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# A miracle happened somewhere around here: A look at life on the land where Hanukkah began

By Hillel Kuttler

MODI'IN, Israel — Hanukkah is about to be celebrated by Jews worldwide. For some Israeli Jews, the holiday pervades life year-round, because they live where the history is believed to have happened.

“We’re the inheritors. We’re the Jews who live in the Maccabees’ town,” said Jason Pearlman, a resident of Modi’in in central Israel. “At Hanukkah time, it’s more palpable.”

Three places in Israel, located near each other and midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, are among those that lay special claim to Hanukkah: Modi’in, Hashmonaim, and Maccabim, named for the Maccabees, the ancient heroes who stood up for Judaism in the face of Greek-Seleucid forces.

Tourists flock to the area, especially around Hanukkah time, which begins Sunday evening and lasts eight days, to better understand the story of the holiday. For locals, including English-speaking immigrants, living where the Jews triumphed and where many believed a

military miracle occurred deepens their Jewish and Zionist pride.

Living in the city of Modi’in represents both modernity “and the historic presence of the people of Israel,” said Pearlman, a public relations professional from Sunderland, England, a duality that “we don’t take for granted — and adds to the significance” of the holiday.

Belinda Talkar, who lives in the West Bank settlement of Hashmonaim, said she can see and feel the energy of Hanukkah in the lit candles displayed in her neighbors’ menorahs. “It’s out there, is in our faces and is real. It’s a direct connection to the history that is beneath our feet,” said Talkar, a business consultant who immigrated from Glasgow, Scotland.

And when Nathan Cherny walks along the hills and woods near his home in Maccabim, he considers how the Maccabees used the area’s topography to defeat their enemies more than two millennia ago, beginning in 167 B.C.E. “It’s nice to live amid so much history,” said Cherny, a physician originally

from Melbourne, Australia, who noted that he was born during Hanukkah.

### **A city reborn on Hanukkah**

Modi'in was the hometown of the Maccabees — called Maccabim in Hebrew. They spawned the Hasmonean dynasty, which ruled in Judea for a century. (The community of Hashmonaim takes its name from the Hebrew word for Hasmoneans.)

Then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin laid the cornerstone for Modi'in, a planned city, in a ceremony held on Dec. 14, 1993, during Hanukkah.

Archaeologists haven't definitively established the site of ancient Modi'in beyond its general proximity to its present-day namesake. In addition to the contemporary places' names — another one is Matityahu, a settlement across from Hashmonaim that honors the priest who led the Maccabee revolt — artifacts excavated in the area recall the Maccabees. Some of them date to the Second Temple period, when the original Hanukkah took place, according to accounts in the First and Second Book of Maccabees.

Each Hanukkah, Israeli tourists and school groups explore sites connected to the Maccabees on excursions marketed with such names as "In the Footsteps of the Maccabees," "Hanukkah in the Land of the Hasmoneans" and "Visiting Hasmonean Castles."

The visitors want to "connect to the geographic place," said Shani Ploskonos, who works for Kfar Etzion Field School, a

nonprofit organization that runs Hanukkah-themed tours. She joked that while her family's roots are Russian, her Greek-sounding surname fits the holiday.

When they stood up for Judaism — perhaps to the extreme, as then and even now some call their firebrand approach zealotry — the Maccabees couldn't have imagined their hometown evolving into today's suburban city of 100,000 people. Modi'in enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the country. A municipal plan approved in August would balloon Modi'in's population to 240,000, which would make it Israel's sixth-largest city.

### **The Hanukkah tour**

"We know the Hanukkah story happened in this area," said Margalit Frydman as she sets off with a visitor on a five-hour tour of several sites relating to the Maccabees. "Our best source is this," she said, taking from her backpack the First Book of the Maccabees, written soon after the Jewish rebels' victory.

She read verses stating that Matityahu moved from Jerusalem to Modi'in, and listing his five sons and their nicknames. One, Judah, was known as Maccabeus — Judah Maccabee.

Frydman, who lives in Modi'in and has guided in the country for more than 30 years, read the verses while sitting on the boulders that served as benches in a Second Temple-era synagogue — possibly the oldest Jewish house of worship in the world, she said. Visible in the one-room synagogue were remnants of six columns

that had supported a roof. A square by one column possibly was a lectern on which the Torah was read to those assembled. Because the Second Temple functioned then, a synagogue may have served only for Torah readings and not prayer, she said.

But since 2006, Modi'in residents have worshipped once a year at the ancient synagogue — the Friday night of Hanukkah. The annual service attracts hundreds of people from the city's many synagogues. Secular Jews come, too, drawn by the historical echoes.

The service represents “an anchor” for the modern city's Maccabee roots and “is part of the whole romance” of Zionism, said Elli Fischer, who lives in Modi'in and organizes each gathering.

“These are ancient landscapes that forged us as a people, and we preserved those memories, following them, like a trail of breadcrumbs, back home after so many centuries,” he said.

Alongside the synagogue, steps lead down to a mikvah, a ritual bath. Discussing symbolic purification makes sense here because Hanukkah celebrates the Maccabees' sanctifying the Temple by lighting pure oil after the Seleucids desecrated it, Frydman said.

The complex, approached via an ancient road that also was excavated two decades ago, is known as Umm el-Umdan, Arabic for mother of pillars. The name's similarity to Modi'in, and the hoard of archaeological finds at the synagogue and throughout the

city, lend credence to experts who place ancient Modi'in here, Frydman said.

A few miles northeast is another hill in Modiin, Givat Hatitora, that's considered a possible site of the original city. From a Crusader fortress, Frydman pointed north, beyond the busy Highway 443, toward the Palestinian village of Beit Ur al-Fauqa. That's where Judah Maccabee defeated the Seleucids in the third of eight battles.

Turning south, she directed a visitor toward the site of the fourth confrontation, known as the Battle of Emmaus. A key battle would be fought there in Israel's War of Independence in 1948. Emmaus is now known as Latrun, housing a memorial to soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces' tank brigade and displaying scores of tanks that tourists can sit on.

“We like to think of the eight days of Hanukkah being happy, a party — but, no, it was a very long process,” she said.

### **Hanukkah and Zionism**

In modern times, the holiday has celebrated the miracle of the temple's rededication, while downplaying the Maccabees' struggle for Jewish independence and religious freedom. However, Zionists settling Israel in the late 19th and early 20th centuries seized upon the Maccabees as role models for Jews' transformation from powerless people in the Diaspora to confident, independent and brave residents of their ancestral homeland.

It's from the Maccabees that the Maccabiah, the international Jewish sports festival held

in Israel since it began in 1932, took its name. Maccabi is the name of a popular youth-sports organization in Israel and abroad, and the name of the teams it sponsors in basketball and soccer leagues. It also is the name of one of Israel's major health maintenance organizations.

Modi'in's Hasmonean Heritage Museum is located on Dam HaMaccabim Street. It means "the Maccabees' blood," but is the name of a bright red flower, a *helichrysum sanguineum*, that is ubiquitous on stickers distributed at military cemeteries on Israel's Memorial Day.

Throughout Israel, the Maccabees are often recalled at ceremonies to open a new building or at house-warming parties. Each of those is called a *chanukat habayit* — a house dedication. The Hebrew word Hanukkah means dedication.

The Maccabees' contemporary influence is so appealing that it is sometimes invoked when the connection to history is at best tenuous. Just west of Modi'in, a Highway 443 traffic sign that's brown, denoting a historical site, announces "Maccabee Graves."

The empty graves there, carved into limestone and with covers ajar, are plentiful — but they're not from the Hasmonean period. Nor is a tiny Ottoman period structure a few steps away. Blue spray paint on its outer walls reads "Matityahu's Grave."

On one recent afternoon, five young men sat outside the stone building. One man strummed a guitar. Inside, two observant men sat beside a tomb adorned with

modern stone and chiseled with words commemorating Matityahu, who reportedly is buried inside. Memorial candles covered the slab, as did bags of potato chips and bottled beverages.

Yosef Amar and his friend Yotam Borat had come from the Samaria region on a periodic visit to graves of righteous men. Being at Matityahu's grave just before Hanukkah was coincidental, they said.

"I came because of the idea of Jewish strength, of Jews saying, 'We're not conquered; we can take matters into our own hands,'" said Amar, a rabbi at a *hesder yeshiva*, which combines military service with religious study.

Amar said the Maccabees' ideals resonate today, with Israel often under an international microscope.

"There's a message to us not to feel the need to conform," he said. "There's too much pressure on us to surrender diplomatically, to not ascend to the Temple Mount, so others won't get angry. If we become like everyone else, we'll lose our uniqueness and our national legitimacy."

Amar said he'd like to return to visit the grave during Hanukkah, but will be away on military-reserve duty.

And he smiled at the irony of missing the chance to visit a Maccabee-themed site, on the holiday celebrating the Maccabees' feats, due to his own military obligations.

# **Kippah under his helmet, this yeshiva grad is now a Texas A&M running back**

By Kimberly Winston

For the first time in October, Sam Salz, a 20-year-old sophomore from Philadelphia, suited up as a running back for the Texas A&M University Aggies, one of the most storied teams in college athletics.

On his back was the number 39, chosen in honor of the 39 types of work that are forbidden on Shabbat. Salz, who wears a kippah under his helmet, is believed to be the only Orthodox Jew now on an NCAA Division I football team. The Aggies play their games on Saturday, about half of them before sundown. Salz is committed to sit those out.

The economics major is a walk-on player — meaning he wasn't recruited or given a scholarship to play. Making the team roster, he said, came after a year of solo training and a lot of prayer.

And, he told the Forward, thanks to some divine intervention. "God is always thinking a few steps ahead," he said one day after classes at the College Station, Texas, campus.

Salz — all 5 feet 5 inches and 150 pounds of him — has not yet actually played for the

team, and, as the current season is over, is unlikely to do so soon this year. But he has hopes for next year's season. And the symbolism of an Orthodox Jewish kid on a major college football team has not gone unnoticed.

"We are talking about a team that competes in the SEC, the most competitive college division," said Oren Glickman, one-half of the team that produces The Ball Habatim, a podcast and YouTube show usually dedicated to Yeshiva University sports that recently had Salz on as a guest.

"To see someone who comes from a similar background walking on at a program like that," Glickman continued, is "mind-boggling" and "inspiring to other aspiring players from the modern Orthodox world."

And that, Salz said, is the point.

"I wanted to inspire kids, I wanted to inspire belief in Hashem," he said on The Ball Habatim, using a Hebrew term that refers to God. "If you believe in Hashem and you believe you can do it, nothing will hold you back in life."

Alan Cannon, Texas A&M's associate director of communications, said that while Salz is small for a football player, walk-on players are crucial, often standing in during practice for an opposing team and helping run plays.

"Walk-ons are very important to our program and [Salz] has shown that ability and it has been tremendous to have him on the roster," Cannon said.

### **A self-made player**

Salz grew up a fan of the Philadelphia Eagles and first dreamed of playing college football as a child. But at Kohelet Yeshiva High School northwest of Philadelphia, he played floor hockey, basketball, tennis and soccer. There was no football program, so his exposure to the sport was all through televised games.

"Football for me, there has always been something about it that I loved," he said. "There was always something calling me inside my head that you have to play college football."

When it came time to pick a school, his family drove the 1,500 miles from their home in Philadelphia to College Station. Salz was immediately smitten by Texas A&M's "12th Man" football culture — every Aggie fan stands throughout all the games, symbolically ready to take the field should the team require it.

But it was a visit to the campus Rohr Chabad Jewish Center that cinched it. Salz felt at home in the tightknit, service-oriented place where campus Jews gathered to pray, share meals and volunteer. "When I saw

how special the Jewish community is here I said, 'This is it. This is the place.'"

He is the first student from his high school to attend A&M, where there are about 400 to 500 Jewish students on a campus of 78,000.

As a freshman, Salz had no clear path to making the team. Texas A&M, like all football powerhouse schools, cultivates and heavily recruits its future players while they are still in high school. And while walk-on slots are fairly common, they are very rare for a football newbie.

Still, Salz believed he could make it happen. He began training solo for two to five hours a day, taking his workouts from social media videos. He wrote an affirmation and put it in his pocket. It said, "I, Sam Salz, play football for the Texas Aggies."

At first, he didn't tell his family or his friends about his goal; then he told a few friends he trusted not to discourage him. And he kept training.

One day in fall 2021, he showed up at a local barbecue joint where head football coach Jimbo Fisher was doing a live radio show. At question time, Salz blurted out "How do I try out for a walk-on position," and got a phone number.

He also got Fisher to sign his kippah — a white one embroidered with a menorah in Aggie maroon he got from the Rohr Center — and his affirmation paper.

More training and a few dollops of good luck later — coaches saw him training and called

him in for a meeting — and he was on the team.

### **‘Breaking barriers’**

Last month, as the Aggies celebrated their Thanksgiving weekend victory over rival Louisiana State University, there was Salz, celebrating with his teammates, revealing that same Aggie kippah under his helmet.

His first game in uniform was on Yom Kippur. When he explained why he could not play, no one had a problem. Though he neither plays nor practices on Shabbat, he will use the players’ lounge on that day to study from a chumash and a volume of the Talmud he keeps in his locker. And for a Thanksgiving event, the team arranged a kosher meal.

In these times of heightened antisemitism, Salz says his teammates and his coaches have been nothing but open to learning about his Judaism and helping him to observe its laws. No one, he said, treats him differently as the only Orthodox Jew on the team roster.

“They all have a faith in God,” he said.

For Salz’s parents — his father is a chiropractor and his mother works for a Jewish relief agency — their son’s spot on the team represents more than just hard work and determination. It challenges the presumption that Jews belong in the library or laboratory, but not on the playing field.

“To us, it is huge,” Marianna Salz, Sam’s mom, said. “There is definitely a level of stereotyping and I think my son wanted to show you can have what to some people

might appear as two contrasting identities in one.”

“I think his dad said it best,” she continued. “He said, ‘They saw something in our son beyond his yarmulke. They see him as a human being.’”

Now that he has made the team, Salz has had to set other personal goals. One, he said, is to “do my best to help the team succeed.” Another is to play in the National Football League.

“I would like to see where my football career could take me,” he said. And if that doesn’t pan out? “Probably something in real estate.”

Salz is not the only observant Orthodox yeshiva boy to make it onto a big team.

Yeshiva University alum Ryan Turell was drafted by an affiliate team of the Detroit Pistons earlier this year, and Jacob Steinmetz, a graduate of a Long Island Jewish academy, is playing minor league baseball in the Arizona Diamondbacks organization.

David May was a placekicker for the University of Maryland football team from 2006 to 2009, and wrote about his teammates’ embrace of him and the times he confronted antisemitism in a piece for the *Algemeiner*.

Glickman says all of Orthodox Judaism is watching Turell, Steinmetz and Salz. “Just seeing these kids who are breaking barriers and not only are they experiencing very little antisemitism, they are being embraced,” he said. “It is just so beautiful.”

# Kids love to play video games. So do white supremacists.

By Mira Fox

Video games have changed since I played Mario Kart on my friend's older brother's Nintendo. Now, gamers — both kids and adults — wear headsets and play in sprawling online worlds populated by thousands of users from across the world.

And, according to a new report from the Anti-Defamation League, those new worlds and battlefields are often populated by white supremacists and extremists.

Imagine: You are a middle-school kid playing Roblox, an online multiplayer game that allows users to create their own worlds and servers, and you stumble upon something called “Camp Concentration.” You go in and find yourself in a prison camp, dominated by massive watchtowers and covered in German flags. Other users walk around clothed in Nazi uniforms, operating showers that release poison gas from a button labeled “execute.” There are pyres.

Or maybe you're playing a shooting or battle game. Before every bout, you're placed into a “lobby” with other, random users who will be on your team. You're given a few moments to chat before the match begins. Apropos of nothing, one user begins spouting antisemitic conspiracies. Another user hears someone's voice, realizes she's a girl and immediately kicks her off the team.

These scenarios are surprisingly common in the world of video games. While we often worry about hate speech and harassment on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, it proliferates freely on online gaming platforms, of which there are hundreds — each game functions as its own platform. And unlike Twitter which, even under Elon Musk, puts an emphasis on moderation, many online games have few systems in place to control the spread of extremist ideology or restrict users from bullying and harassing other players.

Yet these games are unbelievably popular. In 2020, Roblox told Bloomberg that two-thirds of children between the ages of 9 and 12 play the game — and that's just a single game.

More than five out of six Americans experience harassment in gaming according to the new report, which was conducted with the help of gaming industry data analytics company Newzoo. Users reported harassment on the basis of race, religion and gender, among other categories; users come to know each other's race, religion and gender through friendly conversation and often via simply hearing the other user's voice through their headset.

The survey reports that Jewish players of online multiplayer games experienced the largest increase in harassment from 2021, going from 22% to 34% of users

experiencing harassment; women (of all backgrounds) experience the largest share of hate overall as a category.

### **What does the extremism look like?**

The harassment ranges from bullying and name-calling within a game to doxxing, when someone's real name and address are nonconsensually shared, and even swatting, when a bad-faith user sends law enforcement to someone's house on a false report.

"Having weapons drawn on me when the police believe I have a hostage situation is very scary," wrote one Asian American 24-year-old who got swatted.

And then there's the white supremacist ideology. Sometimes, users post hate in comments or spoken conversation, but some users go farther. In some battle games, users might build a swastika-shaped structure out of the materials they can use to shelter from enemy attacks. In world-building games like Roblox, as reported by Wired in a startling story linked in the report, users even build entire worlds inspired by fascism where they force their fellow users to form armies that follow harsh, racially motivated codes of conduct.

For those who make friends on extremist servers or enjoy exchanging conspiracy theories while on a team, there's a path to further radicalization. Users will invite each other to private chats or channels on sites such as Discord or Telegram that are even more conspiratorial, violent or racist where they are exposed to more extreme ideology.

### **Encouraging hatred**

The author of the report, ADL director of strategy and operations Daniel Kelley, said that extremists often experiment with sharing their violent ideologies in video

games. Because they rarely face condemnation, they can radicalize further.

A report from the New Zealand government about the Christchurch shooter, who killed 51 and injured 40 in a shooting at two mosques in New Zealand, alleged that he was able to "openly express racist and far-right views" in his community within online multiplayer games which led, in part, to his further radicalization.

"Because you can connect with strangers, the norms are super important," Kelley said of the gaming community. "And the norms right now are around trash talking and are around conflict and hostility and toxicity."

He attributes this toxic culture to the lack of moderation that plagues most games. When extremists can regularly share freely, they feel encouraged.

"There has been a culture of permissiveness by the platforms where they haven't been aggressive in content moderation, which sets up norms in these places that people can let fly the most ugly parts of themselves and there will be no consequences from the platform or their fellow gamers," said Kelley.

Kelley's research shows that people who are harassed often leave gaming, which exacerbates the problem. "So you end up with a culture of people who are either hardened and see these experiences of harassment as part of the water they swim in, or people who are the worst of the worst and really embrace it and revel in it," he said.

### **Where is hatred found?**

Some games, on their surface, seem more closely connected to hate or extremism. Call of Duty World War II, for example, made the controversial choice to make a game with Nazi zombies.

But hatred can manifest in all games. Games with edgy storylines don't necessarily lead to more hate speech, and seemingly innocuous games often shelter extremists too.

"When you look across our statistics of harassment and white supremacy, it's present across every genre of game, whether it's a shooter that has problematic media elements, whether it's a sandbox like Roblox or Minecraft, whether it's a sports game like Madden," said Kelley. "This is a problem with, I think, the culture of online games. I wouldn't necessarily attribute it to the content."

### **The problem of moderation**

Every social media platform struggles with moderation — but video games do a worse-than-average job. Kelley said that this is because it's unclear who, exactly, should be in charge.

Each game is a giant community that is, in ways, like a social media platform; players can interact with strangers, chat and explore. Except games are played through different consoles, such as Xbox or PlayStation, as well as on PCs, and Kelley said the different console companies as well as the game's company itself are all involved in attempting to moderate. But some, especially the game company itself, are unprepared for the challenge.

"These spaces were never designed with the idea of, like, we're creating a social environment for multiple minds. It was not initially created with this idea of the sort of social aspects of it," Kelley said.

Instead, he compared games to something like a movie; after it's created and shipped out into the world, its creators take their hands off of it. The social aspect arose over time; game developers still conceived of

their products as something that, once finished, were shipped out and did not need continued involvement from the designers, leading to little moderation.

Gamers often move conversations to other platforms, such as Discord or Twitch, both of which sprang out of the gaming community to provide further platforms for chatting and streaming.

"You have the lack of moderation from the game platform then bleeds into Twitch and becomes their responsibility," said Kelley.

Even tracking and researching hate speech on gaming platforms is difficult given that most games are impossible to search. "Our ability to know how and whether these are happening in different platforms is really limited," he explained. "There's no platform that's really providing public access to data."

Kelley said many people don't realize games are the site of so much extremism. "There's a disconnect between the dangers of social media and the dangers that are present in the ways in which online games are very much online platforms now," Kelley said.

Kelley said he hoped the report would raise awareness about the extremism breeding in online gaming. So much attention is paid to hate speech on social media, yet online games might even be more dangerous.

Kelley knows parents who forbid their children from having social media accounts, yet allow them to play online multiplayer games; Roblox, after all, is geared at young children, and rated for ages 7 and up.

And Roblox is one of the only places I can think of where an elementary school kid could accidentally walk into a kinky bondage scene — or a functioning concentration camp.

# In a state with few Jews, free 'Hanukkah kits' aim to combat antisemitism

By Adam Kovac

Montana has among the fewest Jews — and the most hate groups — per capita of any state. Hanukkah, a group of Montana Jews decided, presents an opportunity to combat bigotry in general and antisemitism in particular. Their target audience: school kids.

The Jewish group, an all-volunteer force working out of the Montana Jewish Project, the initiative that earlier this year reclaimed a once-active synagogue and made it into the state's only Jewish center, is stocking Hanukkah kits with books, dreidels, chocolate gelt and lesson plans on tolerance.

Forty have been distributed so far — for free — to Montana teachers who have requested them. It was inspired, said Rebecca Stanfel, president of the Montana Jewish Project's board, by members' experiences as a tiny minority in the state. There are an estimated 1,500 to 5,000 Jews in Montana, out of a total population of about a million.

"A lot of us have had kids that have gone through public schools in Montana, and have not always had the best experiences being the only Jewish kid in our school or the Jewish kid in our classroom," Stanfel said.

The boxes come with a lesson plan that asks students to reflect on how they would feel if someone were to make fun of their race, religion or family and discuss the best methods to help a victim of bullying.

Students also read *The Christmas Menorahs: How a Town Fought Hate*, a short book by Janice Cohn that describes the true story of how a community in Billings, Montana, stood together when neo-Nazis smashed the windows of Jewish homes on Hanukkah in the 1990s.

"The entire city of Billings rallied around the community," said Stanfel. "The newspaper printed color menorahs and the whole town cut them out and put them in their windows.

"Our goal was to use this story as a lens to think about classmates or peers and how they think about acceptance."

Montana has made more national headlines for antisemitism in recent years.

Prominent white supremacist Richard Spencer has made a home in the town of Whitefish, where he directed a hate campaign starting in 2016 against a local Jewish realtor. (A recent report indicated that Spencer has become a pariah in the town).

In March, antisemitic and transphobic flyers were distributed in a residential part of Great Falls, while in November, students at a Billings school were sent home after a threat that included a swastika was discovered in a bathroom.

Many Montanans have never interacted with a Jewish person, and until the Montana Jewish Project raised funds to reclaim Temple Emanu-El in Helena this year, Montana was one of only four states whose capital cities lacked a synagogue or Jewish center.

Kimberly Winkowitsch, who teaches in a small colony of Hutterites, a sect of Anabaptists, who live near the Canadian border, read about the Montana Jewish Project's curriculum kits in a Montana Historical Society newsletter. She reached out to obtain one for her students, kindergarteners through eighth graders, who meet in a one-room schoolhouse.

She said she's using the kit to expose them to aspects of the world they've never encountered. And while she hasn't introduced the dreidel to the classroom yet, she said her pupils have been taking the lesson of The Christmas Menorahs to heart.

"They're Christian students, so they have Christian beliefs and they're thinking the Christian way," she said. "So they get a little bit of exposure to Hanukkah to understand what that means."

Stanfel said the kits' creators have been gratified by teachers' responses.

"The feedback we've gotten, it's just really awesome," she said. "They're just being grateful and saying we really want to teach diversity. We really want to work on this."

# Four secrets for making great homemade latkes for Hanukkah

By Beth Harpaz

I'm always surprised when friends say they can't be bothered to make homemade latkes for Hanukkah. Takeout latkes or latkes from the frozen foods section or a mix never taste as good as latkes made from scratch. There's nothing like a golden potato pancake served hot and crispy right out of the frying pan.

Besides, what's so complicated? You shred 2½ pounds of potatoes (Idaho russet potatoes are ideal) and a yellow onion or two; combine with three eggs, a teaspoon or more of salt, pepper and ¼ cup of matzo meal or flour, then form the patties and fry.

But the prep and frying are time-consuming, and there are many pitfalls on the path to latke perfection. I should know: I learned the hard way — by screwing up. My mistakes also led me to discover four secrets to making great latkes. Here they are.

## **The worst latke mistake of all time**

Pro tip No. 1: Don't peel or shred those potatoes until you are ready to cook them.

Once when the first night of Hanukkah fell on a weeknight, I did my latke prep in advance. I figured that would make it faster

to get dinner on the table for my hungry family when I got home from work. So I grated the potatoes the night before and refrigerated them overnight.

Unfortunately, once you peel, shred and expose a potato to air, it oxidizes and turns a sickly gray. My prepped potatoes were completely discolored! But I didn't have time to start over, so I cooked what I had. Then I turned out the lights and we ate by the dim light of two menorah candles so nobody could see what the latkes looked like.

By the way, if you alternate grating the potatoes with grating the onions, mixing together as you go along, the onions slow down the oxidation of the potatoes.

## **Preventing a common latke problem**

Pro tip No. 2: Squeeze the moisture out of your potatoes and onions to keep them from falling apart.

The first time or two I made latkes, it was hard to keep them in one piece in the frying pan. But there's an easy solution. Just wring the potatoes and onions out.

That's right — after shredding them, but before adding other ingredients, take the

potatoes and onions a handful at a time and squeeze them over the sink, as if you were wringing out a wet sponge. You won't believe how much liquid comes out. Some recipes say you need cheesecloth or a fancy bag or gadget to do this. You don't. Just use your hands. Put a colander in the sink to catch any bits of potato that pop out as you squeeze.

The eggs and matzo meal also help keep the latkes from falling apart. So after you've squeezed out the liquid and added the other ingredients, give the mixture a couple of minutes to bind.

By the way, there's no secret to peeling and grating; not much room for blunder there. Most people use a peeler, but I'm faster with a small, sharp paring knife. (Some cooks don't peel at all, but I don't like dirty potato skins.)

As for shredding: box grater or food processor? If the potatoes are hand-grated, the shreds are coarser and the latkes will be lacier. (Perhaps you've heard it said that latkes aren't authentic unless the cook nicks a knuckle or grates a fingernail along with the potatoes. OK, gross! But it happens.)

Using a food processor takes less time than grating by hand. I often use my Cuisinart (with the shredding disk), especially if I'm making a double batch of latkes for a party. If you have folks offering to help, slicing the potatoes and putting them in the machine is an easily delegated chore. Food-processed latkes turn out denser than hand-shredded, but I like them just as much.

### **Frying the perfect latke**

Pro tip No. 3: Getting the oil and the heat right matters — a lot.

I can't say that I ever fried latkes in olive oil, but that's because I'd already made that mistake frying chicken cutlets, so I knew it was a bad idea. Olive oil smokes and burns food at a lower temperature than other oils, and you don't want to trigger the smoke alarm. (Been there.) So, use canola, corn or some other vegetable oil, and turn the heat up to moderately high. The oil must be hot enough to crisp and brown the latke exterior while at the same time cooking the inside through.

Once you get going and you've got all the latkes in the pan, that oil should be so hot that it bubbles.

You'll also have better, faster results in a stainless steel or coated fry pan than a heavy cast-iron pan. Again, I know this from experience: I often have one batch going in my cast-iron pan and another in my trusty old Farberware pan. The results taste the same to me; it's just trickier with cast iron because the pan is heavier and takes longer to heat up.

Heat the pan on high for a few seconds (count to 10) before you pour the oil. And don't just coat the pan. Put in enough oil — maybe a quarter-inch deep — so that your latkes are about halfway immersed. The oil is hot enough when a droplet of water flicked into the pan sizzles.

If the oil isn't hot enough, the latkes will take too long to cook, becoming greasy instead of crispy. (Yup, I've done that, too.)

Don't flip until they're golden brown on the bottom. If you can't see the edges browning, they're probably not ready; take a peek before you turn them over. Flip them too soon, and they could fall apart. And don't crowd them. You might also have to notch the heat up a tad once the pan is full. Give yourself room to slide the spatula under each pancake without disturbing the others.

To shape the latkes and get them in the pan in one piece, I use a big serving spoon to scoop the mixture from the bowl. Sometimes I pat them with my hands before carefully sliding them into the hot oil.

### **From stove to table: Every minute counts**

Pro tip No. 4: Degrease and serve those latkes as fast as you can.

Set up a degreasing station in advance. Spread newspaper or a brown paper bag out on a counter, then cover with a layer of paper towels. As each hot, cooked latke comes out of the pan, lay it carefully on the paper towels. Press another paper towel on the top of each latke to sop up grease from that side, too.

Set the table (or have someone else do it) before you start cooking so you can serve the latkes immediately. You don't want to be running back and forth for drinks, plates, applesauce and sour cream at this point. Trust me: Latkes taste better piping hot than when they've been sitting around for 15 minutes.

But there have been times when I couldn't serve the latkes right away; guests were

running late or some other problem needed tending. So I always preheat the oven to 375 and have a cookie sheet ready in case I need to keep them warm.

If I'm making more than one batch, I try to serve the first batch and make the second batch while the first batch is being eaten, rather than waiting until both batches are done. I usually have enough time to enjoy one latke myself at the table before that second round needs flipping.

By the way, I love latkes so much that I make them year-round, often with recipes that use sweet potatoes or other vegetables. There are vegan (eggless) versions as well. Putting latkes into your regular meal rotation is also a great way to practice your technique. That way, when Hanukkah rolls around, you'll have mastered all the secrets to potato pancake perfection.

# Despite rising antisemitism, many Jews still want to celebrate Hanukkah publicly

By Adam Kovac

With antisemitic incidents on the rise and antisemitism surging on social media, decorating for Hanukkah may give some Jews pause this year.

It's the custom of many to display a menorah — or other symbols of the holiday — prominently during the holiday, which begins on the evening of Dec. 18. Facing the street, they're signs of Jewish pride. But they can also tip off antisemites: Jews live — or pray, or gather — here.

The Forward reached out to Jews whose Hanukkah decorations have been desecrated in the past to find out what they're doing this year. Most decided that they'll once again display menorahs, string holiday lights or post Hanukkah signs in public view, though several said that they would be taking steps to make sure their Hanukkah displays were more secure.

And though the Forward did not hear from Jews unwilling to risk putting out Hanukkah decorations this year, they undoubtedly exist. Surveys have shown that Jews are being more careful about wearing or

displaying items that identify them as Jewish. Of those who spoke to the Forward, though, several noted that the vandalism had only steeled their resolve to celebrate the holiday openly, and that they felt comforted and emboldened by the warm response of non-Jews and others in their community who had expressed outrage over past incidents.

It's hard to tell whether incidents involving Hanukkah decorations specifically have risen in recent years. The Anti-Defamation League's HEAT Map, which tracks antisemitic incidents globally, does not include data on those that fall on Jewish holidays.

But according to Scott Richman, ADL regional director for New York and New Jersey, the end of the year has consistently seen a notable uptick in antisemitic incidents generally, likely because Hanukkah decorations are often displayed publicly and prominently.

## **A stolen menorah**

Someone in November 2021 stole a nine-foot-tall menorah outside Alabama's Chabad of Huntsville. A year prior, the building had been struck by vandals, who sprayed anti-Jewish slogans and swastikas on the property. Mushka Cohen, who co-directs the Chabad with her rabbi husband Moshe, said they immediately ordered a replacement plus three additional menorahs, which they placed in prominent spots around town.

"We put those up as an added light, to combat the act of hatred by adding more light and not showing that we're bunkering down," she said.

In the wake of the theft, Cohen said there was "an immediate outpouring of love and support" from both within Huntsville and beyond, with messages and donations flooding in.

"The majority of the local residents always feel the need to reassure us that these are isolated acts by individuals," she said. "No additional hate was shown in any way, shape or form. We only saw positivity."

Cohen said that her Chabad is taking extra security measures to monitor their Hanukkah decorations this year, though she declined to elaborate.

### **A thud at the door**

A woman who lives in coastal Georgia, and spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, heard a thud at her door earlier this month and thought she was receiving a package. But when she opened her door,

she found her "Happy Hanukkah" sign smashed into two pieces on the ground.

A landscaper who had been mowing a nearby lawn was standing nearby, holding one of her outdoor lanterns. She saw him throw the lantern. When he spotted her, he turned.

"F-k you, dirty Jew," he said, while giving her the finger.

She reported him to her property manager, who dismissed her, saying she had no proof.

The landscaper's outburst terrified her, she said, all the more so because something similar happened the year before. Another Hanukkah sign in front of her home had been defaced when someone sprayed a foam-like substance in the shape of a swastika and wrote anti-Jewish slurs.

At the time, she reported the vandalism to police. They were "useless," she said.

She said last year's incident didn't stop her from decorating her door again this year.

"Both incidents have been scary, more so with the man yelling at me," she said. "But we will continue to decorate and continue to celebrate."

### **Extra precautions**

Chabad's menorah at Elon University in North Carolina, which is up year-round, was torn down in May 2021 by a still-unknown person. This year, the replacement menorah, as well as one erected in the town

square, will both be under 24-hour surveillance with high-tech cameras. Armed guards will occasionally patrol the areas near both.

Jewish students at the school are also grappling with antisemitism beyond campus, said Mendy Minkowitz, the Chabad house's rabbi and co-director.

On social media and at Shabbat dinners, Minkowitz said, they have been airing their concerns about rapper Kanye West, who has gone on a series of public, antisemitic tirades in recent weeks; Kyrie Irving, the NBA player who tweeted out a link to an antisemitic film; and comedian Dave Chappelle, who some say minimized West's behavior in a Saturday Night Live monologue last month.

### **Balancing pride and safety**

Richman said no specific threats have been detected relating to the Hanukkah season. Decorate your home for Hanukkah if you want to, he said, but remain vigilant and report antisemitism to the appropriate authorities and the ADL.

"Jews should be open and proud of who they are and their heritage," he said. "I think we should always balance security, but it's important in this country that we stand for the ability of every faith and ethnic group to be who they are and to be open about who they are."

The Georgia woman, despite the antisemitism she's endured, said she won't be intimidated.

"Even though I may have physically been shaken, my faith will never be shaken, and I will continue to share my decor and celebrate, because I refuse to go into hiding, because that's what these hateful people want."

# **Jewish law forbids human composting, but for some Jews it's the way to go**

By Stewart Ain

New York could soon become the sixth state to legalize the composting of dead people, a practice prohibited by Jewish law, but one which a small but growing number of American Jews have come to embrace.

Axios has called it “the hot new thing in death care.” For proponents, human composting aligns with an ecological mindset that sees human beings as part of nature, obligated to care for the Earth even after they die.

Gov. Kathy Hochul has until Dec. 31 to sign a legalization bill into law. She has not yet tipped her hand on the measure, which passed both houses of the legislature easily. Several Jewish lawmakers voted for it.

Traditional Jewish burial, which calls for plain wood coffins or no coffin at all, is considered relatively green. But human composting is touted as one of the greenest options available — there are no coffins to bury or bodies to burn.

Orthodox Jewish rabbis, however, hold that halacha, or Jewish law, clearly forbids human composting, for many of the same reasons it forbids cremation, which has

overtaken traditional burial in the U.S. as the most popular option for American families after the death of a relative.

Still, Jews are beginning to consider and choose human composting, and say it can be done in keeping with their Jewish values. Recompose in Seattle is among several companies in states where the process is legal that have composted the bodies of Jewish clients. Some rabbis, from more liberal Jewish traditions, are willing to support the choice.

Rabbi Seth Goldstein of Temple Beth Hatfiloh in Olympia, Washington — the first state, in 2020, to approve human composting — has not yet presided at the funeral of someone who chose to be composted. But some of his congregants have asked about it.

“It is not something I was on the front lines for,” or for cremation either, said Goldstein, who was ordained in the Reconstructionist tradition.

But Goldstein is willing to work with those who favor composting, and said he would figure out ways to incorporate Jewish ritual

into the funeral rather than to turn a family away.

“Human composting seems more in line with Jewish practice than cremation in terms of the practices and values that surround it,” he added. “It is something that has a lot of environmental value.”

### **From dust to dust**

Human composting — also called terramation and natural organic reduction — generally involves placing the deceased in a vessel, which can be cylindrical or boxlike, atop a bed of organic material — wood chips, alfalfa and sawdust are commonly used. The body is often wrapped in a cotton shroud, and air and moisture are pumped in.

Microbes found naturally in the body and the organic material take about two months to decompose it. What remains is about one cubic yard of soil and bones, which are then ground into a powder. Any medical devices or hardware is removed from the soil by hand.

Survivors can scatter the soil in a cemetery, their backyards or in a natural spot special to the deceased.

That’s what Anne Lang wanted.

“When it is my time, I would like to be composted,” she told her daughter Zoe. The Jewish woman from Boulder, who died of lymphoma in May, loved the outdoors and lived in Colorado, which legalized human composting last year.

At her mother’s deathbed, said Zoe Lang, the family said the Mourner’s Kaddish

though they are not particularly observant. “It felt like something my mom would do and I wanted to honor her,” she said.

The funeral took place outside, with a view of the Flatiron rock formations. The Natural Funeral, a company not far from Boulder, took care of the composting. Two and a half months later, Anne Lang’s body was soil.

“The company asked if we wanted to pick it up and we chose to have it return to the Earth because that is what my mom would have wanted. So it was brought to a farm that grows flowers and trees,” Zoe Lang said.

The service cost the family between \$7,000 and \$8,000, and would have cost about \$12,000 had they bought a coffin and a burial plot, Zoe Lang said.

It doesn’t bother her that she has no particular place to visit to mourn her mother.

“She is still with us,” Zoe Lang said. “I think she would be thrilled to know she is coming back as a flower or a tree with a beautiful view.”

More human composting businesses are opening as more states allow it. In addition to Washington and Colorado, it’s been legalized in Oregon, Vermont and California.

Washington has at least three such businesses — Recompose, Return Home and Earth, which promises a “carbon neutral alternative to cremation” and allows families to take a portion of the soil created from a body. It sends the rest to a land restoration project on the Olympic Peninsula.

### **Objections**

Traditional Jewish burial forbids many common funeral practices that are also rejected by proponents of human composting.

Jewish law, for example, prohibits embalming, a process that many who favor composting consider unnatural and polluting. And it shuns crypts, cement liners and other containers for the body, said Rabbi Avi Shafran, director of public affairs at Agudath Israel of America, the nation's leading ultra-Orthodox umbrella group.

Cremation, which some environmentalists object to for the pollutants it produces, is also forbidden under Jewish law, which requires specific steps after a person dies that include the washing and quick burial of the body. In Orthodox tradition, cremation is a defilement.

But composting is similarly problematic, according to Shafran. "The idea of 'utilizing' a body as a growth medium is anathema to the honor due to a vessel that once held a human spirit," he said.

Or as Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, executive vice president of the New York Board of Rabbis, put it: "Reverence for the dead through proper burial traditions has taken place throughout the generations." He added: "The idea of grinding the bones is at odds with Jewish law."

The Conservative movement, which lies between more traditional Orthodox Judaism and the more liberal Reform movement, has not taken a position on human composting, said Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, who leads Anshe Chesed, a Conservative synagogue in Manhattan. But he has studied the issue

on its behalf and concluded that making a profit from human composting does not align with Jewish tradition.

"There is a difference between returning [a body] to the Earth — which is the point — and using the soil for a business," he said.

In general, he continued, dead bodies shouldn't be used for tangible benefit, even if it's not strictly commercial. That's why, he said, "it's dishonorable to eat fruits or pick flowers growing directly above graves, nourished partly by decomposing human flesh."

The Union for Reform Judaism, the largest Jewish denomination in the U.S., had no comment on human composting.

Goldstein, the Washington state rabbi who has fielded inquiries about human composting, is a past president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, which he said not taken a position on it.

But even though he's not an advocate, Goldstein said for some Jews, human composting dovetails nicely with their Jewish environmental values, which call them to be good stewards of the Earth. He advises other rabbis to be prepared for the conversation.

"I have to serve my people," Goldstein said. "This is not an issue we can shy away from. It is reality and we have to deal with it."



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