



Forward

WEEKEND READS

2.3.23

Conservative synagogue makes history with hiring of Hebrew Israelite clergy

By Robin Washington

Like hundreds of synagogues across the nation, Newark's Congregation Ahavas Sholom is celebrating Black History Month.

The largely Ashkenazi synagogue is also making history itself.

Last September, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism affiliate appointed as its first associate rabbi Eliyahu Elijah Collins, a fifth-year student at the Israelite Rabbinical Academy in Queens, N.Y. The shul also last year brought on Robert Azriel Devine, another Israelite Academy student, as a rabbinical intern.

Crossovers between mainstream Judaism and Hebrew Israelites — largely African American groups that range from radical street preachers to others resembling Conservative congregations — are not rare. There are many people who practice both streams of the related faiths, including Collins and Devine, who refer to themselves as both Israelites and Jews.

But their appointments are unusual, if not precedent-setting, as possibly the first Israelite-affiliated clergy to regularly lead a mainstream Jewish congregation.

Unusual, but not at all unimaginable, in the view of Eric Freedman. Ahavas Sholom's longtime president, Freedman said since childhood he's never recognized a distinction between mainstream Jews and Israelites.

"If anything, they are more observant than we are," he told the Forward.

'It felt normal'

The Israelite adherents Freedman has become most familiar with evolved out of the Commandment Keepers in New York, a congregation led through most of the 20th century by Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew and connected to the Israelite Academy and other Ethiopian Hebrew congregations across the country. Though most members are Black Americans, there are those of other races, including whites and a growing Latinx population.

For Freedman, the outreach across racial lines as well as religious barriers that deem who is or isn't Jewish serves two purposes. One is to help bridge racial divides in mostly Black Newark as that city's "last remaining synagogue born of the Great European Migration at the turn of the 20th century," as the shul bills itself. The other is to attract

new worshippers to the historic but dwindling congregation.

“We have humble goals, most of which is trying to keep the synagogue alive,” Freedman said, adding that before the rabbinical pair joined, Ahavas Sholom had other African American members. “We had eight to 10 Hebrew Israelite community members who were congregants at one time. For me, it felt normal. I realize immediately if people are regular members of the community, everything becomes normalized.

“The idea of African American Jews never seemed strange to me,” Freedman continued, adding he never asks first-time attendees if they are Jewish.

More diplomatically, he may instead query “Kohen or Levi?” before allowing a new face up to the bimah.

That respect is missing in far too many congregations, Freedman said. “If an African American walks in, the question becomes much more heightened. It’s crazy. It shouldn’t be that way.”

The appointments of Collins, 46, and Devine, 66, followed conversations over several years between Freedman and Rabbi Capers Funnye, Jr., the spiritual leader of Chicago’s Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation. Funnye is also a Conservative Jew and the chief rabbi of the International Israelite Board of Rabbis.

When Ahavas Sholom reopened for in-person gathering after the building was closed for two years during the pandemic, Freedman said the discussions with Funnye and other Israelite leaders turned to the idea of taking on interns.

“I said, ‘Let’s see how our community reacts to being led by a Black rabbi. I need to get them in front of people,’” Freedman said.

Familiar tunes

Another reason for adding spiritual staff was that the synagogue’s rabbi, Simon Rosenbach, has aphasia, a condition that diminishes the capacity to understand or express speech. “My aphasia brought me to the end of the road. I will retire as of June 30, 2023,” he wrote in a recent synagogue bulletin.

Devine, the rabbinical intern, said he developed a bond with Rosenbach. Both men turned to the rabbinate in middle age, enrolling at the Academy for Jewish Religion, an interdenominational seminary founded in 1956 and based in New York and Los Angeles. Devine later left and is completing study at the Israelite Academy.

“I really connect with him a lot,” Devine said of Rabbi Rosenbach. “He sees my mannerisms on the bimah. He’ll say, ‘This is supposed to be like that. This is supposed to be like this,’ which is very helpful.”

Devine may not need much help, however. Though his impending smicha is under Israelite auspices, as was that of his late father, an esteemed Israelite rabbi, the younger Devine grew up in a Conservative environment at Chicago’s Congregation Rodfei Zedek.

“I had my bar mitzvah there. I went to Hebrew school, summer camp at Camp Ramah,” he said. “I’ve had a lot of good experiences with Conservative shuls.”

Wouldn’t a Conservative bar mitzvah make you Conservative? he was asked.

“It makes you a Jew,” he replied.

Elaborating, Devine described Collins and himself, saying, “We’re Hebrew Israelites who practice Judaism, as opposed to some other denominations that include the New Testament” — or more radical factions better known for antics especially targeting Jews.

Returning to his Conservative upbringing, Devine said of Ahavas Sholom: “I was familiar with the melody and tunes because I grew up in Rodfei Zedek. The liturgy is the same. Eric has always encouraged us to daven the way we do in our community. I sing in a very operatic style, but they like it.”

Added Collins: “There wasn’t that much of a difference except for the cadence and in various tunes. I’m very, very familiar with the liturgy.

“Ahavas does not play musical instruments on shabbat. Neither does Beth Shalom,” Collins continued in a comparison to his Israelite home congregation in New York.

There is a difference in the absence of a mechitzah to separate women worshippers from men at the Newark shul, and its presence at the Israelite synagogue.

Or its mental presence.

“Beth Shalom had it, but they did some construction of the sanctuary and the mechitzah was not erected again. However, everyone is accustomed to going to their sides.”

‘Driven by Torah precepts’

While Freedman’s recruitment through the Israelite Academy may be groundbreaking, it may not have been in accordance with rules of the shul’s rabbinical authority, according to Steve Rabinowitz, a spokesperson for the United Synagogue of

Conservative Judaism and its affiliated rabbis’ group, the Rabbinical Assembly.

“United Synagogue and the Rabbinical Assembly have real guidelines about recruitment of rabbis, about advertising and about vacancies. Their members are expected to follow them,” he told the Forward.

“This particular shul did not use those guidelines. They found this rabbi on their own,” he continued, declining further comment except to say, “In the hundreds and hundreds of placements, it’s fairly rare.”

In Newark, both nascent rabbis spoke with affection about their congregants, giving particular praise to Freedman.

“Eric’s congeniality intrigued me,” Collins said. “His compassion to reach out and build bridges was in alignment with my own.”

Said Devine: “Eric is tops among all my relationships. I call him my friend.”

Freedman said the most important result of his outreach is how well both men fit in.

“If you come to a service on Shabbat and listen to Azriel and Eliyahu give a drash, it’s blatantly obvious they’re driven by Torah precepts and that’s how they go about their lives,” he said.

“I just want people to come to Shabbos services and say, ‘This is normal,’” he said — adding, however: “The goal is not to turn them into Ashkenazi clones.”

How the premiere of ‘The Diary of Anne Frank’ was different from any other Broadway opening

By Adam Langer

The Diary of Anne Frank’s premiere at the Cort Theatre in autumn of 1955 was a typical Broadway opening. Until it wasn’t.

The play had just completed an out-of-town tryout at the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, and the reviews had been good.

“It was a big deal; it went very well,” Eva Rubinstein, who played the role of Margot Frank, told me of the Philadelphia run. “They made some minor changes, but not a lot, and the same cast came to New York.”

Even so, the cast was nervous.

The Cort Theatre had been dark for four months, after the closing of *Once Upon a Tailor*, an old-world Jewish folktale by Yiddish theater veteran Baruch Lumet, father of Sidney Lumet, who at the time was just getting his start as a TV director. *Tailor* had been deemed “laboriously quaint” by the *New York Daily News* and lasted less than a week.

Walter Kerr, critic for the *Herald Tribune*, would be in the opening-night audience for

The Diary of Anne Frank. Brooks Atkinson would be reviewing for *The New York Times*. Susan Strasberg would be making her Broadway debut in the title role, and one of her best friends, Marilyn Monroe, would be watching.

In her memoir, *Bittersweet*, Strasberg wrote that her “stomach was playing strange tricks” that night. When I interviewed Rubinstein last fall, she told me: “It was very, very emotional because everybody got extremely involved in the actual facts of the thing.”

Rubinstein, the internationally renowned photographer, who started out as an actress and ballet dancer, was one of the dozens of people I spoke to for *Playing Anne Frank*, a podcast series about how *The Diary of Anne Frank* became a Pulitzer Prize-winning play and an Oscar-winning movie. When I started work on the podcast, I’d recently finished the final edits of *Cyclorama*, a novel about how a high school production of *Anne Frank* changed the lives of its young actors, and I wanted to learn

how the original show had impacted its cast and crew.

“It never felt like just a plain old play,” Rubinstein told me. “It really felt like a responsibility.”

In *The Real Nick and Nora*, a biography of the show’s writers, Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, their nephew David L. Goodrich wrote that Anne’s father, Otto Frank, sent a note expressing regrets for not feeling up to attending the opening.

“You will all realize that for me this play is a part of my life, and the idea that my wife and children as well as I will be presented on the stage is painful,” read the note, which was posted on a bulletin board backstage. “I hope most ardently that the play will, through you, reach as many people and awaken in them a sense of responsibility to humanity.”

When the curtain came up on the Frank family’s secret annex on Oct. 5, 1955, it represented the culmination of a three-year process to bring Anne Frank’s story to the stage.

There had been a contentious artistic and legal battle between the show’s producer, Kermit Bloomgarden, and the writer Meyer Levin, who was replaced by Goodrich and Hackett. Plus innumerable back-and-forths between the writers, producers, director and Otto Frank, who was a thoughtful and kind but pretty demanding literary critic.

“I am feeling very desolate to have to tell you that I have a lot to object,” Frank wrote of one of Goodrich and Hackett’s drafts. I

found Frank’s very detailed responses to the evolving script in Kermit Bloomgarden’s papers, which are housed at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

There was also a long search for the right director. At one point, Bloomgarden was considering Fred Zinnemann, who had never directed a Broadway play but was beloved in Hollywood for *High Noon* and *From Here to Eternity*. The producer selected Garson Kanin, the veteran film and theater writer and director, who’d collaborated with his wife, Ruth Gordon, on numerous screenplays including *Adam’s Rib* and *Pat and Mike*.

Kanin turned out to be a shrewd choice. He was “tireless,” Frances Goodrich wrote in her diary, which I also found in Kermit Bloomgarden’s archives, and had a “meticulous attention to detail.” When the creative team visited Anne Frank’s room in the secret annex, Kanin noticed that, on Anne’s wall, she had pasted a picture of Ginger Rogers from *Tom, Dick and Harry*, a film he had directed.

And, of course, hundreds of telegrams and letters had been exchanged on the question of casting. Among those under consideration to play Anne Frank and Peter Van Daan were Natalie Wood and Dennis Hopper. “We think this boy is a great find, an ace in the hole,” Frances Goodrich wrote of Hopper in a letter to Bloomgarden. Ultimately, the roles went to Susan Strasberg and Dan Levin.

But now it was opening night. Over the course of about two hours, the cast of 10

people and one cat (Mouschi) performed the story of how the Frank and Van Daan families managed to survive more than two years of hiding with the help of heroic friends and neighbors. And how, inevitably, the Nazis discovered their hiding place.

“That last scene when you hear them coming up the stairs, it was awful,” Rubinstein told me. “Your heart was pounding so that it was hard to pretend it wasn’t real.”

The curtain came down, then back up. And so did the lights. The cast faced the audience, and then something happened that was unlike the end of any other Broadway opening: Nothing.

There was no applause, no shouts of “Bravo.” Just silence.

“It was so profound — the sound — that the actors were nervous, you know, they were thinking ‘what’s wrong?’” recalled Hale Lamont-Havers, who played Miep Gies, who helped hide the Franks, in the original Broadway cast. “And it was just the audience was so stricken by what they had seen and what they had lost — the loss of the child and her family.”

Arnold Margolin, the show’s assistant stage manager — who later took over the role of Peter Van Daan — shared a similar memory when we spoke.

“You know, the whole issue of the Holocaust, that was very fresh, and of course the birth of Israel was also very fresh, and so it felt very immediate,” he told

me. “It was a rare night when the curtain came down that there wasn’t just silence.”

Eva Rubinstein said: “They weren’t even sure they wanted to applaud you.”

After a few stunned, quiet moments, the applause did come. Not just from the audience, but from critics. The show would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award for best play.

“A radiant play — as bright and shining as a banner,” Kerr wrote in the Herald Tribune.

“A lovely, tender drama,” Atkinson said in The Times. “Out of the truth of a human being has come a delicate, rueful, moving drama.”

(Somewhat oddly, Mark Barron of The Associated Press described Susan Strasberg as “the sexiest actress of this season.”)

The next day, Oct. 6, Frances Goodrich wrote about opening night in her own diary.

“It was worth the tears, the months we worked, the miles we traveled,” she said. “We only wish that Anne could have known.”

How a Black and Jewish punk band defied South African apartheid — and how it came undone

By PJ Grisar

National Wake was a band, a movement and a revolution — and within four years, it was just a memory.

Formed in Johannesburg, South Africa, in the late 1970s, National Wake blended punk, funk and reggae, but its most subversive act was bringing together Black and white musicians who lived together, jammed together and played to mixed crowds in defiance of apartheid. By 1981, they'd released one album, which sold 700 copies before the label withdrew it due to government and police pressure. By 1982, they had parted ways.

Filmmaker and journalist Mirissa Neff discovered National Wake — comprised in its final lineup of Jewish Johannesburg native Ivan Kadey, Steve Moni and brothers Punka and Gary Khoza, from Soweto — in the documentary *Punk in Africa*. Watching the Super 8 footage of their concerts shattered her perception of South Africa in the apartheid era.

“To see it just blew me away,” Neff, whose first feature film, *This Is National Wake*, had its New York premiere at the New York Jewish Film Festival Jan. 14. “To see this band getting up on stage together in that environment, to see their multiracial group

of fans dancing together, flirting with one another. It just seemed so incredible and vibrant and rebellious.”

This Is National Wake is a celebration, and sometimes an elegy, propelled by music, archival footage and interviews with those who remember when one band dared to call for change.

I spoke with Neff about the band's significance, approaching filmmaking like a DJ and how an accountant smuggled the music out of Africa and onto the British airwaves. The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How unique was National Wake — were they the only multiracial band at the time, or were they an early one?

There were other contemporaries of theirs that were making other kinds of music in a more dogmatic way, where the point of the band was to make a statement. Johnny Clegg and Juluka is kind of the most well known group of that time that was mixed race. But I think in terms of the medium of rock, the medium of punk, National Wake was singular for that moment. I feel like they came together in this very organic way that was unusual too for that moment. [Original

band member] Mike Lebesse was this very unusual figure who just kind of didn't abide by the laws of apartheid and he wandered into this white commune house in the university zone and befriended Ivan and they started jamming. And then he was like, "Hey, I have some friends from Soweto that I want to introduce you to — I want to make a band. Here are some guys." Of course they were aware of how defiant it was for them to play together and live together and get up on stage together. But I think National Wake came together as organically as possible within the confines of that environment.

That's actually really surprising. Punk seems made for this kind of a thing!

There were virtuosic musicians in this band, so to just call them a punk band, musically it's not necessarily totally the right term because they were fusing together all kinds of music and influences from all over the world. But I do think in terms of attitude, what could be more punk than National Wake?

They coined this term, "Gunk Rock," to describe what they were playing. How do you see the music, lyrically, musically, aligning with the politics?

They were very political. And in fact the label was so scared of their lyrics. [BBC radio DJ] John Peel mentions that Warner Elektra Atlantic, they were so nervous about the lyrics in the song "International News" that they told them that they couldn't print the lyrics, and the band already had their liner note artworks laid out and put together with those lyrics, so their protest was just blacking that out. On the original album, there's this weird area in the liner notes that's just black where the lyrics should be.

So you knew you were coming into all this great Super 8 footage that you saw in this other documentary. Was there more you found? Did the people shooting it know what they were documenting?

I think there was an awareness of what they were documenting and I think there was some kind of intention to make some kind of film at the time, but it never happened. Essentially an hour of the footage had been digitized for use in Punk in Africa. And there were many more Super 8 reels that hadn't been digitized and hadn't been looked at in years. I think there was in total another two hours' worth of footage.

But I had to connect with a lot of other archives to give historical context. The John Peel piece ... I had heard that he had played their music on his show. And I reached out to the BBC and they didn't have the recording, they pointed me toward their written archive an hour outside of London. I went through all the John Peel's playlists from 1981. Finally I get to October, I'm nodding off at the microfilm machine. And a couple days in I opened my eyes and there's National Wake staring right back at me I'm like, "Oh, OK, so this did happen. I wasn't told a lie!" But I still didn't have the tape. And I had no idea of how I would get it. Finally I was able to track down this guy who is a British accountant who'd been sent to South Africa on assignment and fell in with National Wake, became this huge fan of theirs, and then when he was on his way back to the UK, he smuggled two of their records, kept one, got the other to John Peel. That's how it was played on John Peel. That's step one.

Wow. It's like the Pentagon Papers.

Step two is that he recorded that show on cassette, kept the cassette for 40 years.

And when I finally reached out to him, he's like, "Oh, yeah, of course I have the recording of that show." I'm like, "What! I've been searching for this for years! I have to go to the UK immediately to record this on high quality, digitize this." Anyway, that was a high moment of the process.

It was always really of vital importance to me to amplify the voices of the Black members of the band as much as I possibly could. I'm of mixed racial heritage, which is, I think, in part why I was so drawn to this story. My father's Jewish, my mom's from Barbados. I identify as African American. It presents a huge challenge when [the Black members of the band] are deceased and died several years before I started the project. I tried to bring in the people from Soweto that were closest to them and closest to the band and kind of serve as proxies but also I was trying to seek out archival material of them outside of this moment with National Wake. I finally was able to connect with the Irish musicians that Punka worked with later in his life and got that audio of him talking on Irish radio in 1994. We never get to hear Gary's voice but we do see that piano solo of him, that improvisational, incredible piece that he plays [that was filmed] right at the end of his life. I feel like that just brings Gary to life and lets him communicate in a way that is really vital for the film.

This is screening for a Jewish Film Festival and follows the guitarist and singer, Ivan Kadey, who's Jewish. How do you see that as playing into this story?

Ivan's heritage is Lithuanian, Ashkenazi, and like he mentions in the film, the vast majority of Jews in South Africa are Lithuanian Jews. His family escaped in the early 20th century. He grew up in the Jewish Quarter of Johannesburg. I think that kind of

gave him a certain empathy. I think a lot of Jews landed in South Africa, I don't think that they were considered white to begin with. They were othered as well. So it's not surprising that he ended up creating a project like National Wake with the Khoza brothers. It makes complete sense to me.

In a lot of ways, this is really about something that had momentum that was really shut down by various factors, the biggest one being the government having it out for them. We see Ivan keeping the memory alive. What is their legacy in South Africa?

Honestly, I think it's kind of limited, in part because South Africa, my impression has always been that it's not a very nostalgic society. With good reason, because there's such a painful history there. I feel like it's a very forward-facing society. I haven't screened the film in South Africa yet. In the UK people who were part of that scene and emigrated came out and were just verklempt, it brought them right back to something that they'd kind of put behind them. It'll also be amazing to introduce it to younger South Africans and have them experience this band.

The music's so great and you hear a lot of it. How did you find the balance between historical context, the personal story and threading the music through?

I'm a DJ! I'm part of the MTV, music video generation. I think that's in part how my brain works, and I did edit the film along with Doug Lenox. But I'm definitely drawn to a kind of music video editing style for sure. And the music kind of comes first for me, and I guess that that comes through in that there's a lot of music in the film. I wanted it to be a lean story that had rollicking music.

From the pain of miscarriage, a Jewish space to mourn pregnancy loss is born

By Stewart Ain

When Abby Porth of San Francisco suffered a miscarriage 14 years ago, she sought comfort from Jewish rituals — and came up short.

She learned that Judaism has shied away from marking a lost pregnancy. There is typically no mourner's kaddish, sitting of shiva or observance of *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of a death. Even a newborn who lives less than 31 days does not require mourning rites, according to the rabbis who codified them.

The inability to recognize these losses Jewishly “can be quite isolating and painful for many Jews,” said Porth, now 47, and the director of a family foundation.

So she and Debbie Findling, a friend and philanthropic advisor who had also lost a pregnancy, founded what they call the first Jewish space built to mourn fertility loss. The Memory Garden opened in November at the Jewish Eternal Home Cemetery in Colma, California, just south of San Francisco.

“It provides sacred place, and sets the canvas for ritual — all in sacred Jewish ground — for those who wish to memorialize their perinatal losses,” Porth said at the dedication of the garden, which was attended by 400 people, in-person and virtually.

“If Judaism doesn't embrace people when they want and need it, we will have lost an important opportunity,” she said.

Owned and operated by Sinai Memorial Chapel Chevra Kadisha, or burial society, which gifted the land in perpetuity, the garden is planted with redwoods that set aside areas for contemplation. A walking paths winds through it, and benches invite visitors to stay awhile. The edges of a circular water element are marked with the months of the year in Hebrew and English. With a nod to the Jewish tradition in which mourners place stones on grave markers, visitors are invited to place a stone near the month in which their loss occurred.

Porth and Finley raised \$1 million from donors to build the garden, from more than 400 individuals and foundations.

A new tradition

Other religious traditions in recent decades have begun to establish gardens to mourn pregnancy loss. One Catholic cemetery near Albany, New York, for example, allows families to create plaques with the names given to stillborns and fetuses, though there is nothing buried under them.

At the Memory Garden, losses are remembered without tombstones, grave markers or plaques.

“This is a sacred space that is both respectful of halacha (Jewish law) and also recognizes that people have emotions that need to be addressed,” said Sam Salkin, Sinai’s executive director.

Rabbi Cozen-Harel, a Reform rabbi who advised on The Memory Garden project and who had a miscarriage at nine weeks, said the garden speaks to her personally, but also creates opportunities for new Jewish rituals, for both individuals and groups.

It “acknowledges lives lost that parents had hoped for,” she said. “Your womb grew life and then something went wrong. Your body had held it and then your womb became a grave. It is not uncommon.”

Miscarriage, or the spontaneous loss of a pregnancy before the 20th week, is very common. About 10 to 20% percent of known pregnancies end in miscarriage, according to the Mayo Clinic. Stillbirths, far

less common, are pregnancies lost after the 20th week.

Dr. Mark Jacobs, a retired obstetrician-gynecologist who dealt with high-risk pregnancies, said the medical community is getting better at helping mothers and families grieve when loss happens late in a pregnancy, allowing them to hold stillborns or even pressing little hands or feet into clay to create a keepsake.

“But we are not so good at that when there is an early loss,” he said.

The Memory Garden, according to its founders, is there for anyone suffering from loss, no matter how far along the pregnancy.

The hope, Porth said, is that it will promote healing, “providing solace while connected to tradition during a moment of great pain.”

Film

A controversial documentary upended the narrative on Jenin 20 years ago. Has anything changed since?

By Mira Fox

Two decades ago, during the Second Intifada, Israeli forces raided the Jenin refugee camp. In the aftermath of the 10-day battle, Israel blockaded the camp for days, forbidding medical teams, journalists and a U.N. fact-finding mission from entering. But Muhammad Bakri, an Arab-Israeli actor, snuck into the camp with a camera, interviewing numerous residents. The resulting film, *Jenin, Jenin*, which Bakri released shortly afterward, told the Palestinian side of what West Bank residents refer to as the Jenin massacre, painting a very different story — with a much higher civilian death toll — than the version from the Israeli government.

Last Thursday, the Israeli military entered the Palestinian city of Jenin, in the West Bank, killing nine Palestinians in the shootout, including at least two civilians. It was the deadliest day for Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in over a year — even given the fact that 2022 was the deadliest year for Palestinians in two decades. But this time, we don't need a guerilla documentary to know about it.

Within hours after the Israeli military attacked, videos emerged on Twitter of tanks rolling through the streets of Jenin. A viral clip showed mothers and children running through the halls of a hospital,

apparently fleeing tear gas from IDF soldiers. The daughter of Majda Naefa, the 61-year-old woman allegedly shot by Israeli forces, made a video showing exactly how the bullet hit her mother through a window. Others compiled a video of smiling photos of Naefa to mourn her death. Both videos quickly went viral.

Twenty years ago, Jenin, Jenin was one of the only ways to hear these sorts of stories. Otherwise, information about the battle was dominated by official government statements about death tolls and danger — Israel claimed they killed around 50 Palestinians, the majority of whom were responsible for bus bombings and terrorist attacks that killed hundreds of Israelis, while Palestinians alleged a death toll near 500 composed largely of civilians. But both sides of the debate focused on numbers instead of humans.

Bakri's documentary was one of the only ways to hear the stories of Palestinian people after the violence in Jenin. Though he only entered the refugee camp after the fighting had ceased, the descriptions are vivid. "They shot at everything that moved, even a cat," says one man. "Why does a sniper shoot a 12-year-old unarmed child who can barely walk? Why shoot an old woman? Why crush a young man under a

tank when he is holding his arms up in the air?”

Perhaps most shocking is the testimony of a young girl, perhaps around 12, who says she dreams of torturing then-prime minister Ariel Sharon. “I’m not afraid of these cowards. They’re like mice. Despite their great weapons, they still hide behind their tanks, afraid of civilians like us. Their cowardice is legendary,” she says. “I would sacrifice my life for the camp.”

Yet, today when social media has given everyone a platform to tell their personal stories, the stories in Jenin, Jenin feel almost commonplace. Now everyone has a camera in their pocket, and can capture the violence as it unfolds, unlike Bakri’s film which was limited to shots panning over rubble afterward.

And this access has changed the narrative. In Jenin, Jenin, residents say, frustratedly, that the world mourns a single Jewish death yet hardly cares about hundreds of Arab lives. Today, however, “Free Palestine” or the emoji of a Palestinian flag is a ubiquitous comment online.

A Jewish influencer posts a challah recipe? You’ll find Palestinian flags in the comment sections. At this year’s World Cup in Qatar, players from Arab countries wore the Palestinian flag as an armband. And even after an armed gunman killed eight Israelis outside a synagogue on Friday night, the day after last week’s Jenin raid, tweets mourning those deaths were ratioed by comments calling the Israeli deaths “karma” and otherwise referencing the Palestinian deaths the day before.

This scenario would have been hard to imagine in 2002 when Jenin, Jenin came out. Shortly after its release, the Israeli Film Ratings Board banned the documentary,

claiming that it showed only one side of the story. (Independent cinemas in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv continued to illegally screen the film.) Bakri countered that media only showing the Israeli side is widely distributed, and ultimately, the court overturned the ban, saying the film board did not have “a monopoly over truth.”

Today, banning a documentary seems useless — after all, what’s the point in an era of social media? A viral video is likely to reach more eyes than an independent film anyway, and courts have little sway over the moderation policies of social media companies.

This is not to say that the tables have turned entirely. While the Palestinian fight may be trendy online, the real-world changes have not been so abrupt. Palestinians still live under occupation, and Israel’s military might still greatly outstrips Palestinian insurgents. Part of the reason videos of Palestinians running down the street, throwing stones at tanks or being forcibly evicted from their homes, are so common online is because they’re so common in life.

And at least institutionally, Israel’s command of the narrative remains strong; The New York Times, the U.S. newspaper of record, sent a push alert about the Israeli synagogue deaths but not about the Palestinian deaths in Jenin the day before. Numerous American politicians released statements mourning the Israeli deaths though they had been silent about the Palestinian ones.

But online — where many of us conduct large portions of our lives — we no longer need to rely on a film like Jenin, Jenin to hear civilians’ voices.

Opinion

Poland and Germany have long taken opposing approaches to Holocaust remembrance. Touring them with Doug Emhoff, the difference was stark

By Laura E. Adkins

BERLIN — It is one thing to acknowledge the dark parts of your country's history. It is quite another to reckon with them.

I've spent the past six days traveling through Poland and Germany with Doug Emhoff, the second gentleman of the United States, as he's toured sites of Holocaust atrocities and engaged in a series of conversations about rising antisemitism.

And at each stop, whether walking through the soggy woods in Gorlice, Poland — where Emhoff has family roots — or down the immaculate streets of Berlin, I tried to make sense of what had happened here.

It may sound trite: We know what happened, and it was bad. The Holocaust decimated European Jewry. Six million Jews, and millions of non-Jews, were murdered. The population — and in many ways, the Jewish people — have never recovered.

In Poland and Germany, I witnessed two dramatically different ways of dealing with these facts. Poland was home to some of the deadliest concentration camps during the Holocaust, but its approach to remembrance makes the brutal nature of

the Nazi regime feel distant and foreign. In Germany, the horrors of the past are an inescapable part of the present.

Berlin especially makes open acknowledgement of the sins of the past, both collective and individual. There are abundant memorials to victims of the Holocaust and markers of past Nazi sites throughout the city. While there, Emhoff participated in solemn conferences, where leaders from across Europe discussed strategies to combat antisemitism.

German authorities have worked to be painstakingly honest about how their society arrived at a point at which the Holocaust was possible. At the Topography of Terror Museum, which sits on the site of the former SS headquarters, a gripping visual timeline of Nazi rule takes visitors through the dramatic escalation of nationalist frenzy and calculated violence during the 1930s and 1940s.

What struck me most deeply was the efficient organization of it all: this was no accidental genocide. Everything was planned to get rid of Jews, the Roma people, gay people, and dissidents as quickly as possible. And it was effective. Of

the estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Jews that reside in Berlin, an estimated 90% emigrated from the former Soviet Union. Virtually no descendants of the Jews who thrived here before the Nazi reign of terror remain.

In Germany, you feel as if you're standing in the clearly defined and omnipresent shadow of those who came before you. In Poland, you're constantly chased by ghosts. There are plenty of markers of the country's dark past — well-preserved concentration camp sites, Holocaust museums, buildings bearing Hebrew writing yet lacking any Jews.

But Poland's leaders have consistently avoided acknowledging the antisemitism that still festers there, or that the Polish people were anything but the Nazi's victims. (It's true both that Polish citizens suffered intensely under Nazi occupation, and that many Poles were complicit in turning in their Jewish neighbors.) Publish the words "Polish death camps" and you'll receive a formal letter of reprimand from the government.

At a Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration in Birkenau, I felt that lack of self-awareness acutely. While the ceremony itself was held outside, on the site of demolished barracks, the press and translation room was set up in an outbuilding room equipped with ovens. Seeing a coat rack casually set up next to them filled me with rage.

The building isn't a crematorium, and they weren't the ovens used to burn the bodies of those murdered in the camp. But their significance as a symbol is unmistakable — as is the callousness of treating the room that houses them as just another space to store extra stuff. It felt as if the officials in charge wanted the credit and gravitas that accompanies Holocaust remembrance,

without grappling with the gravity of what actually happened in this place.

Mourning the past, preserving the present

Tuesday, as Emhoff prepared to fly back to the United States, we visited Berlin's New Synagogue, which was built in 1866.

The once-opulent synagogue was partially destroyed by Allied bombing on Nov. 22-23, 1943, and has not been fully rebuilt. The vast majority of what was formerly the main sanctuary was destroyed: Only rows of columns and an expanse of gravel remain. The space in which today's 100 or so congregants pray, a plain room up several flights of stairs, takes up just a fraction of the building. The ark is not ornate. It's a simple wooden box on wheels, covered with a simple white curtain.

The synagogue's dual functions — monument to the past, and home to a small, committed set of contemporary worshippers — make it a particularly emotional memorial to Germany's once-thriving Jewish community.

When we teach younger generations about the Holocaust, we usually focus on the brutality: the humiliation, the violence, the propaganda and the killing. That's the focus I saw in Poland: a sense that it's honorable to remember these terrible things, so long as remembrance doesn't extend to an admission of culpability.

It's Germany's approach, exemplified in the New Synagogue, that better understands what the real point of remembrance is. There are supposed to be so, so many more of us. Seeing the shul, once a seat of vibrant Jewish culture and life, now preserved in a perpetual state of violent incompleteness, made me want to weep.

News

Israeli emissary blames political foes for eroding relations with American Jews

By Jacob Kornbluh

Amichai Chikli, Israel's new minister of diaspora affairs, touched down in the U.S. as American Jews organized protests against his government, the most right-wing in the nation's history. These rallies are smaller than those in Israel, but their participants are as fearful as their Israeli counterparts that the country is veering away from democracy and pluralism, and taking a dangerously combative tack against Palestinians.

This makes Chikli's job — to strengthen ties between Israel and Jews abroad, most of whom live in the U.S. — exceptionally tough. The alliance had deteriorated under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who led Israel for a dozen years and, thanks to the November elections, leads it once again. This time he is flanked by coalition partners that many call extreme. They have backed legislation to curb the power of the high court and proposed changes to the law of return that would narrow the pool of people to which it would apply. Fears that violence will spiral have intensified. Many American Jews were unnerved last week by an Israeli raid in the West Bank city of Jenin that left 10 dead. And they mourned the

seven killed in a terror attack at a Jerusalem synagogue Friday.

American Jews, the vast majority of whom vote against right wing candidates in their own country, feel increasingly discouraged with Israel.

Chikli, 41, who landed the ministry job because he has been willing to make bold political moves and challenge members of his own party, is painfully aware of the disconnect. But he said in a recent interview that he believes Jews abroad still need to be heard by Israel. "We don't have better ambassadors than the Jewish communities in diaspora," he said. "Their voice is very important, and they all genuinely love Israel."

In the U.S. last week, Chikli sought to assuage Americans' concerns about the future of Israeli democracy.

But at the same time, he placed blame on the Israeli opposition and media for what he said was American Jews' wrongheaded understanding of the Jewish state's new leadership. He charged that they are being "greatly influenced" by relentless attacks on the new government. And he blamed Yair

Lapid, the former prime minister and the current opposition leader, for “causing massive damage” to U.S.-Israel relations and the Israel-diaspora relationship.

Listening — but not to everyone

In his brief visit to the U.S., Chikli packed his schedule, meeting with leaders of the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox streams of Judaism, as well as the heads of the Jewish Federations of North America, UJA-Federation of New York, Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. He met with the board of Momentum Project, a group sponsored by the Israeli government that seeks to strengthen Jewish identity and connection to Israel. He also addressed an annual conference hosted by the Israeli American Council, a group of ex-pat Israelis, in Austin, Texas.

He refused to meet, however, with the leadership of J Street, the prominent liberal advocacy organization that calls itself “the political home of pro-Israel, pro-peace, pro-democracy Americans.” Chikli called the group “hostile to Zionism and the state of Israel.” He said its lobbying supports policies that “serve Iran and the Palestinian Authority” and “advances antisemitic trends.” Ron Dermer, the former Israeli ambassador to the U.S. who is now the minister for strategic affairs, also snubbed the group during his tenure in Washington, D.C.

Logan Bayroff, a J Street spokesperson, called it “self-defeating and short-sighted” for the government of Israel to refuse to meet with the group. “Israel is the national homeland of the Jewish people, not just those who agree with Benjamin Netanyahu and Itamar Ben-Gvir,” Baayroff said, referring to Israel’s national security

minister, who has been much criticized for inflaming tensions with Palestinians. He noted that J Street’s views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its focus on democracy are shared by a large portion of U.S. Jews. “It shows just how deeply out of touch this government is with much of our community,” he said.

Chikli himself is a hardliner on the conflict. He has called Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas “one of the greatest Holocaust deniers of our generation and a distinct antisemite” for accusing Israel of carrying out “50 Holocausts” of Palestinians as he stood alongside the German chancellor in Berlin last year. On Sunday Chikli called the Palestinian Authority a “neo-Nazi entity.”

“We may disagree on policy and criticism is welcome, but all we ask is the trust and backing from diaspora Jews,” he said.

From Camp Ramah to the cabinet

The son of an ordained Conservative rabbi, and an alum of Camp Ramah, a network of Jewish summer camps affiliated with the Conservative Movement, Chikli fashions himself as an independent who speaks his mind. In an interview with the Forward in 2021, Chikli said he had visited the U.S. numerous times and suggested that many American Jews are affiliated with “an anti-nationalistic, anti-liberal” ideology that will disconnect them from their ethnic origins.

“I have the ability to create an open and frank dialogue — though unapologetic — with American Jews,” Chikli said in last week’s phone interview, adding that his views “haven’t changed one iota” since he was in the political opposition.

He came to prominence in Israeli politics just weeks after he entered the Knesset in

2021 as the lone conservative rebel in the previous government. Formerly a member of the rightist Yamina party, Chikli accused its leader, Naftali Bennett, of allying with the left and an Arab-Israeli party for personal gain. Bennett's government lost its majority last April after additional members of Yamina quit the coalition.

After joining the Likud Party and following the election, Chikli asked to lead the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs, the Ministry for Social Equality, and also to head the campaign against the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

Netanyahu gave it all to him.

On Sunday, Chikli presented a comprehensive report about antisemitism in the diaspora at the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem. He related the rise in antisemitic incidents to a hostile atmosphere towards Jewish students on college campuses, and told his colleagues that he is working on a strategy to combat it.

On the offensive

As much as Chikli presented his trip as a listening tour, he also came to talk — to explain his government's thinking behind initiatives critics have labeled anti-democratic.

Currently Israeli Supreme Court judges are appointed by a committee that includes some, but not a majority, of lawmakers. A new government plan would give them a majority, a move the opposition said would politicize the judiciary. Chikli called it "ridiculous" to claim that the present method of seating judges is normal or "even close to what is custom in other western countries."

He urged American Jews to await committee hearings and Knesset debate on

the issue before drawing conclusions. "There will be changes," he said.

He also dismissed concerns about proposed changes to the Law of Return, which allows anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent to immigrate to Israel as long as they do not practice another religion. Some American Jewish groups have warned that restricting immigration by abolishing the so-called "grandchild clause" will alienate the diaspora.

Chikli in response referred to a presentation — prepared by a right-wing think tank, the Kohelet Policy Forum — that forecast that a majority of immigrants eligible for Israeli citizenship in the future would not be Jews, but mostly non-Jewish immigrants from former Soviet republics, Russia and Ukraine. "Right now, the law is broken and it's costing us dearly," he said.

But he said he told Jewish leaders he would serve as their conduit to the committee that will consider the bill and that he believes that, unlike decisions on homeland security and the economy, the concerns of Jewish leaders abroad should be taken into consideration as immigration reform is legislated.

The Likud politician said that religious matters concerning conversion, kashrut and the 2017 Kotel deal, which designated protected space at the Western Wall for various streams of Jewish practice, didn't come up in his meetings with Americans. And he said he doesn't foresee any legislation that would change the status quo at this point.

"We just had an election and the results were crystal clear," Chikli said about the positions of the new government. "We were very honest about our agenda, and it is our responsibility to follow this agenda."

Arrest made in Molotov cocktail incident at New Jersey synagogue

By Louis Keene

An arrest has been made in the recent Molotov cocktail-throwing incident at a synagogue in Bloomfield, New Jersey.

Nicholas Malindretos, 26, from Clifton, New Jersey, faces a federal charge of attempted use of fire to damage and destroy a building used in interstate commerce, according to a press release from the U.S. attorney's office. The charge is punishable by a minimum of five years in prison, a maximum of 20 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Malindretos' car was tracked down using images on a license plate-reading device and video cameras near the synagogue, which showed a car passing by just before and after the incident, the release said. The car was located in Clifton, and video cameras near where it was parked showed a man who looked like Malindretos getting out of the car and entering a nearby building.

Bloomfield Mayor Michael Venezia said in a Facebook post Wednesday afternoon that the suspect was in the custody of the FBI and the Bloomfield Police Department.

Temple Ner Tamid president Josh Katz confirmed the arrest in an email to congregants Wednesday and in a subsequent interview with the Forward.

"I'm still very angry," Katz said. "But I'm also very, very grateful."

The Bloomfield Police Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Video surveillance showed a person wearing a ski mask and black hoodie light a bottle and throw it at the door of the Reform synagogue at about 3 a.m. Sunday, hours before Hebrew school at Ner Tamid was set to begin. The bottle broke, but did not cause any damage and no one was hurt.

The incident prompted a visit to the synagogue Tuesday from New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, who called the incident "absolutely despicable."

Katz told the Forward that it was the first antisemitic incident at Ner Tamid, which has about 540 member families, that he could remember in his decade in the synagogue's leadership.

"My initial reaction was almost disbelief — but not," he said. "We all know this has been happening in many places, so there's that dichotomy of feeling like I can't believe this happened, but knowing that this is the reality we live in."



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