feel both modern and classy, they don’t hint at a Jewish past.

DLJ partner Andrew Rifkin, who is Jewish and whose family came through the area, could have also taken a cue from the Hoxton Hotel in Williamsburg, which recently opened a modern Jewish restaurant called Laser Wolf by Israeli chef Michael Solomonov. Rifkin instead went with the Uruguayan chef Ignacio Mattos to head the Swan Room, the bistro Corner Bar, and a soon to open fine dining restaurant. Mattos, known for his Michelin-starred modern American restaurant Estela, didn’t find inspiration in the old Lower East Side. There is no babka on his dessert menu and none of his 22 bespoke cocktails have a Jewish twist.

Dolkart suggested that a plaque be added to the building’s facade to share its story, but the European travelers and the neighborhood tipplers do not seem interested in Jarmulowsky history. Rifkin commissioned writer Jeffrey Rotter to write a book on the building’s and the Jarmulowsky’s family history. The book, “At the Corner of Canal and Orchard,” sits in every room, but from what I gather from conversations and the media, it goes unopened.

The city’s tastemakers, however, are missing out on a great story. The Swan

Room was where Jewish garment workers once deposited their hard-earned savings and purchased ship tickets to bring relatives to the U.S. The cheapest steerage tickets cost the price of today's shrimp cocktail (\$35).

Although Jarmulowsky was a Jewish immigrant, he wasn't the Forverts-reading tenement-dweller type. Sender was born in Grajewo, Russia (now Poland), in 1841 and came to New York in 1873. By the turn of the century, he'd become known as the "East Side J.P. Morgan," a millionaire banker and respected member of the growing Eastern European Jewish community. He was a founder of the synagogue on Eldridge Street and advocated for Jewish businesses to have the right to close for Shabbat.

The bank building didn't escape the harsh realities of the Lower East Side. Three weeks after it opened, Jarmulowsky died. His sons took over, but with disastrous results.

"In 1917, immigrants eager to send money back to relatives in war-torn Europe found that their money was not available," according to a Museum at Eldridge Street installation. Wartime depositors rioted outside East Side banks and the Orchard Street financial institution closed. Two Jarmulowsky sons were arrested for fraudulent activities and overnight the family name became associated with financial ruin.

After the bankruptcy, the building became just another eastside loft. According to the 2009 Landmark Preservation Commission report, in the 1920s, it was "teeming with manufacturers of garments and various types of finishers." Then, from the 1940s to 1960s, it was occupied by a piano

manufacturer before east Asian sewing factories came to dominate most floors.

By the 1990s, artist loft parties and illegal makeshift apartments existed side-by-side with the building's "Chinese sweatshops" and "brothels" according to a 2013 article on the website Bedford + Bowery.

Other businesses play up this gritty and freer era. The restaurants and boutiques of Dimes Square restaurants and shops keep the Chinese-language signage of previous tenants as a mark of authenticity. Nearby, on the Bowery, the streetwear brand Supreme took over the landmark 1899 Germania Bank Building. They opted to keep the graffiti, using the urban decay aesthetic to push \$168 hoodies.

Nine Orchard erased both the graffiti and working class history. They created the pristine aesthetic and experience expected of a fashionable high-end hotel.

Still, one doesn't need a historian or an interior decorator to realize the area's connection to struggling immigrants. It's in plain sight. According to NYU's Furman Center, the Chinatown and Lower East Side area has a poverty rate of 24 percent.

On a recent Saturday morning, vacationers started their day at the hotel's restaurant with bellinis and perfect sunny-side-up eggs. Outside, the line for a food pantry run by the Buddhist organization Tzu Chi wrapped around the corner. Elderly East Asian men and women stood patiently waiting to fill their fabric bag carts with fruits and vegetables.

# Nazi monuments removed amid ongoing Forward investigation

By Lev Golinkin

*This article is part of an ongoing investigative project the Forward first published in January 2021 documenting hundreds of monuments around the world to people involved in the Holocaust. If you know of streets, statues or other emblems honoring Nazi collaborators not included in our country-by-country lists, please email [editorial@forward.com](mailto:editorial@forward.com), subject line: Nazi monument project.*

Streets in Virginia and Bosnia that honored Nazi collaborators have been renamed. An art gallery in Australia no longer bears the name of a Lithuanian who worked as an intelligence officer for the Third Reich.

And, nearly a year after pledging to remove a monument celebrating Latvian soldiers in the military wing of the Nazi Party, a Belgian town finally did so this summer.

These are among the changes that have occurred amid the Forward's ongoing, award-winning investigation documenting some 1,500 instances in which cities and towns around the world continue to uplift people who were complicit in the Holocaust.

## **A whitewashing of history**

Many of these monuments reflect a whitewashing of history engineered by far-right forces, others unwitting ignorance.

A small but growing resistance from individuals, local media and watchdog organizations has begun to call them out.

The Forward first published an article and lists of 320 such monuments across 16 countries in January 2021. A year later, in January 2022, we reported on an additional 1,135 streets and statues, in a total of 25 countries — including in eight U.S. states and five Western European nations.

And while several places have recently moved to erase these paeans to people with dark pasts, we have continued to learn of more such monuments, including a bust of Ferry Porsche that sits in the North American headquarters of his family's eponymous car company in Atlanta.

Ferry Porsche, who died in 1998, was one of two children of Ferdinand Porsche, the Austrian automotive engineer who was responsible for the car company that bears his name as well as the Volkswagen Beetle and the Mercedes-Benz SS/SSK — and who manufactured weapons for the Third Reich. Like his father, Ferry Porsche was a member of the Nazi Party and an SS officer involved with slave labor.

Ferry, who ran the auto company after World War II while his father was

imprisoned in France for war crimes, is also honored with a street and a convention center in Austria and a kindergarten in Germany.

### **Atlanta's Porsche Experience Center**

In Atlanta, the bust of Ferry — and a photo installation about his life — sits in the Heritage Gallery of the Porsche Experience Center, which contains a restaurant and racetrack, and bills itself as a venue for weddings and corporate events.

When Porsche opened its headquarters there a decade ago, the company attempted to name the street it is on after its founder, Ferdinand Porsche, but the city of Atlanta nixed that idea because of his Nazi past and ties to Hitler.

Other monuments we have learned about in recent months are:

In Wiener Neustadt, Austria: a bust, street and university all honoring Ferdinand Porsche. (Other Austrian things bearing his name include a museum in Mattsee and streets in Felixdorf, Knittelfeld, Leibnitz and Wals-Siezenheim.

In Germany: "Ferdinand Porsche" streets in Erkelenz, Freudenstadt and Tarp, plus a street in Henstedt-Ulzburg named for Nazi Party member Kurt Körber, who was technical director for a company that had 3,000 slaves. And a second bust honoring Klaus Riedel, who helped develop the deadly V-2 rocket used by Nazi to shell Britain and other Allies, in the town of Bernstadt auf dem Eigen, where Riedel was raised.

In Ukraine: Dnipro recently named a major thoroughfare for Nazi collaborator Stepan

Bandera, whose troops massacred Jews in the Holocaust; there is also a Bandera monument in Tatariv.

### **A change in Virginia**

Meanwhile, in Herndon, Virginia, the street where Volkswagen's North American headquarters is located has been renamed from Ferdinand Porsche Drive to Woodland Pointe Avenue. Signs with the new name have been up since at least June, according to Google maps; records regarding the name change were filed with Fairfax County in 2021.

The Bosnian city of Mostar also voted in July to rename six streets that had glorified leaders of Croatia's fascist Ustasha regime, which had collaborated with Hitler and exterminated hundreds of thousands of Jews, Serbs and Roma. The streets included five highlighted by the Forward's investigation.

Two of the streets now bear the names of national poets, and another honors a Mostar priest celebrated for his work with war wounded and local hospitals.

Israel's foreign ministry praised Mostar's move as "historic," saying on Twitter: "This change will undoubtedly further strengthen the relations between our peoples." A European Union official commended Mostar for being inclusive and called on other towns to follow suit.

### **An Australian city takes action**

Around the same time, a city-owned art gallery in Wollongong, Australia, removed the name of Bob Sredersas, a European who had arrived in the city in 1950 and

helped grow its steelworks while amassing a fine art collection.

A former Wollongong councilman, Michael Samaras, began looking into Sredersas' past in 2018, the 40th anniversary of the steel man's gift to the art gallery. He was helped by Efraim Zuroff of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

An exhibition mounted for the 40th anniversary of the gift said that Sredersas had included an essay saying that "Bob's story goes quiet during the second world war" and that the benefactor had been reticent "to talk about himself and his past." Now, decades after Sredersas' 1982 death, Samaras found archival evidence in Lithuania suggesting that he served during World War II in the intelligence arm of Nazi Germany, which contributed to the murder of 212,000 Lithuanian Jews.

Wollongong had initially balked at Samaras' revelations, but after a March article in *The Guardian*, the city worked with the Sydney Jewish Museum to investigate the matter. This June, Wollongong announced the allegations were confirmed and the gallery was renamed.

Zuroff, an American-Israeli historian who has been involved in hunting Nazis for decades, said Wollongong was unusual because "unlike most of the statues and monuments erected to honor Nazis," the people who had named the gallery "had no idea that the donor had served in the Nazi security service in Lithuania." And because an individual "took the trouble to investigate," he added, "so hats off to Michael Samaras, who saved dignity of the victims."

Indeed, it is a rare example of citizens, local government, experts and journalists decisively and deliberately exposing such a whitewashing. A crucial part of the process was Wollongong's decision to work with historians to corroborate Samaras' findings, which added an extra layer of credibility.

"Wollongong is basically a Labor city with a long history of anti-fascism so I always believed that the council's initial reaction could not be sustained," Samaras said via email. He said he was impressed by the city's commitment to use this incident to educate the public, with a joint presentation between Wollongong and the Sydney Jewish Museum planned for next year.

"Overall, I think it has been very worthwhile," he added. This summer also saw the long-promised removal of the "Beehive to Freedom," a monument honoring Latvian soldiers in the Waffen-SS, from the town square in Zedelgem, Belgium.

After the *Forward's* initial exposé of this monument, the town had pledged in August 2021 to rename the square and remove the plaque honoring the soldiers, with its mayor saying any offense was unintentional. The Latvian foreign ministry and ambassador to Belgium waged a campaign pressuring Belgium to keep it, but Zedelgem followed through this summer in removing the "Beehive."

The *Forward* will continue to report on removals of Nazi-related monuments, and to update our country-by-country list of such statues and streets. If you know of examples not included in our lists, or changes being made, please email [editorial@forward.com](mailto:editorial@forward.com), subject line: Nazi monuments.

# **Sukkot brought hope and warm weather to Kyiv. Then a missile struck blocks from my apartment**

By Helen Chervitz

Helen Chervitz, a Jewish Ukrainian who spent more than 25 years in the U.S., began filing dispatches to the Forward after the Russian invasion in February. She has lived through shortages and documented the Jewish community's response to the invasion from her native city, Kyiv. This week, for the first time, violence came to her neighborhood.

I live right in the center of Kyiv, around the corner from Kreschatyk Street, the city's main thoroughfare. Though the war is never far from my mind, it has seemed far away from my body since it began. Kyiv has felt lively and safe.

But Monday morning, shortly after 8 a.m. Kyiv time, I was doing my morning exercises on my fifth-floor balcony, facing one of the city's main streets, when our neighborhood was rocked by a thunder-like blast. I thought my eardrums had ruptured.

A neighbor from an apartment below opened her window, a look of panic on her face, and asked me if I knew what had happened. I told her that it might have been

a missile, but I didn't quite believe it myself. Then I saw a cloud of smoke rising, from about two blocks away.

I asked my husband if he had heard anything on the news. "Not yet," he said, "but I have no doubts about what has just happened." I was still in disbelief. It didn't compute. We were in the first days of Sukkot, a festive holiday made all the more pleasant for the warm days it seemed to have brought after a cold and rainy September. The holiday held the promise of safety. I was not the only one who had sensed the hope and peace.

Since the beginning of the war, I had never thought my life was in danger. Monday was the first time that I realized it could have been the end for me, as it was for those who had happened to be close to the strike, just a couple hundreds yards away.

People were terrified, and rushing to bomb shelters. Stores stayed shuttered. Traffic came to a standstill. We worried about another strike. Putin, we know, lashes out unpredictably.

My friend works at the Khanenko Museum, halfway between my apartment and the place where the missile landed. The museum holds the biggest and most valuable collections of European, Asian, and ancient art in Ukraine. She told me afterward that the force of the blast caused a chandelier to fall. It ripped several paintings off the walls, which are now cracked.

The missile fell close to a playground, but thanks to the early hour, no children were playing there at the time.

Texts flew between Kyivites and their friends and relatives as they tried to make sure no one they knew had been killed or injured. My husband and I received more messages than we can count, including from our American friends who woke up to the news that Kyiv's center city had been hit.

Here is one from a dear friend who lives in Chicago, who wanted me to know how angry she was about the violence. She told me to hang on. And she asked: "Ever think of moving back to the USA?"

She said she knew I wouldn't. But my husband and I are American citizens. She knows we could leave at any time and resume our comfortable American lives, in the same country as our grown daughter, a baby when we immigrated from Ukraine to escape antisemitism.

"I almost know your answer, but there is a limit to everything," she wrote, adding, "During the season of Jewish Holidays, we are praying for you!"

Some friends, knowing that my husband and I were so close to the strike, thought it better not to contact us directly. Maybe we needed to be fleeing to safety, they reasoned, instead of taking the time to reassure them that we were alive. So they checked our social media accounts instead.

I don't want to focus too much on what happened in my neighborhood, because there have been similar attacks against civilians in Kyiv and elsewhere in Ukraine in recent days. Nineteen people died in Russian airstrikes on Monday, according to Ukraine emergency services.

I am still left with a sense of disbelief. I saw the smoke for myself. But how can a missile launched from 2,000 miles away fall 200 yards from my apartment? I can't help thinking of Israel today. Its enemies want to deny it the right to exist as an independent state like Russia wants to deprive Ukraine of its independence, at the cost of thousands of lives, both soldiers and civilians, women and children included. My Sukkot prayer this year is for peace.

# The Holocaust bus tour that was truly a trip to hell (snack bar included)

By Jim Sullivan

*Editor's note: This article contains discussion of suicide.*

Jerry Stahl was on a bus tour of what he calls “Naziland” — three concentration camps and related museums in Eastern Europe — six years ago when his understanding of how the world perceives the Shoah did a somersault.

Stahl, the 68-year-old author best known for his 1995 memoir “Permanent Midnight,” knew he’d be trodding upon, as he said in an interview, ground “where the bones of the dead are buried and ashes had drifted.” He had some inherent trepidation, and expectations of somber reflection.

“My heart is open. I’m one big emotion waiting to happen,” Stahl said on the phone from his home in Los Angeles. “Who do I think I am to think I can grasp the enormity of this suffering and honor it?”

Yet grasping that enormity is precisely what Stahl tries to do in his new book, “Nein, Nein, Nein!: One Man’s Tale of Depression, Psychic Torment and a Bus Tour of the Holocaust.” The account contains a crazy

quilt of emotions captured with dark humor and keen insight.

The book, Stahl said, is a chronicle of what he felt on the trip — “as a human, as a Jew, as a man, as a citizen of the planet.”

What it isn’t — at least, not always — is an account of the somber reflection Stahl expected. The first thing he saw in Auschwitz, he said, was “a guy in an ‘I’m With Stupid’ T-shirt slamming a Fanta and stuffing his face with pizza.”

“I just wasn’t ready for it. I don’t know why.”

So, it wasn’t the historic horror that struck him first. It was the mundane nature of people doing what people do in their day-to-day lives, no matter where they are. They eat, drink, crack bad jokes, respond in almost comically inept ways to their circumstances. Three Filipina girls who spotted Stahl became convinced that he was Michael Richards — the actor who played Kramer in “Seinfeld” — and kept yelling “Kramer!” because they wanted a selfie with him.

He let them snap the picture.

“I agreed to do the most grotesque thing you can do, especially in a death camp,” Stahl said of the selfie, “but I think there is a certain human truth” to people acting that way.

While Stahl took his trip in 2016, he only wrote about it during the 2021 pandemic-driven lockdown. Stahl faced serious roadblocks in finally beginning the book. He had lost many of his notes from the tour, and there were continual distractions from other projects — mostly failed projects — for TV, film and print.

And the subjects he planned to write about were challenging to revisit. As he writes in “Nein, Nein, Nein!,” he was not in a good place before taking the trip. He felt his career had run aground. His third marriage was in tatters.

He peered into the abyss — or more precisely, looked down from a bridge in Southern California. He “was discouraged from doing it,” he writes, when he realized he’d have to climb a fence and likely be caught by the suicide-prevention mechanism he described in our interview as “these weird chain-link macrame large-enough-for-a-human-being bags.”

“There’s a lot of athletics involved,” Stahl said. “They make it hard. I would have been News at 11 — ‘World’s Biggest Baby Caught in a Net, Swaddling.’”

So, Stahl said he thought, “Why not go somewhere where complete and utter despair and depression is wholly appropriate?” Like Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Dachau.

Another factor in his decision: Donald Trump was ascendent, and more than a few people were equating Trump’s tactics and autocratic bellicosity with Hitler’s. “With Nazism on the rise here,” Stahl said, “it was almost like, ‘Why sit here and watch the previews? Why don’t we go to where it happened and where it was shot?’”

The book examines how Stahl’s own personal demons collided with the ghostly demons of the Holocaust, with a dose of absurdity added by his being on a tour with mostly Midwestern tourists — early on the journey, he likened it to a 4-H Club trip — complete with a forced, though not entirely unwelcome, camaraderie.

He told his tour guide, Suzannah, and his fellow tourists that he planned to write about the trip. “I made the decision to be straight up about that,” Stahl says. “Being a writer, you’re a little bit outside the main community. Everybody can take you aside and tell you their deepest and darkest. As cornball as it sounds, I grew to love these people at the end.”

Part of what makes “Nein, Nein, Nein!” an engaging read are Stahl’s (sometimes) purposeful digressions. Some of these are whimsical, but all are pointed, like one about little salt-shaker-sized “Lucky Jews” — statuettes of rabbis clutching coins sold at Warsaw gift shops. The idea: Place one at the door so money won’t leave the house.

“In Poland, we have a saying: ‘A Jew in the hallway — a coin in the pocket,’” the shop owner told Stahl.

“I take six,” Stahl writes. “Because — why not?” Yes, they’re a racial stereotype, but in

Stahl's eyes, compared to the range of offensive depictions of Jews, "these rabbi dolls feel almost benign. All Talmudic beard and soulful eyes. But maybe benign is more insidious."

There are gruesome details about the Nazis' ingenious forms of torture and Josef Mengele's "medical experiments." There are stomach-churning accounts about Ilse Koch, "The Bitch of Buchenwald," who used her victims' tattooed skin and body parts for "crafting."

As to experiencing the camps themselves, Stahl notes the contrast in presentation of the museums at each. Though the high-tech, immersive exhibition at Dachau is more informative and far-reaching, he writes, for him it had a less powerful effect than the silent horror of Auschwitz.

Stahl also realized that being overwhelmed by an experience can also leave you underwhelmed. "I can't remember a time when I wasn't aware of 'bodies piled up in mounds,'" he said, citing Lou Reed's song "Heroin." "Through no fault of its own, these images are so numbing and so overwhelming."

At one point late in the trek, Stahl found himself getting "burned out on the concentration camps," he writes.

"I've become the weird guy who doesn't talk much on the bus. I try to front that I'm gripped by the torment, soul-savaged by the in-your-faceness of strolling down the landscape where Hitler ripped the world apart, like a child tearing the head off a doll."

In the end, Stahl attempts to step back from the statistics and the stock images of the Holocaust to cast an eye on the lives of its victims, and what they may have been like before Hitler came on the scene. He considers how terrifying it must have been to have their ordinary lives stripped away — "the futility of all those wasted hours thinking about sex and money, did their hair look right, success and failure and all the things that drain the life out of life — when life is so fucking vulnerable and fragile and easy to pluck away?"

With a book so stark and revelatory — as is pretty much anything Stahl touches — one wonders, what didn't make the cut? Are there worse, more self-denigrating points not in print?

"The eternal question," said Stahl, with a laugh. "I think that answer's going to go to my grave, but I don't know if there's much worse than what is actually in there. If I think about it too much, I will start pulling back, which for my purposes wouldn't ring true."

"To bring up another great Jewish writer, Bruce Jay Friedman — he said, 'If you write a sentence that makes you squirm, keep going.' Somehow, I squirmed my way through this book."

Stahl has got two more books and another movie project in the works — in addition to a possible film adaptation of "Nein, Nein, Nein!" which has been optioned by Robert Downey, Jr. — but fears talking about them may be a detriment to doing them.

"At my age, I'm a lot closer to a man being dead than being 40," he said, "so I'm writing like a man being chased."

# **A Jewish comedian didn't mention Israel in his act. He was still heckled with 'Free Palestine'**

By Alex Zeldin

In a comedy club in Omaha, Nebraska, the American Jewish comedian Sam Morril made a joke about Jeffrey Epstein and Jewish heritage month.

In response, a heckler began to shout "free Palestine" at a Jew who was not saying a thing about Israel or Palestine.

Morril asked the heckler to explain why, in response to a Jewish joke, they began to yell about apartheid. The heckler, like others who blur the line between criticizing Israel and being antisemitic, was not interested in engaging, and continued to yell.

Morril handled the heckler with the good humor you'd expect from a talented comedian. But the scenario is one that many Jews have experienced: being held responsible for the perceived crimes of any other Jew, simply because you are a Jew.

This is obviously antisemitic. But it does not come in a cultural vacuum. As I've learned through personal experience, when critics of Israel publicly use terms such as "apartheid" and other emotionally heated language to discuss the Israeli military occupation and

the settlement enterprise, it enables and fuels a particular stream of antisemitism.

Most Jews who have received this kind of harassment do not have the good fortune of performance chops, a microphone and a sympathetic crowd. When it happened to me, I was just getting groceries.

It was May 2021, during an outbreak of violence between Israel, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. I was far removed from the conflict, preparing for Shabbat in New York. Two teens followed me for a full city block jeering antisemitic insults, including "baby killer."

The person heckling Sam Morril had no way of knowing what Morril thinks about Israel (I have listened to Morril's comedy for years, and neither do I). The people calling me a baby killer because I was wearing a kippah likewise saw my Jewishness as merely a useful pretext for their bigotry.

If you're involved in Israel debates long enough, you know how incidents like what Sam Morril experienced play out. The talking points used to minimize the

connection between overheated rhetoric and the harassment of Jews goes something like this: This heckler was bad. But speaking out against Israel is not antisemitic, and any critique of those who do so is designed to silence criticism of Israel.

Each of these arguments can, in specific circumstances, be true. However, in my experience, the people typically deploying these talking points do not genuinely engage with the core issue: harassing American or other Diaspora Jews because you are upset with Israel is bigotry, and it happens all too often — with the silence of people who should know better.

No American Jew has the power to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We cannot, and should not, have to answer for the choices of Israel, just as no American Muslim or Arab should have to answer for the actions of Muslim governments. People of good conscience understand that these are merely pretexts for bigotry by people who do not really care what is happening elsewhere in the world. The actions of people like the heckler at Morril's show should be unequivocally condemned.

But condemnation rarely follows.

As soon as Jews voice worry, like clockwork, people jump in to say that critics of Israeli policies are being silenced, and that criticizing Israel is not antisemitic. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians does not change one iota as a result of these debates. Yet the number of

antisemitic incidents in the United States continues to rise, year after year.

I am not attributing all instances of antisemitism in the United States to overheated rhetoric about Israel, nor the majority of it. But there is very clearly a subset of antisemites in the United States and around the world who justify their hatred of Jews by cynically invoking the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Critics of Israeli policies and anti-Israel advocates should contend with the social reality their rhetoric inspires.

**Opinion**

# **No one dreamed of a mechitzah: At the newly liberated Western Wall, we all prayed as one**

By Mark I. Pinsky

A few days before the fast day of Tisha B'Av, on Aug. 15, 1967, I found myself standing in the sunshine in front of the Western Wall.

I wasn't exactly sure what brought me there, but before I knew it, a Haredi man had put tefillin on my arm and forehead and had me repeating prayers as I touched the ancient stones. Raised in a Conservative, suburban South Jersey home, it was surreal, unlike any experience of Judaism I had — or could imagine.

Weeks earlier, from the Duke University campus where I was a 20-year-old student, I was glued to the TV in the dormitory commons room as the Six-Day War unfolded. In particular, on June 7, when Israel Defense Force paratroopers stormed the Temple Mount, rushing to the wall in tears, singing and praying as the bullets were still flying. Photographer David Rubinger captured the moment in his famous shot of three paratroopers standing at the wall.

Knowing something of Jewish history, I realized what a momentous event that was. For the first time in nearly 2,000 years, Jews were able to access the remnants of our Temple, the holiest site in Judaism. I knew that I had to get to Israel as soon as I could.

By July, I was at an abandoned United Nations peacekeeping base in El Arish, in Sinai, on the Mediterranean Sea, where I was a civilian volunteer attached to the IDF. With other young Jews from around the world, we brought abandoned and captured Egyptian tanks, trucks and artillery for shipment back to Israel. I was fitter than I had ever been, tanned nut-brown, and feeling more fulfilled by the work I was doing and the people I was doing it with than ever before.

As Tisha B'Av approached, the same pull that drew me to Israel beckoned me to the Kotel. I hitchhiked to Jerusalem while on leave, staying with an Israeli guide named Dov Singer, whom my parents had met on an earlier tour. He and his wife were secular, like many Israelis, and were amused but encouraging when I said I

wanted to go to the Western Wall for the holiday. I told them that I was feeling the pull of Jewish history.

Near dusk, I set off on foot alone, dressed in my fatigues, to the Old City. The closer I got, the thicker the crowds. The mood seemed jubilant, if not festive – I don't recall any security. From a distance, the vast, then-unobstructed dirt plaza appeared to be a vast sea of people, with small circles sitting on the ground, with candles, reading from the Book of Lamentations, as tradition dictated.

There was no mechitzah separating men and women.

Some of the circles were grouped by gender while others — including ones composed of IDF soldiers — were mixed. There were Haredi circles, but some Orthodox Jews also had joined the mixed groups. My Hebrew was still rudimentary, so the ancient verses meant little to me. I drifted from circle to circle, marveling at the variety of Jews who had come to the dusty square to touch history.

Here were the Jewish people assembled, without thought of sect or denomination, religious or secular. There was a sense of unity among all present despite religious observance differences. The mood was almost pre-Messianic — anything seemed possible.

Tisha B'Av is traditionally an occasion of mourning, historically the date of various catastrophes suffered by the Jewish people, including, by some accounts, the

destruction of both Temples and the expulsion from Spain.

But the atmosphere this night was disconcerting. Why should we mourn? Why not celebrate? The Temple Mount was under the control of the Jewish people for the first time in nearly two millennia. Screw the Romans! We're back!

All these memories came flooding back last July when Orthodox protesters disrupted a Conservative Tisha B'Av prayer at the Western Wall. These same memories returned this year as Tisha B'Av approached and a Conservative bat mitzvah was disrupted.

I understand that the half-century political fight over control of worship at the wall is inextricably tied to Israel's notoriously fragile parliamentary coalitions. The Haredi-controlled rabbinate — and now Israeli law — forbid women from reading from the Torah or even bringing one into the women's section, and from wearing a tallit or tefillin at the Western Wall.

A deal brokered by the Likud government in 2016 would have allowed for a meager form of egalitarian worship, a 900-square-meter prayer space for men and women in a relatively small area at the southern end of the wall. But just 17 months after it was negotiated, in 2017, it unraveled. The consensus in Israel and the Diaspora was that the agreement was cynically sacrificed to preserve Netanyahu's governing coalition.

Natan Sharansky, who, as chairman of the Jewish Agency, helped broker the original

deal, told The Guardian that the decision to abandon it was a “deep disappointment,” and that it would have provided “a dignified space for egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall. ... [The] decision signifies a retreat from that agreement and will make our work to bring Israel and the Jewish world closer together increasingly more difficult.”

In the years since, unseemly scenes of Jews shouting and shoving Jews in the shadow of the wall have become part of our media diet.

I find this situation both disappointing and infuriating. Was it for this narrow sectarianism that so many soldiers of both genders died liberating this remnant of our history?

The reprehensible bullying behavior of young Haredi men and women — none in uniform that I could see — toward women worshippers, as well as Conservative and Reform clergy, was and is inexcusable. Whether it be regular daily worship or on a fast day like Tisha B’Av, Jews of all denominations deserve the right to worship unimpeded at the holiest site in Judaism.

In all the newsreels and still photos I have seen of that day in 1967 when the wall was liberated, I’ve never been able to find any black hats among the soldiers who liberated the wall, or those who died trying.

So why should they dictate the rules now? Is Israel a pluralistic democracy, or a narrow theocracy?

I can’t honestly say that, moving through that dusty expanse that night in 1967, with

its twinkling circles, I had a fully formed vision about what was to come for Israel and the Jewish people. But I had a sense of almost unlimited possibility for both, one of an untroubled peace and of unity, without sectarian division and strife.

Certainly not the recent scenes of Jews shouting at Jews, attempting to drown out the sound of a bat mitzvah reading from the Torah — sacred writing that belongs to all of us.



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