

*Forward*

**WEEKEND READS**

**10.7.22**



# In London, an antisemitism scandal has sparked a play about antisemitism. Is it helping?

By Talya Zax

LONDON — If you linger outside the Royal Court Theatre after a performance of Jonathan Freedland’s “Jews. In Their Own Words,” you’ll hear some ordinary post-theater chatter. Friends compare notes and ask after each other’s families. People discuss whether they ought to grab a drink.

But, almost inevitably, there’s also someone in the crowd speaking quietly, just to a friend, about the antisemitism they’ve experienced in their lives.

After one preview, a group of women in their 70s or 80s approached Freedland, 55, a journalist by trade. One embraced him. When she was 11, she said, she was playing a sport at school and scored a goal.

“Suddenly a girl, who she thought was a great friend of hers, turned on her and called her a ‘dirty Jew,’” Freedland said. “She hadn’t told that story before. Her friends — old friends — hadn’t heard it.”

After several years of bruising high-profile battles over antisemitism in the United Kingdom, Freedland said over an early dinner in Sloane Square, the posh West London plaza on which the Royal Court sits, he’s seen the play give Jews the sense of

being in a space where it feels safe to “trade stories of antisemitism.” For some, like that older woman, that experience has proved “quite cathartic.”

That the Royal Court has become that space is, to put it mildly, surprising. In 2021, the theater sparked yet another of those very public antisemitism battles by mounting a play, Al Smith’s “Rare Earth Mettle,” in which the central figure was a power-hungry billionaire called Hershel Fink. The scandal was bad enough that the British government’s independent antisemitism adviser, Lord Mann, told the London-based Jewish Chronicle that he planned to boycott the theater.

Every cultural institution weathers scandals. The Royal Court knew the playbook for handling this one. “Normally, you know, it’s about an apology, and about some work, and a statement, and somebody goes on a course,” said Vicky Featherstone, the Royal Court’s artistic director, in an interview. The theater took all those steps. But it still didn’t feel like enough.

The result of that feeling is “Jews. In Their Own Words,” a piece of verbatim theater about the experiences of 12 British Jews

with antisemitism on the left. It's an unusual bit of self-reflective work, examining the failures of both the Royal Court and the political movements with which it has long been affiliated.

And while the play has meaningful flaws — one review called it a “muddled act of public contrition” — it has pushed both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences to think about British antisemitism in a new and possibly productive light. After one of the three performances I saw, I heard a woman give a capsule review to a friend as they walked to the Tube.

Yes, she knew about antisemitism, she said, but “I didn't realize how permanent it was.”

### **‘Another Jewish billionaire trying to steal people's land’**

The Royal Court could have avoided the “Rare Earth Mettle” scandal. An accent coach who participated in a 2020 workshop of the play, which had been in development since 2015, raised the first objections to the idea of a character named Hershel Fink. The director, Hamish Pirie, told her that the character was modeled on Elon Musk, who isn't Jewish; the matter was dropped.

Then, in September 2021, a Jewish director at another workshop expressed alarm at the depiction of, as he put it, “another Jewish billionaire trying to steal people's land.” Still, the name stayed.

Then, the week before “Rare Earth Mettle” began previews in November 2021, the Royal Court sent out a marketing email describing the character of Hershel Fink as “messianic.” Within hours, a number of Jewish artists involved with the theater reached out with concerns. Social media

chatter about the name, none of it flattering, picked up steam.

By the end of the day, the theater, now in crisis mode, made the decision to give the character the new name of Henry Finn. In announcing the change, it noted that he was not intended to be Jewish, or seen as such.

For Jews, it was obvious that the name “Hershel Fink” wasn't just Jewish; it felt like a dog whistle, invoking the trope of the avaricious Jewish puppet-master without stating it. Hadley Freeman, a Jewish columnist for *The Guardian*, captured the sentiment in one wry tweet. “I guess the name Shylock Shlomo Liebergoldbergstein was already taken, huh,” she wrote.

The Royal Court is proudly leftist. For many in its orbit, it was exactly the theater's principle of combating bias that made its apparent blindness around the stereotype of Hershel Fink painful.

The play opened as scheduled. But the scandal overshadowed its run — and, to some extent, the Royal Court's whole season. The law firms Kirkland & Ellis and Weil, Gotshal & Manges, both significant corporate backers of the theater, declined to renew their funding. Some individual backers dropped out, too. Ticket sales for “Rare Earth Mettle” were anemic, an outcome, as the theater wrote in a February board report, that was likely “a direct result of this incident.”

“The theatre sets out to be exemplary in its artistic, social and cultural behaviors,” the board concluded. “In regard to ‘Rare Earth Mettle’ it fell short of those ambitions.”

### **‘There is no defense of not knowing’**

As the scandal unfolded last fall, Vicky Featherstone reached out to Jonathan Freedland through a mutual friend.

Freedland writes a column in *The Guardian*, a paper with a left-leaning readership, in which he regularly engages with issues of British antisemitism. During a long conversation by phone, he told Featherstone he would have been “more forgiving” of the Hershel Fink saga “if it had happened five years earlier.”

Since 2015, when Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party, the increasingly strained relationship between Jews, Labour and the left had been in the news almost constantly. The list of Labour-related antisemitism scandals from Corbyn’s five years as party leader is long and tortuous. The saga culminated with an external investigation that, in 2020, determined that the party under Corbyn had unlawfully failed to address claims of antisemitism.

The impact of those years on British Jews was clear. Labour had consistently drawn a steady if small voting base from British Jews, who make up less than 1% of the U.K. population. In 2019, in the final national election under Corbyn’s leadership, a poll found that 87% of British Jews believed that Corbyn was antisemitic. In the most heavily Jewish district in the country, Labour earned a meager 19% of the vote — a fraction of the 44% it snagged only two years earlier.

Hence Freedland’s point to Featherstone. After that tsuris, the ignorance about antisemitism the Royal Court had displayed was hard to forgive.

That was especially true, it turned out, because antisemitism on the left was, at the time of the Hershel Fink affair, an issue the

theater was already deep in conversations about. A Labour Member of the House of Lords who sits on the theater’s board had asked, during the Corbyn years, if the theater might consider doing a play “about antisemitism in the Labour Party.” Shortly thereafter, the actress Tracy-Ann Oberman, an outspoken critic of antisemitism on the left and a longtime friend of Featherstone’s, approached her with the same idea.

The right approach, Featherstone and Oberman decided, was to construct a play out of the words of British Jews. But it was a long-term project. There wasn’t a sense of “radical urgency about it, like do it right-right now,” Featherstone said.

Then came the outrage about “Rare Earth Mettle.” Suddenly, what had been one idea on a long docket was a right-right now kind of item. “We were all very broken by the harm that we caused, and by our lack of understanding,” Featherstone said.

So she told Freedland that, in the wake of the scandal, the theater wanted to do something meaningful. They wanted to stop talking about the idea for this play, and actually make it. Would he write it?

Freedland was worried that the Royal Court only thought of the play as “a gesture to get them out of the PR hole” — an effort he was definitely not interested in aiding. And he knew that if he accepted the assignment, he’d face serious mistrust from the Jewish community.

But he found himself focusing on the fact that he’d spent years using his column in *The Guardian* to urge British institutions on the left to take concerns of antisemitism seriously. It was a charge they had often failed to meet.

Now, he said, “here was a pretty august institution of that progressive, cultural, liberal left doing exactly that.”

Plus, he thought: “if it goes wrong at any point, I will just walk away.”

### **‘I think it’s about, like, five types of Jews’**

Two women were chatting in the roomy, warm bar in the Royal Court’s basement before a preview of “Jews. In Their Own Words.” They didn’t have tickets to the play. They had just met up for a drink and a bite.

But one of them was thinking about sticking around for the show. As she talked herself into doing so, her friend asked what it was actually about.

“I think it’s about, like, five types of Jews,” she said.

“Jews. In Their Own Words” isn’t categorical in quite the way she meant. But the idea of a “type” of Jew, or several types, is central to it.

The play’s actors depict a cast of characters including some famous British Jews, like the novelist Howard Jacobson, alongside more everyday sorts: a Haredi man with firsthand experience of the violence of antisemitism; a progressive social worker struggling with her colleagues’ tendency to look past bias against Jews; a Mizrahi Jew who does interfaith work with Muslim communities.

Things start off with a set of brisk showpieces, including a set of energetic pantomimes and a flamboyant song and dance set to the refrain “it was the Jews that did it.” Then it moves into a slower, more somber, conversational register. Longer and

more challenging stories come out. The mood, initially a bit hectic, darkens.

The show ends with a gesture at resolution that feels, perhaps purposefully, incomplete: It leaves unanswered the question of what telling all these stories ought to achieve.

Some critics have accused the play of being overly didactic; one deemed it to be “basically a performed lecture.” That has more to do with its tone of sometimes overwhelming earnestness than its structure, which pulls off a more creative theatricality than its premise might suggest. Characters whose stories reflect one another are portrayed in conversation, although they’ve never met. At one touching moment that would be a shame to spoil, the all-Jewish cast breaks the fourth wall to address the audience directly.

The play has undeniably rough edges. In that, it mirrors the mindset of its makers, for whom British Jewish identity, personal and cultural, is a work in progress.

Audrey Sheffield, who co-directed the play with Featherstone, said she was drawn to the project because “my relationship to my Jewish identity was an area that I’ve been interested in exploring — that I have been much more in touch with over recent years.”

The environment behind the play, Sheffield said, felt very much like a Jewish “coming together.” It changed her sense of her Jewishness: It made her want to own that identity more publicly, and also “furthered certain questions that I have.”

Promotional materials for “Jews. In Their Own Words” frame the play as “a theatrical inquiry” into the antisemitism that inspired it. But there’s a deeper level of questioning in

the play as well, not about dealing with antisemitism, but about being Jewish. How much should we let the politics around Jewishness affect our communal life? Is it possible to prevent hatred or ignorance from informing how we think of ourselves? Why does it sometimes feel so grating to talk about this identity?

If there is something strained and undecided about “Jews. In Their Own Words” it’s because there is something strained and undecided about the experience of being Jewish. That’s why the parts of the play that feel a bit, well, off are the ones that end up working best. The pantomimes; the kick line; the broken wall between cast and audience: They point to the fact that there is something inherently and uncomfortably performative about living as a Jew. There are points in most Jewish lives where we find ourselves assessing our audience to figure out if our Jewishness is safe to talk about, and if so, in what ways.

### **‘Maybe I’ve got sick of listening to antisemitism’**

If “Jews. In Their Own Words” has one serious strength, it’s in its ability to generate the catharsis that Freedland hoped for — the kind he saw in the older woman finally telling her friends about the girl who yelled a slur at her in the schoolyard. It happened to me, too. After the first preview, a friend who attended the show with me asked what I’d thought. I found myself, without planning to, telling him about things I never talk about: names I’ve been called, times I haven’t felt safe.

Some of the people telling their stories after the show confessed, in nearly the same breath, that they didn’t like the play very

much. I understood that, too. These stories can sound trite and overblown, in part because they’ve been told by someone, somewhere, so often.

But sometimes they do change things — if not the world, then how we see ourselves.

One night, I met a woman named Sarah Lou Morris, who was wearing one of the most colorful pairs of shoes I’d ever seen, in the crowd outside the theater. A few days later, we went for tea. Morris told me that before that week, she had never spoken up about antisemitism when she encountered it. She preferred, she said, to treat it with “removed interest.”

The day of Queen Elizabeth’s funeral, something changed. Morris, 71, was watching the proceedings at The Ritz. The man sitting next to her, a stranger, asked her to lunch. He told a story about his lawyer, who, he noted, was Jewish. There was no reason for him to bring that up, Morris thought. “I’m Jewish,” she told him.

He changed the subject. It wasn’t clear he understood that he’d been inappropriate. But she was shaken. It was the first time in her life that she had ever responded to something she saw as antisemitic, and she didn’t really understand why she’d done it.

She was still thinking about that exchange when she saw “Jews. In Their Own Words.” Late in the play, one character says that he thinks British Jews are just tired. That moment stuck with her. Maybe, she said, that was what had happened to her — after all this time, she was tired.

“Maybe I’ve got sick of listening to antisemitism,” she said. She was ready to talk. So, it seemed, were a lot of people.

# The secret Jewish history of the Great Chicago Fire

By PJ Grisar

The spark of the Great Chicago Fire, which razed nearly four square miles of the city, killed hundreds and left 100,000 more homeless, can be traced with certainty back to Catherine O’Leary’s barn. We still don’t know what or who exactly started it, but one possibility is an 18-year-old German-Jewish immigrant.

While the traditional culprit for the inferno, which started on Oct. 8, 1871 at around 9 p.m., and blazed for two days, is the O’Leary cow — and some experts blame the colorfully-named Daniel “Pegleg” Sullivan — the first person to take full responsibility was a young gambler named Louis M. Cohn.

The admission became public only after Cohn’s death in 1941, by which time he had become a pillar of society and a prosperous importer and world traveler. A 1944 news release announcing Cohn’s endowment to the Medill School of Journalism stated that Cohn “steadfastly maintained” that the cow was not the cause of the fire. Instead, Cohn claimed the trouble started as he and several boys, among them one of the O’Leary sons, were playing a lantern-lit game of craps in the hayloft.

“[[O]ne of the boys accidentally overturned the lantern, thus setting the barn afire,” the

release noted. “Mr. Cohn never denied that, when the other boys fled, he stopped long enough to scoop up the money.”

In Cohn’s will, Alan Wykes reports in his 1964 book “The Complete Illustrated Guide to Gambling,” he was less ambiguous as to his culpability: “When I knocked over the lantern, I was winning,” he said.

Cohn’s claim remains apocryphal, but his presence — and that of some 32 other Cohn households in the 1870 census — paints a picture of the Windy City’s Yiddishkeit at that moment.

While Cohn, a German Jew like some of the city’s first settlers, was busy gambling, others were observing Simchat Torah. The flames quickly spread to the synagogues but, as Irving Cutler wrote in his definitive “The Jews of Chicago,” most of the shuls were able to save their Torah scrolls.

The 1871 fire gave Chicago the resilient name the Second City — built on the ashes of the first — but three years later a blaze originating from the shanty of Nathan Isaacson took a toll on the newly-arrived Eastern European Jewish community. Several synagogues were lost, as were Black churches south of the Loop.

Press coverage at the time was anything but sympathetic to the victims — the Chicago Journal described the recently un-homed citizens as “peddlars whose pack-ridden backs are humped and known in every land: whom children fear, and dogs bark at in the country, and who, in a trade, can out-jew all other jews [sic].”

The writer concluded that the Jews “packed up with a unanimity quite unusual with even these natural-born wanderers, and, need it be said, unusually quick?”

Isaacson, whose shanty and barn were next to an oil factory, was arrested and charged with arson but never found guilty. He was likely a victim of his own city’s prejudice.

In the end, though, Jews took a leading role in commemorating the fire most people remember. Screenwriter Sonya Levian helped pen the script to the best-known film depiction of the conflagration, 1938’s “In Old Chicago.” Lew Pollack, the co-writer of “My Yiddishe Momme,” worked on the music.

The film follows the O’Leary family — Louis M. Cohn is nowhere to be seen.

# Why go to one synagogue service when you can go to many? Congregants confess their love of virtual shul hopping

By Stewart Ain

This Rosh Hashanah, Chuck Levine of Fort Lauderdale began watching services online at Park Avenue Synagogue, a Conservative shul in Manhattan, where he finds both the rabbi and cantor “engrossing.”

Then he switched to Temple Emanu-El, which is Reform, and also in New York, because it was once his spiritual home and he and his non-Jewish spouse always felt comfortable there.

Then he checked out Temple Keneseth Israel, a Reform congregation in Allentown, Pennsylvania, that he used to attend when he lived there.

“The rabbi I knew retired and they have a new rabbi who I wanted to hear speak,” Levine, 76, explained.

When COVID-19 turned synagogue sanctuaries into television studios, with cameras, lighting and tech crews, it also gave congregants nearly endless choices. Now Jews can daven across time zones and denominations, checking out services

at multiple congregations over the course of a few hours.

Pray Shacharit in St. Louis and Ma’ariv in Minneapolis. Zoom with your congregation and then tap into the livestream from the one you used to belong to. One man in Georgia said he surfs through an average of a dozen synagogues each Shabbat.

Call it shul hopping, or maybe shul surfing.

Many of those who shul surf say they are still not attending services in person for fear of catching COVID-19. Others just like to avoid the hassle of dressing up and leaving the house. Then there are those who simply appreciate the opportunity to sample. They can personalize a schedule of virtual shul visits that satisfies a multiplicity of desires, among them, listening to a particularly inspiring rabbi, and discovering how another congregation approaches a particular prayer.

“I generally do three synagogues on Shabbat online,” said Susan Levine, 66, of Sonoma, California. Her all-California mix

draws from both the Reconstructionist and Renewal movements: Congregation Ner Shalom in Cotati, Congregation Shir Shalom in Sonoma, and Or Zarua, in Berkeley.

For Levine, who uses a wheelchair, it's simply "easier" to participate in services from home, though she went in person to Shir Shalom on Erev Rosh Hashanah this year, her first time in shul since the pandemic began.

Alan Berg, a Southerner, emailed the Forward about his elderly parents, who are avid shul surfers.

"They hop around from New York to Chicago to Houston to Los Angeles," wrote Berg. "They enjoy "listening to rabbis of different persuasions and cantors with different styles."

They also appreciate not having to dress up, and the being able to get a cup of coffee in their own kitchen during services, he added.

Rabbis know that Jews do this.

Take Rabbi Ashira Konigsburg, chief program officer of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Her parents, like Berg's, tune into several different synagogues for services.

Konigsburg said it's a good thing that people can "shul hop and see the talents of rabbis and cantors across the country." But she also cautioned that dropping into a Zoom or livestream doesn't afford the advantages of being part of a Jewish community.

"It's unlikely the rabbi you are watching in Chicago will be able to come to New Jersey to officiate at your mom's funeral," she said.

For some congregants, shul surfing made sense during the height of the pandemic, but not after infection rates subsided and they felt comfortable returning to their own congregations.

Fran Goldman of Delray Beach, Florida, is a loyal member of Temple Anshei Shalom. But when COVID-19 hit in 2020, she isolated in her home and began attending "many shuls" virtually, including Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan; Temple Emanuel, a Conservative synagogue in Newton, Massachusetts; Sinai Temple in Los Angeles; and Central Synagogue in Manhattan.

"I wanted to see what they were doing," she explained. "I would do a Reform shul like Central Synagogue on Friday night and a Conservative on Saturday."

# In Lena Dunham's latest, a medieval teen gets a girlboss makeover she doesn't need

By Irene Katz Connelly

It's 1290, and there are Jews in the great hall.

They are men, women and children, en route to Flanders after an edict expelled all England's Jews from the country. Seeking shelter from a rainstorm, they've stopped at the ramshackle, nearly bankrupt Stonebridge Manor, where the lord is away and the lady lets them in. Catherine, the 14-year-old daughter of the house known to her family as Birdy, is supposed to stick to ladylike pursuits, like embroidering in her chamber. But she's heard so many stories about Jews. Hoping to catch a glimpse of their "horns and tails," she sneaks into the hall.

Instead of the monsters she's expecting, Birdy finds an old woman trying to amuse a group of tired and hungry children with fables. One story she tells concerns an exceptionally stupid man who, when told to wash himself, starts looking for "himself" under the bed and behind the chair. Embedded in this silly story, the old woman says, is a lesson. "Know where you yourself are," she tells the children. "How? By knowing who you are and where you come from."

I was in grade school when my mother first read aloud this chapter from "Catherine,

Called Birdy," Karen Cushman's 1994 Newbery Medal-winning children's book. I probably read it to myself a dozen times afterward. But I'd forgotten about the Jews' visit until, just after watching Lena Dunham's lush but lackluster new movie adaptation, I sat down with the book again.

Birdy, on the other hand, does not forget about the Jews. It makes sense that she would empathize with a people capable of preserving their identity at the moment of their dispossession, because she's facing something of a predicament herself. To remedy the manor's ailing finances, her parents are looking for a groom for their just-barely-marriageable daughter — essentially selling her off to the highest bidder, no matter how loathsome he might be. Birdy is a teenager whose greatest pleasures involve instigating mud fights with local goatherds, but she already understands that in her world, marriage means a total surrender of rights and self.

Told in a series of diary entries, the novel chronicles Birdy's fight to evade matrimony, a charming but superficial narrative the film emphasizes at the expense of a more profound one: her cultivation of a sense of self that will sustain her in the face of a fate that was, for most women of her time, inevitable. There are no Jews in Dunham's

adaptation, nor many of the grown-up realities Cushman managed to smuggle into a book for elementary schoolers. By jettisoning these elements, Dunham creates a girlboss fantasy of medieval life that lacks the book's subtle power.

I first encountered *Birdy's* story at a time when, like most young female readers, I was assailed daily by frilly and anesthetized stories about virtuous princesses who wore clean clothes and certainly never hid menstrual rags to prevent their father from realizing they'd reached childbearing age. Cushman provided a boisterous and uncensored take on life within this much-vaunted demographic. The more suitors visit the manor, the cleverer *Birdy* becomes at fending them off. She blackens her teeth to make it look like she has none; she decorates her hair with mouse bones; pretending to be a servant, she slanders herself to one suitor, insisting that Lady Catherine has a stooped back and "pits on her face." Her tactics work — until her father dredges up Shaggy Beard, a lord so aged and disgusting that *Birdy's* grossness doesn't faze him.

It wasn't just the nastiness and brutishness of life in the medieval gentry that kept my mother and me turning pages, although that was certainly entertaining. ("I am near fourteen and have never yet seen a hanging," *Birdy* laments at one point. "My life is barren.") It was the adult calamities with which *Birdy* reckons: Not just antisemitism but forced marriage, miscarriage, and plain old sex. As a child, I puzzled long over one particular episode, during which *Birdy* begins to suspect that her older brother has impregnated his betrothed before their wedding. "Either the girl has overfed herself on honey cakes or the child is with child," *Birdy* writes drily. Moments like this made "Catherine, Called *Birdy*" a book I grew into over years, as the indignities and improprieties I observed in

my own world informed my own nascent sense of self.

Beggars for adaptations of idiosyncratic childhood favorites, of course, can't be choosers. I didn't expect the movie to reflect my precise relationship with the book, and I admit to enjoying the 108 minutes I spent at Stonebridge Manor. Dunham, who established herself with "Girls" as a purveyor of ribald realism, is actually a good choice to direct a medieval romp, and she excels at depicting the physical messiness of *Birdy's* world: When she stumbles home after rolling in the mud at a village cottage-raising, *Birdy's* harried nurse laments, "And to think I just bathed you a fortnight ago!" Bella Ramsey (known for playing Lyanna Mormont on "Game of Thrones") makes a charming *Birdy*, her expressions as mulish and her hair as witchy as I imagined as a child. The landscapes are stunning, the robes earth-toned, the anachronistic pop soundtrack (British singer-songwriter Misty Miller is heavily featured) appropriately trendy.

But when it comes to emotional and ethical messiness, Dunham retreats, diluting the harsh and complicated realities that Cushman found sneaky ways to convey. No one impregnates their betrothed in this movie. When *Birdy's* friend is married off to a seven-year-old boy, he conveniently dies and frees her up for a love match. It's easy to see why Dunham nixed the Jews — the whole expulsion thing wouldn't really go with the vibes.

Nowhere is the film more profoundly inoffensive than in its treatment of one of its most important characters: *Birdy's* father. In the book, Lord Rollo is a distant and forbidding force, known for hitting his daughter and assessing her marital worth as if she's "a bull bought for breeding." The movie's Lord Rollo (played by Andrew Scott, otherwise known as the hot priest from

“Fleabag”) dresses in a perplexing array of influencer-chic silk robes and vacillates between charming fecklessness — one reason for the manor’s insolvency is his purchase of a live tiger — and a deeply ahistorical reluctance to use his daughter as currency. I won’t say exactly how he saves Birdy, but it involves an eleventh-hour change of heart and a very weird duel that turns the movie into a parable of twenty-first century fatherly virtue.

Cushman, by contrast, offers us something very different: a story of how women keep going even when they can’t liberate themselves from mercenary fathers or unwanted marriages. By the end of the novel, Birdy has used up all her tricks. She knows that none of the adults in her life are going to save her from a repugnant union with Shaggy Beard. Yet the exercise of recording her life has proved transformative. In her journal, she’s crafted a narrative in which her value has nothing to do with the bride price she can command or the children she can bear. Comparing herself to the Jews who took their stories into exile, she writes, “No matter whose wife I am, I will still be me.”

After Birdy arrives at this realization, Cushman swoops in with her own *deus ex machina*, if a more period-appropriate one than Dunham’s: Shaggy Beard dies in a convenient brawl, leaving Birdy to marry his son. Sure, she’s never met him. But he’s “young and clean” and “loves learning,” which puts him ahead of all the other suitors she’s met.

When my mother and I arrived at this ending, we were both a little scandalized. Children’s novels about spunky and clever heroines, to which my mother gravitated precisely because they provided an alternative to the princess industrial complex, were not supposed to end in arranged marriages, even to clean and learning-loving men. They were supposed

to end with the heroine beating the odds to become a queen or a doctor or a problematic suffragist leader. Dunham provides exactly this kind of ending. When the movie’s Birdy, now an emancipated woman, leans out of a turret and murmurs plangently, “I wish I could help every girl in the world,” one starts to wonder if she is opening a Ye Olde franchise of *The Wing*.

As an adult rereading “Catherine, Called Birdy,” I found myself unexpectedly touched by that ending, and able to see why I came back to the book again and again. An obedient child who, born in medieval times, would have embroidered in my chamber until the end of time, I was always a little overwhelmed by the “Lean In”-style novels I was supposed to read to empower myself. In a literary landscape saturated with stories of girls who beat the odds, it felt more real and more intimate to read about girls whose inner strength sustains them when they can’t.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Cushman’s novel starts and ends with a naming exercise. In the first chapter, Birdy describes herself in terms that emphasize her captivity: “Daughter of Rollo and the lady Aislinn, sister to Thomas, Edward, and the abominable Robert,” and so on. By the end, though she hasn’t achieved the right to own property or choose her own groom, she no longer defines herself that way. She’s simply “Little Bird or Birdy, of the Manor of Stonebridge in the shire of Lincoln, in the country of England, in the hands of God.”

Like most of us, Birdy can’t simply throw away the constraints of her unequal, unjust world. She can change painfully little about her circumstances. But, all by herself, she has changed something. In allowing Birdy’s father to save her, Dunham loses track of the quieter, more powerful ways in which Birdy was already saving herself.

# The last schnitzel: End of an era for Israel's famed Penguin restaurant

By Hillel Kuttler

NAHARIYA, Israel — The Penguin's backyard once hosted fashion shows, weddings and concerts by the country's leading singers. On its patio, British Mandate-era soldiers drank cold beer, unaware that the young women making conversation were sent to distract them from nearby ships that were discharging arriving Jews. Out front, along eucalyptus-shaded HaGaaton Street, horse-drawn carriages ferried summer tourists to their hotels.

Visiting the restaurant today conjures these decades-old images of a landmark that's occupied the same spot for 82 years.

But come Jan. 1, The Penguin will exist only in sweet memories in this remote coastal town, its property slated to become a nine-story residential building. No more Ilan Coffee — the owner's layered, white-black-white concoction of warm milk, espresso and froth. The end of signature dishes like schnitzel (a thin, fried and breaded chicken cutlet), goulash and Bavarian bratwurst with cabbage.

Changing tastes or decreased business aren't prompting The Penguin's demise, since people of all ages continue

patronizing the restaurant. Rather, owner Ilan Oppenheimer, 75, is selling out to apportion the proceeds to his children while he's alive and well, intent on ensuring harmony in the family — shalom bayit, domestic tranquility, is the Hebrew term he used.

Oppenheimer mentioned local families that splintered in their third generation of running a company. His late father, Ernst, established The Penguin in 1940, soon after emigrating with his wife Mariana, from Offenbach, Germany. Ilan and his eldest child, Amir, 42, now run the business.

## Nahariya's German roots

The family's gain is the community's — and Israel's — loss, for more than an institution is closing with The Penguin. It's among the last public vestiges of Nahariya's German roots.

Jews fleeing Hitler founded Nahariya in 1935. They tried farming family-size plots, couldn't make a go of it and reverted to their white-collar professions. The following decades saw the establishment of still-operating companies, all of them German-Jewish: Soglowek meatpacking,

Strauss dairy products and toolmaker Iscar, which founder Stef Wertheimer famously sold to Warren Buffett — the American tycoon's first foreign holding.

But all of those companies abandoned Nahariya in recent decades for other northern locales. Little of the old-country flavor remains in the town, with German-born residents almost completely dying off and their children long ago moving to the country's center. Danny Ohayon, whose parents are Moroccan, fondly recalls German families on Balfour and Sokolov streets to whom he delivered meals from The Penguin in the 1980s. German would be heard in the streets, but no longer is; Russian and Hebrew are Nahariya's lingua franca. Low-rise nursing homes are everywhere, transformed from mom-and-pop hotels — most owned by German Jews — that once catered to Israeli tourists. The owner of one nursing home, The Jordan, told me a few years ago that shifting from the hotel business was more profitable. I've seen just one horse-drawn carriage — another Nahariya hallmark — here in five years.

What remains, outlasting even The Penguin, are the symbols of those roots. Most of Nahariya's sister cities are in Germany: Alzey, Bielefeld, Darmstadt, Offenbach, Paderborn and the Berlin borough of Tempelhof-Schöneberg. Their flags fly on a podium along the main road.

### All in the family

Over an Ilan Coffee on a late August afternoon, Ilan Oppenheimer, an otherwise

subdued man, makes like he's performing at the Improv.

"I've been working here my whole life. I like to say that I was born because my father and mother had sex on this table," Oppenheimer says early in our interview by The Penguin's bar.

"My father had a customer who came here every morning. One day, he didn't come, and my father saw him walking on the far side of the street and enter another restaurant for lunch. He returned here the next day, and my father asked why he'd gone elsewhere. The guy said, 'I had pain in my mouth, and my dentist said to eat on the other side.'"

Maybe the shtick steels its teller against the impending separation from a place where memory pervades. Oppenheimer began working at The Penguin peeling potatoes and sweeping floors as a child. Even his paternal grandparents, Hugo and Recha, put in their time here.

Recha "was smart," he said. "She said, 'Close while you're on top.' She also said, 'Money is easier to divide than property.' I have five kids. They're all married. That's 10 opinions. Interests differ. You hear it every day."

Oppenheimer said he's happy to discuss the restaurant, even approaching its closing, rather than be interviewed about disasters. Occasional missile strikes, terrorist attacks and flash floods — HaGaaton Street is named for the stream flowing through town — killed several Nahariya residents over the years. Residents fled in 2006 during the

Second Lebanon War. Except for certain holidays, though, The Penguin never closed. Even during the coronavirus crisis, Oppenheimer offered his full menu for pick-up or delivery.

### Final farewells

What he's acknowledging, really, is that The Penguin has seen it all. Mention Nahariya to many Israelis, and they'll reflexively offer these two associations: fond memories from childhood visits, invariably followed by a version of, "I haven't been back since, I should go," and The Penguin.

It's a restaurant where generations have eaten — and begun. Ohayon, who would establish his own eatery, Chumus Danny, in an alley across the street, chatted up a Penguin coworker, Nurit, in 1988; she became his wife and the mother of their three children. Computer science professor Nissim Francez wrote two books here, always at a corner table on the balcony level, ordering coffee and sometimes a bite to eat. On Saturdays, he brings his wife for lunch.

Maya Barlev's father, Willy Benjamin Rausnitz, immigrated from Vienna and ate at The Penguin; Barlev and her husband come regularly for the schnitzel. Most weekends, they meet friends at The Penguin for coffee.

"It's our place. It's the habit of going there. The price is good. I was there just last week," says Barlev, the director of the Lieberman House, a stone mansion housing the town's history museum. "Nahariya will

lose a symbol, and you'll only be able to put up a sign: 'Here stood The Penguin.'"

Since word spread about the restaurant's imminent demise, some longtime patrons have given Oppenheimer a piece of their minds. He gets it. The restaurant never seems to be empty, and it's become more popular with the end nearing. Those let's-go-back-to-see-Nahariya intentions are finally materializing. National newspaper and TV reporters have come to offer their farewells.

"It's hard for me. People are angry I'm closing. Someone told me, 'You're lucky. They're eulogizing you while you're still alive,'" Oppenheimer said.

"I knew it would be hard for Nahariyans. Some said, 'Nahariya without The Penguin is like Jerusalem without the Kotel.' I knew it would resonate here. I didn't know it would echo nationally. People are coming for the last schnitzel."

# **This non-Jewish nanny knows more about keeping kosher than you**

By Mira Fox

Accents say a lot within the Jewish world. You can often tell someone's religious affiliation or family traditions or sometimes even guess at their politics through their pronunciation of certain words.

Adriana Fernandez speaks with what most people would call a yeshivish accent. She says "Sukkos" and "Shabbos" and "the aleph beis" like a nice yeshiva bokher from Flatbush. She can say a perfect Hebrew "ch," talk about davening and chat about the ins and outs of maintaining a kosher kitchen.

She did not, however, go to yeshiva, nor did she grow up in Brooklyn. She's from Florida. And she's not Jewish.

Fernandez picked up her accent and Jewish expertise from nannying for frum, or Jewishly observant, families in Boca Raton. She's been in high demand from Orthodox families for the past three years, nannying almost exclusively for the city's Jewish community.

When she was first hired, she didn't even know what keeping kosher entailed. But

with the help of her charges, she learned fast — making her a hot commodity in the community.

Fernandez, who works as an opera singer and teaches voice lessons when she isn't nannying, began to document what she was learning on TikTok. In one video, she tells about the time she saw one of the moms' wigs and thought she had cancer or alopecia until the kid explained about sheitels, the wigs worn by married Orthodox women — and then tugged to see if Fernandez's hair was real. In another, she excitedly explains about the mikvah used to make plates and cutlery kosher, and then discovers, thanks to commenters, that there's a "human mikvah" too.

It would be easy for all of this to come across as condescending, or for Fernandez to make fun of the habits of Orthodox Jews. But her respect is palpable. With each new fact she learns, her curiosity grows, and she often asks her supportive followers to help her understand something new.

Below, find out the things that have surprised her most in her frum nanny journey, edited for length and clarity — and because she spent half our conversation asking me about Jewish trivia.

### **How exactly did your frum popularity start?**

I put my info on a nannying website and someone contacted me. Her name was Hadassah, but I'd never heard a name like that so I just thought maybe they're using their last name. She asked me to babysit the kids after school and I was like yes, sounds cool.

But at the end of our little Facetime interview, she just randomly was like, "Oh, by the way, we're Jewish, is that OK?" I was like, this poor woman, why would that not be OK? Now that I am more in the Jewish community, I'm learning that's actually a thing, and you guys have so much persecution.

So I got there, and they didn't really explain much, they were like, "You're just here to play with the kids." And then day by day I started learning. Oh — kosher. Oh, your homework is in Hebrew. Oh, what does this word mean? Oh, what is this snack?

And I messed up their names. I thought Eli was a girl. But I still babysit those kids.

### **And from there, it was just by word of mouth?**

They have such a great unit, like family and neighborhood, so we'd go play outside. The moms were always more than accepting

and friendly and slowly started coming up to me because they'd notice that I'm really good with the kids. So now my phone just blows up all day with people like, "I got your number from so-and-so!"

### **What's your background — did you know a lot of Jewish people before this?**

I've been to every type of school: homeschooled, charter school, private school. My private school was a Christian, Catholic private school. But the only Jewish kids I was around were when I went to public school in high school. It was your typical, they had a bar or bat mitzvah and they celebrated Hanukkah — sorry, Cha-nukkah. The kids yell at me for that all the time.

### **Don't worry, my mom can't say the chet either.**

I feel like it's a crime if I don't say it right.

Anyway, I thought being Jewish was that they celebrated Hanukkah. None of them were kosher. I knew one person who was kosher and what I thought that meant was they just couldn't eat a cheeseburger. So that was a huge learning curve for me.

Then all their holidays, different dressing, the sheitels — I was like, oh my gosh, this is a whole other world.

Sometimes the kids will come home with stories like Noah's Ark — or Noach, is how they call him. Or Moses — Moshe. And so I would find that really interesting to relate, that we know the same stories.

I think it's so fascinating and I love how dedicated the families are. And the kids! I can't express how impressed with the kids I am. They are the most moral, driven kids. They never complain if they have to go daven. They never complain if they have to do homework in Hebrew. They never complain if we're in a store and I say sorry, that's not kosher.

**How did you learn about all the rules of keeping kosher? It can be pretty complicated, especially in a fully kosher kitchen.**

Well, obviously, if it's in their house, they can eat it. But then I started to realize they can't mix certain things, or certain things can't go on this kind of plate — that was the biggest thing! I was always wondering like, wow, these people really don't like doing dishes because there were so many plastic utensils. Now I know it's just hard to have space for two sets of dishes, so they keep it around for the dairy.

At first, I was super oblivious, but once I started realizing all the super specific details, now I look into everything. Like the tissues in the bathroom — is this for a reason? Two beds — must be for a reason.

[Editor's note: Some interpretations of halacha forbid ripping on Shabbat, so some observant families use tissues. For those who observe niddah, sex is forbidden while a woman is menstruating and two beds are common.]

Sometimes I'll go to Google, but it's pointless. I either just ask the kids or the parents, and now, the TikTokers. Because

Google will use a lot of words that I'm not familiar with, and explain it in too much depth.

**Are the kids ever resistant to keeping kosher?**

Never. It's mind-blowing! You're dealing with children, like the age of 2½. They can understand kosher, Shabbos. They'll throw a fit if I won't buy them a toy or something, but if I say no, we're not having that ice cream because it's not kosher, you don't hear another word.

But some of the kids do complain about walking on Shabbos to shul. Because it's hot outside in Florida.

**Do you find any of the customs confusing?**

Someone on TikTok explained this to me, but I guess I've asked the kids why they can't do arts and crafts on Shabbos, or why can't you swim. In my head, I'm like, arts and crafts are so innocent! It's not TV, it's not immoral, it's not something that's bad for you, so why not?

But on the other hand, I'm just like, that's how it is and I respect it. That's what I respect about it, it's about giving up something you want to do to completely honor Hashem and use that day to be with family. Your phone will be there tomorrow. You can swim tomorrow.

**What's been the most surprising thing you learned about?**

In the beginning, it was just like, wow, I can't believe they don't use the vacuum cleaner on Shabbos, and so on. But then I realized they just clean before, turn the lights on before. Then it made sense to me, they're still living a completely normal life. You just prepare, it's not that complicated.

But then you go into all of the details — like not ripping! I can't really pick.

**I loved seeing you realize, in real time, in the comments of a TikTok video that the mikvah is not only for dishes.**

Yes! Everyone has been dying for me to make another video on that. I've seen the item mikvah. I guess for the "people mikvah," people do it after the woman's period. But is there any other reason?

[Redacted overly long explanation of the textual basis for various mikvah uses.]

Wow, I feel like we could sit here and talk forever. And they also have a special medical team on Shabbat?

[Another lengthy explanation, also covering Shabbat elevators.]

The Shabbos rules kind of make me giggle. People always make a bunch of jokes about the Shabbos goy. I've never been a Shabbos goy! It usually doesn't work with my schedule to babysit on Shabbos because I teach on Saturdays.

**But I want to go to a Shabbos dinner! I'm afraid to say that online, though. I don't want to intrude on anything.**

You mentioned that you're the only non-Jew a lot of these kids know. What have the kids been curious about from your life?

To them, "not Jewish" means I celebrate Halloween and Christmas. Or that I can eat bacon. It's super general things that they know about from their stories about non-Jews. The kids always want to know about Halloween and Christmas, and then they are immediately like, "Santa is NOT real! Why is every single non-Jewish holiday lying about some made-up person — Santa, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny!"

I've had moms ask me about my dating situation, about nightclubs — like, "Is that actually a thing? Is it actually that crazy?" I've worked at a nightclub and explained that people will pay thousands of dollars for alcohol and they're like, "Wow, I've seen that in movies."

# In ‘Blonde,’ Arthur Miller is Marilyn Monroe’s Jewish husband, and we all know what that means (don’t we?)

By PJ Grisar

A few months ago, Joyce Carol Oates, as is her wont, tweeted something baffling:

“When I was first married to my (Jewish) husband two Jewish women friends of mine took me aside and said with wry smiles: ‘Welcome to the club.’ Soon, I knew what they meant.”

No one was entirely sure what Oates meant. Her attempt to clarify (a captionless photo of her late husband on a bridge near a backdrop of conifers and mountains) did little to help. But watching “Blonde,” the fitful, NC-17 fever dream of Oates’ best-known novel, about Marilyn Monroe (née Norma Jeane Baker), I couldn’t stop thinking of what she — and filmmaker Andrew Dominik — meant to say with their portrayal of Arthur Miller.

While Oates’ novel lightly obscures key names with titles like “Ex-athlete” and “the Playwright,” Dominik’s film — a punishing and impressionistic Hollywood martyr story — is more direct. Though never named as such, Bobby Cannavale plays “Joltin’ Joe” DiMaggio and Adrien Brody is Arthur Miller.

The two men serve as polarized totems of Norma Jeane’s love life.

Marilyn (Ana De Armas) divorces DiMaggio, who is possessive and physically abusive. Miller, introduced spilling a stackful of pages near the Astor Place subway entrance, makes for a too-perfect romantic foil.

The brutish, ethnic athlete is replaced by a rangy, bespectacled, ethnic writer type, who wistfully handles a snapshot of a former love. “Magda, Magda,” he repeats. We soon learn that Magda is not just Miller’s “own first love,” an immigrant who spoke broken English, but a role in his new play. Imagine Miller’s surprise when he arrives at a reading to see Marilyn Monroe in the part.

“Magda — her?” Miller says, in his familiar “Boy Grew in Brooklyn” accent. But by the end of the play, he’s in tears.

After the reading, Miller and Marilyn sit down for coffee and discuss the role. Miller is shocked by her insights — the connections she makes to Chekhov’s “Three Sisters.” He is absolutely bowled

over that she realizes that Magda, who is probably illiterate, is just pretending to read the writing of the character Isaac. (By way of fictional elements, I don't think this is a real play, though it, like Miller's once-mentioned, invented ex, "Esther," seems pointedly Semitic.)

This note is a breakthrough that sends Miller reeling and, eventually, makes Marilyn a vessel for his lost love.

At this point in the film we are entering some potentially hazardous territory, with an avatar of tender-hearted, New York Jewish erudition (the sort that won't raise a hand to you), wooing the picture of peroxidized goyishe beauty. Monroe's own conversion to Judaism is duly glossed over. In a montage of their prenuptial press tour, a reporter asks what kind of wedding they'll have. "Very quiet I hope," Marilyn replies.

Life with Miller is quiet, shifting to a sort of perfume commercial presentation, as she calls to him, "Daddy, I don't ever want to leave."

Of course, trouble comes to paradise. While Miller is largely solicitous, he has a mild Hitchcockian urge to mold an icy blonde to his liking and use her in his art. She is not Magda or Marilyn but Norma in their home, and yet, like every man in her life, he betrays her. One day, Marilyn goes up to his home office, lovingly surveying pages laid out on a desk, only to find lines of dialogue ripped from a discussion they had. The discussion concerns a pledge he made to never write about their relationship. Oops.

It's a relief that Miller's behavior doesn't fall into something Svengali-esque or predatory. His trespasses are the most venial of all of Norma's beaus, their breakup largely

framed as the result of a miscarriage. (There is a scene where the fetus speaks to her; out of context, a number of sequences here could play well as pro-life propaganda.)

In the final reckoning, Miller is the partner who best understands her. He alone appreciates her intellect. He embodies common stereotypes of a Jewish husband: educated, attentive, and a good provider, if a meek one not equipped for crisis. He's the sort of person who won't tread on your toes or take control when you're clearly spiraling into drug use. Who seems only the tiniest bit concerned when you trash your bedroom. "What can I do to help you, darling?" he'll ask, but he won't really help.

Dominik's film, in all its bewildering toggles in aspect ratio and black and white to color also ends with a final double exposure: the fractured identity of Norma the victim and Marilyn the pinup. While skipping the steps leading up to a pivotal transformation, "Blonde" wants to tell us about the roles we play and the constructs we fit into.

In the end, the role Miller plays, as yet another surrogate for Norma's missing father, is fungible. After crashing her car into a tree, Norma staggers into their home and, seeing Miller there, asks "Who are you?" Miller's face blurs in and out as he says, "Norma, I'm your husband."

Norma doesn't register what that means in the moment. But the larger point, in all its glaring banality, is we can never really know a person if we insist on simple classifications like "Jewish husband," "ex-athlete" or "blonde." Oates should know that too — she wrote the book on it.



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**