



**WEEKEND
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Forward

‘Always making demented performances’: Meet the professional clown with a show about the Holocaust

By Talya Zax

Alexandra Tatarsky was having a crisis in a luncheonette on Grand Street: There was no matzo brei.

Every time they come here (Tatarsky uses the pronouns she and they) they get the matzo brei, which is reliably awful. But it is a reliably awful necessity: There are certain rituals that anchor the world, and getting bad matzo brei at the tiny Lower East Side luncheonette that carries an aura of having fed the neighborhood since Tatarsky’s grandmother left her religious family there to become a “bohemian actor and dancer” is one of them.

But there was no matzo brei, and reality was crumpling. Tatarsky was wearing a worn-out black baseball cap with “WTF?” embroidered on the front. “I’m devastated,” she said. She ordered a grilled cheese with tomato, and a chocolate egg cream “for the table” — two straws.

Tatarsky, 33, is the theater artist behind the surreal new one-woman show *Sad Boys in Harpy Land*, now running at the Abrons Arts Center on the Lower East Side. It is impossible to describe exactly what the show is: Abrons describes it as “equal parts sad clown, demented cabaret, and extended crisis of meaning.”

It’s sort of about antisemitism, and it’s also sort of about Jewish self-hatred, and it’s also sort of about, Tatarsky said, “having fun making weird demons with toys and stuff.” It includes an extensive close read of the work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; an atonal but heartfelt song about the perils of tinned fish; an acrobatic tutorial in the work of being an artists’ model; a whole lot of Holocaust trauma; several rubber chickens; and one fake beard so long it must be wound and unwound via a fire-engine-red hand crank.

At a rehearsal a week before the show opened, Tatarsky was presented with that last item for the first time. They cradled it to their chest. “Look,” they said, tenderly, “the world’s longest wandering Jew beard.”

‘Hilarious, hilarious degree of self-torture’

Tatarsky grew up on the Lower East Side, just like that artistically inclined grandmother, whose family sat shiva for her after her rebellion. Their father “was raised in this neighborhood,” they said, “but not speaking to his grandparents, because they considered him to not exist, because his mother was dead to them.”

So Tatarsky was brought up “in this kind of milieu of arts and performance and Jews who had a lot of troubling feelings,” they said. “And from a young age, I was always making demented performances.”

The first of those performances: an opera, written at age 3, about then-New York Mayor David Dinkins. (The conflict, as Tatarsky remembers it: “We love you, but you’re not doing enough.”)

After graduating from Reed College — “I studied Russian Jewish experimental poetics and translation theory, so I was, like, thinking a lot about nonsense” — Tatarsky returned to the Lower East Side. The 2008 recession hit, and, as she tells it, the only economically viable way forward she could find was through performance. That work introduced her to an Irish clown called Ed Malone who one day informed her that she, too, was a clown. And from that point on, a clown, in fact, she was.

(In the theatrical world, clowning refers to performance that emphasizes playfulness, interaction with the audience and a guileless kind of social critique; clowns are more like court jesters than birthday party objects of joy and terror.)

As a clown, Tatarsky began to play onstage with ideas about nonsense that carried over from their student days, and also from their Mayor-Dinkins-isn’t-doing-enough days: “There was this political question about sitting around making clown shows, which often feels like doing nothing.”

Around the same time, she read Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, a novel about an upper-class young German man attempting and failing to commit himself to a life of art. She felt an odd closeness to

Meister — like they were “trapped in the same story” about doing, well, nothing. It wasn’t comfortable, “because our identities are not the same, but they are very much entangled historically.”

Tatarsky was a Jew with troubling feelings about being Jewish. Maybe approaching those feelings through the lens of someone like Wilhelm Meister, a scion of the society that would eventually give rise to the Nazis, was a radical enough perspective shift to actually let her look at what the feelings meant. “If I am Wilhelm, I can say all these things,” she said. Challenging and disturbing things about the “hilarious, hilarious degree of self-torture” involved in trying to develop an individual identity and make art about it; about the “panic of nothingness” she felt every day; about being Jewish.

So Tatarsky decided they would make a lifelong project out of adapting Goethe’s novel, but never finish, just as Meister never, in the book, gets around to producing his own great work. Tatarsky would produce theirs — just in a series of highly un-literal performances that, getting deeper and deeper into the text, would never really end. They would make a performance that was both nothing and something. They call the project Seinfeld.

Sad Boys in Harpy Land is the third installment of Seinfeld. It was originally supposed to premiere in 2020, which, for obvious reasons, did not happen. (Tatarsky debuted the first installment in 2014.) It was going to focus on a single sentence from an unpublished novel about Wilhelm Meister that Goethe drafted and then discarded, in which Meister describes his mind as, Tatarsky said, “a theater of the inferno.” Then the pandemic happened, and it

trapped Tatarsky even more in her own hellscape mind. But it also reintroduced her to an important sense of fun: She couldn't perform, she couldn't really leave her neighborhood, but she could go "play in the dirt." That ethos — there's something pretty dissonant, but also pretty human, about finding ways to have fun while tragedy is unfolding outside — informs Sad Boys in Harpy Land.

"My fear around the work is always that it seems like I'm making fun of something horrific, or that I'm treating very heavy topics with levity that is unwarranted," Tatarsky said. "But what inspires me is that humor is a survival mechanism — a very Jewish survival mechanism."

'For me, this is about mystical Jewish philosophy'

Here is an incomplete list of the objects Tatarsky may or may not wear on their head in the course of performing Sad Boys in Harpy Land, which, in keeping with standard clown practice, is largely improvised: a tree branch pointing skyward, like a disproportionately large unicorn horn; the metal frame of a stool, adorned with a skirt made of potatoes; multiple wigs; a wire headdress outfitted with two styrofoam heads, also wearing wigs.

At a rehearsal I attended in, surprisingly, formalwear — I had a gala after — I kicked off my high heels to settle in on the floor, and Tatarsky promptly warned me to hide them, because they otherwise faced a strong likelihood of ending up in the show.

She began to warm up with her choreographic consultant, Lisa Fagan, and ran through her to-do list for the day. She wanted to work on "potato lady." (See

above, re, the stool.) She wanted to work on the three-headed beast at the gates of hell. And she wanted to do something with her "disordered tree thinking state." (See above, re, the unicorn branch.)

She flexed her limbs. She told Lisa that she wanted the tree to look something like a Hebrew letter. "For me, this is about mystical Jewish philosophy of language," she said. "God spoke the world into existence. There's a supermaterial experience of language. I'm curious about what, like, a letter movement is."

Tatarsky was concerned, they told me, about their decision to publicly bill Sad Boys in Harpy Land as being about "a Jewish woman who thinks she's a German boy who thinks he's a tree." They worried it might put people off, not just because of the "um, what?" factor, but because of people like me, who see "Jewish" and "German" in the description of anything, and think, oh, God, I know what this is going to be like.

"How do you get out of that?" they said. "And therein lies the tragedy, and the comedy."

'Jewish hell can basically be understood as the feeling of shame'

If you are a Jew born after the Holocaust, you likely live with a certain set of conundrums about it. On the one hand, it can feel intimately connected to your history and identity. On the other, it didn't exactly happen to you. So: How traumatized do you get to be? How much does it come to define you, and how much do you want to let it?

Sad Boys in Harpy Land is an extended effort to sit in the sense of funhouse-mirror horror that can come from thinking about

these questions too much, for too long. It's profoundly funny — it's a clown show, after all — but it's also, in a deeply personal way, desperate. There is a person onstage seeking any way out of having to think about these things, not because they don't want to, but because the act of thinking about them feels like it swallows every last iota of their individuality. If they want to live, they have to be able to live as an individual. So they try to find a way out. And there is none.

The result is a shockingly playful look at what it's like to try and stay alive when it feels like history is crushing you. There's a belligerent humor to it: Yes, she's really saying all this! Can you believe it! But underneath that is a truth that contemporary art grappling with the legacy of the Holocaust can often fail to reach: It's not just the facts of it that are enough to drive you insane. The inescapable knowledge that these facts are part of your identity, and you must think about them forever, can, too.

"I have been thinking about why I'm so drawn to hell, and hellscapes — such a Christian idea," Tatarsky said. "It's not like in any point in my Jewish education, I was really taught about hell. But apparently, Jewish hell can basically be understood as the feeling of shame. That's the eternal punishment: a feeling of shame."

'I came here to talk to the demons'

At rehearsal, Tatarsky was working with Fagan, the choreographic consultant, on the beast at the gates of hell.

The show's sound designer and composer, Shane Riley, cued up music to accompany her. Another member of the tech crew, set and costume designer Andreea Mincic,

complained that there was oil on the floor. "When I was warming up I accidentally knocked over the anchovies," Tatarsky said, apologetically. (Yes, the anchovies are a prop.)

Tatarsky arranged the wire and styrofoam head contraption around their neck, then began to snarl and writhe, laughing at themselves along the way. Eventually, they mimed giving birth to one of the heads. Acting like a beast at the gates of hell, they confessed, coming out of character, "is deeply humiliating. I can't imagine anything stupider."

It was a good start, Fagan said. But Tatarsky needed to take it further. The impression just wasn't out-there enough. "I want to find my inner harpy," Tatarsky said, "even though what comes much more naturally to me is my inner sad boy."

They reset. They dropped to all fours, crawled to Fagan, and licked her knee. "Scratch me!" they demanded. They made out with one of the foam heads, while miming the other one gnawing on their shoulder. They howled: "I CAME HERE TO TALK TO THE DEMONS."

Jewish hell might be shame. But just like there's an odd kind of freedom in thinking about Jewishness from the perspective of a golden-haired German boy, there's an odd kind of freedom in leaning into the shame, and seeing what you find there. "So much of our lives, we're socialized to be kind of out of touch with our impulses," Tatarsky said. "Maybe if you can see a person exploring that, it opens something up."

Music

They're your cool friend's favorite funk band. Their frontman released a klezmer album

By Jake Wasserman

In 2019, the Michigan-based indie funk band Vulfpeck sold out Madison Square Garden for a one-night-only show. I was in attendance in nosebleed seats, and as the show began, klezmer clarinetist Michael Winograd took the stage to lull the raucous crowd with a solo evocative of the shtetl called "The Sweet Science," as Vulfpeck's frontman Jack Stratton literally crawled onto the largest stage the band had ever taken.

Now at this point in my life, I was not yet the engagement editor at one of the most-storied Yiddish newspapers in United States history. I was about a year and a half out of college, emotionally distanced from both my cultural and religious Judaism, and excited to see the low-volume funk band with a cult following that I had tried to emulate in my own basement rock. I didn't understand it at the time, but Winograd's serenade revealed to me a Yiddishkeit infused in the band's catalog that I could only see in hindsight.

In a 2016 Bandcamp blog post, writer Allegra Rosenberg wrote about Vulfpeck's Jewish roots, and how the tummler (comic

entertainer) persona that Stratton adopts on stage straddles the band's music in an Ashkenazi-Jewish space between past and present. Jack Stratton is the son of Bert Stratton, who plays clarinet, harmonica and saxophone for the Cleveland-based klezmer group Yiddishe Cup.

It makes sense that Stratton, who came of age playing Jewish music with his dad, would release a music video under his solo label/alter ego "Vulfmon" conducting Winograd in the latter's arrangement of Johann Sebastian Bach's "Contrapunctus I." And it makes even more sense that he'd wear a Na Nach Kippah while conducting the song whose YouTube caption quotes Rebbe Nachman of Breslov: "The most direct means for attaching ourselves to God from this material world is through music and song." These hints of Yiddishkeit were hiding from me in plain sight.

From funk to full-blown klezmer

Last year, Stratton returned home to Cleveland Heights, Ohio, to join Winograd and Socalled, the stage name of Canadian

rapper, pianist and accordion player Josh Dolgin in forming a band called Yiddishe Pirat (Yiddish Pirates). They then played a free concert at the 42nd Annual Yiddish Concert in the Park at Cain Park.

Some Vulfpeck fans trekked out to Ohio, expecting to see the full band and their funk, and instead found Stratton in a march on a two-piece drum kit, Winograd sliding clarinet melodies, and Dolgin syncopating on a baby grand piano.

“We’re pirates! We’re pirates! We’re here, we’re confident. Hide your valuables, we’re pirates!” Stratton shouts ahead of “Araber Tantz,” a tune that he says is his favorite from the repertoire of 1990s klezmer revival music.

This week, after placing an order at the end of September, I received my vinyl copy of “Klezmer Klezmer Klezmer,” the live recording of this concert.

The album rips open with an explosive, freylekhe celebration that you can’t help but dance to with “Sirba,” as Stratton and Dolgin carry the beat forward, while Winograd squawks joyfully on the clarinet. The woodblock percussion of “Heyser Bulgar” is impossible not to tap your toes along with.

My personal favorite track is the B-side “Shabbes Shabbes,” where Dolgin sings a rich baritone explaining the things you need to have to celebrate a good shabbes: fish, fleish, and vayn.

As Stratton brought his father out to play clarinet (with fellow Yiddishe Cup bandmate Alan Douglass on piano), I was struck by

the pride shared by these men and the generations that they represent. Though I can offer very little perspective on the technical side of klezmer music, I know l’dor v’dor when I see it, and the younger Stratton’s carrying forth old world songs into a digital age brings me hope that cannot be fully expressed in writing.

We are the memory keepers and the bridge builders. Yiddishe Pirat’s “Klezmer Klezmer Klezmer” is building a bridge across the gap between Crown Heights traditions and Vulfpeck’s Bushwick fanbase.

Antisemitism is a growing problem. Georgia's proposed law is the wrong way to fight it

By Joe Sterling

Everyone in the Georgia House of Representatives appears to have two things in common: complete abhorrence of growing antisemitism and the will to do something about it.

But there are different opinions on how to fight the scourge, and my state is on track to side with the wrong one.

The Georgia state house overwhelmingly approved a bill defining antisemitism, and codifying antisemitic acts as hate crimes, shortly before Purim. As a Jewish resident of Greater Atlanta for more than 25 years, I think the General Assembly's wish to confront rising antisemitism is laudable. But I think lawmakers should hit the brakes on this particular bill. There are better ways to fight antisemitism than enacting laws that raise questions of free speech.

Rep. John Carson, a bill co-sponsor, in a March 6 session cited support for the bill from several mainstream Jewish groups — and expressed irritation over pushback to the proposed law.

"Why am I hearing so much opposition to this bill from Jews?" he said.

"There is a loud group of quote unquote Jews that are opposing this because they support Palestine. They do not support Israel and the Jewish people," added Carson.

Wait, say that again? Quote unquote Jews?

Here we have a legislator questioning and discrediting the identities of Jews just because he doesn't agree with them. This blatant disrespect for my people should give every Georgia legislator and citizen pause.

Most critics of the bill are keen on battling antisemitism, but have concerns about the definition itself. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition, used in this bill, contains language that could threaten free speech over issues involving Israel and the occupied territories.

Carson tried to paint support for the IHRA definition as nearly monolithic. He cited several supportive mainstream Jewish groups, such as the American Jewish

Committee and the local federation. He also read quotes from the URJ supporting the definition.

It's true there is support for the definition from the Reform movement and other quarters — as a guide and a working tool. But Carson left out some important context.

In a letter issued two years ago, the URJ and other groups cautioned that “using the definition itself to trigger federal or state anti-discrimination laws, though, could be abused to punish Constitutionally protected, if objectionable, speech.”

That's from a Jan. 29, 2021 letter to the administration and Congress recommending “urgent steps to take to combat antisemitism.”

The Progressive Israel Network also raised questions about the definition two years ago. (I'm a member of the local chapter of J Street, part of this network. We also sent a letter to Georgia legislators opposing the codification of the definition into Georgia law.)

Kenneth Stern, an antisemitism expert who helped draft the original definition and the examples from which the IHRA definition is derived, has written that it was never intended to be used as a sweeping, all-purpose hate speech code.

It is true that some people who identify as anti-Zionists and critics of Israel are bigots who stoke antisemitism under the cover of respectability. Those people should be called out and confronted. But anti-Zionism

and anti-Israel views aren't intrinsically antisemitic.

Two of the working IHRA definition's contemporary examples have been cited as vehicles that could stifle speech on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

One is that the statement, “the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor,” is under the definition viewed as antisemitic.

Another is the murky application of “double standards” to Israel “by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation” as strong indicators of possible antisemitism.

There have been other definitions crafted since the IHRA working definition was written that better address criticism of Israel.

State Rep. El-Mahdi Holly, on the House floor, cited one of them, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. He said it should be adopted.

This declaration says “criticizing or opposing Zionism as a form of nationalism” and arguing for a variety of constitutional arrangements — such as two state, one state or confederation — are not antisemitic.

Another definition, developed by the progressive rabbinic group T'ruah, makes similar points.

State Rep. Jasmine Clark said on the House floor that antisemitism is already covered under the state's hate crimes law. That law pertains to victims of crimes targeted because of their race, gender,

sexual orientation, sex, national origin, religion or physical or mental ability.

“I’m not Jewish. I don’t purport to be Jewish, and so when making decisions that come to the Jewish community I wanted to make sure that Jewish voices were amplified,” she said. “I will not go so far as to qualify who is Jewish or who is quote unquote Jewish.”

Now that’s a respectful comment.

Clark also opposed adopting a non-legally binding definition into Georgia law. She added that the email feedback she has received about the bill is split.

“Just because I vote no on this bill does not mean I am making a vote against Jewish people,” she said. “I support the Jewish community. However, I also oppose referencing non-legally binding working definitions in Georgia code.”

Georgia’s vigilance on antisemitism is admirable, and we need the power of government and law enforcement on all levels to fight it.

But let’s explore using the state’s existing hate crimes law and apply these better definitions of antisemitism instead of turning a troublesome working definition into law.

Meet the actual Israelis on Team Israel

By Louis Keene

MIAMI — Tal Erel fell in love with baseball when he was 8 years old growing up in South Florida. When he was 10, his parents moved the family to Israel — rejecting Erel’s wishes to leave him behind so he could continue learning the game.

Where his hometown seemingly had a baseball field on every corner, his new home country had only one or two fields total — if you could call them that.

“We would go out to the field and not know what’s gonna happen that day,” Erel, 26, said. “It could be a hole in the field all of a sudden from construction, or a dog chewing a base and running away with it. You really just didn’t know what to expect.”

The team representing Israel in the World Baseball Classic this week in Miami is hardly Israeli — all but one of the active players on the roster were born in the U.S. (Tournament rules allow anyone eligible for citizenship to play for that country’s team.) But the team did bring two products of its national baseball program: Erel, who’s serving as the team’s bullpen catcher, and Assaf Lowengart, an infielder currently sidelined with an injury.

They are the greatest achievement — so far — of a fledgling program still working to be taken seriously in the Israeli sports world. And as Lowengart and Erel try to soak up the experience of their big-league

teammates — and savor the groundskeeping — the two Israelis are also imparting a few lessons of their own.

Grassroots, but with sand

Lowengart, who hails from Timorim, a town in central Israel, discovered the sport on TV as a kid. He decided to try it out, and by his second year playing, he was on the national team.

“I thought, maybe I’m good,” Lowengart, 25, said.

Like Erel, Lowengart remembers the challenges as much as any tournament he ever played in. One time he showed up at what was then the country’s best field — near Tel Aviv — only to find that the pitching rubber had been stolen off the mound.

The national team program does not receive much funding from the Israeli government, according to Louie Miller, the national director of player development. Instead, it relies on donations — and improvises. Trying to start an after-school program, Miller hired a tractor to plow a field, then trucks full of sand to dump on it.

“Every time we went to a game, you go to the kids and say, ‘hey, we came with 20 balls — we want to come home with 40 balls,’” Miller, who is with Team Israel at the WBC as an assistant equipment manager, said with a laugh. “Normal Israeli stuff.”

Cultural exchange

There are benefits to having Israelis on the team, especially given the rest of the team's curiosity about Israel — animated further by the turmoil in the country right now. (On Saturday half a million Israelis took to the streets to protest the new coalition government, which has taken a hard right turn.)

The kinds of questions they ask, Lowengart says, have been thoughtful: “Is it kind of like a right wing-left wing fight? Or is it more of a democratic fight?”

Some of the players have been nurturing their interest in Israeli culture and politics for a few years, having previously worn the country's name across their chest in the last World Baseball Classic, in 2017, and in the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. Erel pointed out that a few have been to Masada and other national landmarks he's never had the opportunity to visit.

And because of the presence of a few Israeli experts on the team, the American players have been able to hear different viewpoints.

Lowengart said he understands Israeli politics differently than veteran pitcher Shlomo Lipetz — an Israeli-born player on the team's provisional roster should it advance to the next round. Though he declined to elaborate on how, Lowengart — nearly 20 years Lipetz's junior — said the banter was helpful for the group, and part of the fun for him.

“It's an ongoing conversation that's been going on for 75 years,” Erel says of Israel's upcoming anniversary.

Growing the game

Much of Israel's formal support of the program comes in the form of two sporta'i, or “elite athlete,” slots for teenagers bound for conscription in the Israeli Defense forces. Though the roles are not exemptions — Lowengart and Erel both served three years — they allow the person to leave the base to train in the afternoons.

One challenge in the country, Miller says: There's no adult professional league for young players to aspire to. Soccer has been established in Israel longer than the country itself, and the Israeli basketball league has been around for decades.

No one interviewed for this story could distill a reason why Israel should be developing baseball as a national sport. But the World Baseball Classic may make the clearest case. It's easier for the country to make than the World Cup — baseball doesn't trail soccer just in the Middle East, after all — and it looks just as fun.

Tens of thousands of fans of Israel's opponents this week have descended upon LoanDepot Park to celebrate their countrymen. Miller and his pair of Israeli charges in Miami envision a future — maybe 40 years away, or maybe just 20 — when natives will be as core to the team as Jews from the rest of the Diaspora.

“I think now if you go to a municipality in Israel and you say ‘baseball,’ people know what you're talking about. Ten years ago, if you went to a municipality and said you wanted to start a baseball program, people would say, ‘what the hell are you talking about.’ But there's still a long way to go.”

Cats

What ever became of the cat in ‘The Diary of Anne Frank’?

By Adam Langer

Among the props needed for a stage production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* are any number of suitcases, kitchen utensils, and candles. Probably the most difficult of these to wrangle is the cat.

When I first read Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett’s script for the play, I assumed that this cat, who arrives at the secret annex along with the Van Daan family and becomes a source of contention later on, would be represented by a stuffed cat. Or maybe indicated through pantomime.

But while I was researching the play’s history for the podcast *Playing Anne Frank*, I discovered that Mouschi, as the cat was called in the script, was real — one of dozens of items on the prop list that the show’s crew had to procure and take care of.

Animals onstage are notoriously difficult, and I imagined that 717 performances on Broadway plus hundreds more on the show’s various tours must have been stressful for the animal.

But Peter Dan Levin, who originated the role of Peter Van Daan on Broadway,

remembered only a few difficulties with Mouschi.

“I got on fine with him,” Levin told me. “One matinee or evening, the cat jumped out and started for the audience and I grabbed him by the tail and pulled him back in. And that was that.”

Levin also recalled a scene with Susan Strasberg, who played Anne Frank, in which Mouschi “crapped in the little cage.”

“And she did the funniest look at me,” he said, meaning Strasberg, not the cat. “But we had to go through it. So that was that.”

Arnold Margolin, who served as assistant stage manager of the Broadway production and later took over the role of Peter, was not quite as fond of the animal. “He didn’t care for me and I didn’t like him, so he spent most of his time in a little caged box,” Margolin told me.

“We got a new stage manager and he had the bright idea that at the curtain call, I should hold the cat, which we hadn’t been doing,” he continued. “And so that first night, the curtain went up. There was silence. He was fine; the cat was fine. We’re all lined up

waiting. The curtain went up and we got hit by lights and the audience applauding. The cat went nuts and just tried to get over my back and just tore into me with his nails on my chest and my back.

“After about three nights of that, I went to the stage manager and I showed him my wounds and threatened to go to Equity if he couldn’t get rid of the cat,” Margolin said, referring to the actor’s union. “So that was the end of the cat taking a curtain call.”

The next to take on the role of Peter was Steve Press, who also had to take over minding Mouschi. Press described Mouschi as “an average-looking gray cat” and said that training the animal wasn’t easy at first, but a relationship bloomed, and, when the show closed, Press took the cat with him on tours in which it played more than 100 American cities.

“Mouschi never missed a performance,” Press said. “He did everything from the previews before it opened on Broadway to the full Broadway run to the national company to the bus-and-truck tour.”

When the run finally ended, there was much interest in using Mouschi in other productions, but the cat “did not like that because the whole company was different,” Press recalled. “He did not like the changes that were being made.”

So, the cat ended up living with Press’ parents in Westchester.

“Mouschi was the happiest cat in the world,” Press told me. “My favorite moment would be if I was visiting my parents, my father

would turn on television in the evening and Mouschi would come over and sit on his lap and the two of them would fall asleep.”

Jews win religion popularity contest in new poll

By Adam Kovac

While antisemitic incidents may be up, Jews can take heart: We're more popular than you might think.

New data from the Pew Research Center indicates that while most Americans don't really know enough Jewish people to have an opinion, far more see them positively than negatively.

The poll showed 35% of those asked had either a favorable or very favorable opinion of Jews — the highest percentage of any of the major religious groups on the survey. Only 6% had a somewhat or very unfavorable view.

Jewish popularity has actually been fairly consistent. In a similar 2017 poll, where respondents were asked to rank their feelings towards religious groups between 0 and 100, Jews scored an average of 67, the highest out of any group.

By and large, Jews like themselves: 81% held a favorable view of their fellow tribesmen. However, 2% held an unfavorable opinion and 14% either wouldn't give a reply or didn't know enough about Jews to say one way or another. Jews also have the distinction of being the only

religious group to have a net positive opinion among people belonging to all the other religious groups.

The good vibes were split fairly equally among Republicans and Democrats. The negative view of Jews was at 6% for both of them, while positive views were at 38% and 33%, respectively.

Only 15% of Americans said they had a favorable opinion of Mormons, the lowest approval of all religious groups. Atheists were also unpopular, with 25% of American adults seeing them negatively, compared to only 17% viewing them positively.

While Americans who identified as born-again or evangelical saw themselves in a positive light, that attitude wasn't shared by others: 32% of non-evangelicals saw these Christians negatively and only 18% saw them in a good light.

The survey was conducted with over 10,500 participants, weighted to reflect the United States' ethnic, racial and gender makeup, between Sept. 13 and 18, 2022, via an online survey. The margin of error is plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

Remembering Topol, the people's Tevye

By Mira Fox

Fiddler on the Roof is a landmark piece of Jewish culture. It has shaped the way Jews are perceived by others, and how we understand ourselves, since it premiered on Broadway in 1964, starring Zero Mostel as the iconic milkman Tevye.

The thing is, not everyone can go to a Broadway show. So for everyone else, there was Topol.

I've often heard that Mostel's performance was incredible. A titan of the Yiddish theater scene, he defined the role, and reportedly pushed the writers and directors for greater authenticity through the musical's development. But for me, and millions of others, Topol's version of Tevye in the 1971 movie adaptation of Fiddler is the one that truly defines the musical.

His Tevye is larger-than-life: twinkling and wry in the opening number, "Tradition," and balancing the schtick and camp of songs like "If I Were a Rich Man" with real emotion when the film takes on the heavy issues of pogroms, persecution and family ruptures.

The role turned the actor, who died at age 87 on Thursday in Tel Aviv, into "Israel's most famous export since the Jaffa orange," according to The Jerusalem Post. The Associated Press estimated that the movie has been viewed by over a billion people.

Chaim Topol, who used his last name as a mononym for most of his professional career, first played Tevye in a Hebrew-language Tel Aviv stage production, and then one in London. For the latter, he said, he had to phonetically memorize the songs, because at the time he knew "about 50 words of English."

Yet the film's director, Norman Jewison — who is, ironically, not Jewish — cast Topol over Mostel in the film version of Fiddler. As he explained in the 2021 documentary *Miracle of Miracles*, on the making of the movie, he worried Mostel's Yiddish theater schtick would subsume the role, making it too difficult for viewers to connect with the story.

Jewison wanted a Tevye who would make the story hit hard for the widest variety of audiences. And that's what he got.

The film made Topol into a global Tevye: He would go on to reprise his role in stage productions across the world, including in Turkey, Greece and Japan. Residents of each country, he said, in a 2017 interview with *Mishpacha*, connected to the story in their own ways.

"Everywhere I performed, I was able to sense that the audience identified with my characters," Topol said. "There's this scene

in Fiddler where the Cossacks storm onstage and conduct a pogrom. When I took a look at the audience, I could tell that they identified personally with the scene. When I performed in Turkey, the audience saw their Armenian enemies in those Cossacks. And when I performed in Greece, the audience was visualizing their Turkish oppressors. I guess every nation has its own personal Haman.”

Topol saw firsthand how universally resonant Fiddler’s themes were: the struggle between tradition and modernity, the importance of family. But he also embodied it as a deeply Jewish story.

When I flew to Utah last year to cover a production of Fiddler at Brigham Young University, the flagship college for the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, most of the cast told me they had watched the movie to try to better understand Jews, a group many of them had little knowledge of or contact with. Topol’s Tevye shaped how they understood what it meant to be Jewish. His accent and mannerisms defined Jewish culture; his impromptu, heartfelt conversations with God and his steadfast and sometimes humorous confrontation of shtetl life’s miseries shaped their grasp of Jewish history, values and the very concept of God.

Fiddler was carefully structured to make Judaism and the influx of Jewish immigrants after the Holocaust sympathetic and accessible to outsiders. But as American Jews have become increasingly assimilated into American culture, it has turned into a touchstone for the Old World roots that help

ground Judaism as a unique ethnicity and culture.

“I never attended Hebrew school but, thanks to Fiddler on the Roof, I learned what the Sabbath is and the rules related to its observance,” Emily Knoppert wrote in Kveller in 2020. “I know that if I listen to the Fiddler soundtrack, I feel like I am part of something tangible in the world, something bigger than my own questioning sense of identity.”

For so many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, Topol remains the face of Fiddler — and the face of Judaism. As Tevye sings: “How do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: tradition.” Now, Topol himself has become the tradition.

Hundreds of Jews and Palestinians decry Israeli minister at parallel Washington protests

By Arno Rosenfeld

Hundreds of protesters greeted Bezalel Smotrich, Israel's far-right finance minister, outside the Washington, D.C., hotel where he addressed an Israel Bonds conference Sunday evening.

The remarkable scene outside the hotel — two separate protests focused on Israel — had little precedent in American history. One crowd waved Palestinian flags, the other, Israeli flags. But both delivered similar messages denouncing Bezalel Smotrich, the Israeli finance minister, and the hard right turn the Israeli government has taken since Benjamin Netanyahu won a sixth term as prime minister in November.

The demonstrators showed up outside the hotel ahead of Smotrich, leader of the far-right Religious Zionist party, who made headlines earlier this month for saying that the Israeli military should have destroyed a Palestinian village following a terrorist attack. Israel Bonds was one of the few organizations that agreed to host the controversial politician.

"I'm thrilled to be here as part of your welcoming committee," Rabbi Esther Lederman, of the Union for Reform Judaism, told a raucous crowd of roughly

400 people gathered on the sidewalk outside the Grand Hyatt, waving Israeli flags and holding signs condemning the Israeli government's proposed changes to its judicial system — changes opponents deem anti-democratic.

They had been organized by Americans for Peace Now and a coalition of other liberal Zionist organizations, along with a group of Israeli expatriates. Around the corner an equally spirited group of about 75 anti-Zionist protesters waved Palestinian flags.

"No to Smotrich, no to hate," read posters produced by J Street, the liberal Zionist group that lobbies for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Smotrich supports genocide," was the message on the placards from Jewish Voice for Peace, an anti-Zionist group that supports a boycott of Israel.

It was the largest protest against the Israeli government and its proposed judicial reforms, along with other far-right policies, in the United States, following several smaller protests in recent weeks. In Israel in past weeks, hundreds of thousands of

people have gathered to demonstrate against the government, including a crowd of 500,000 Saturday night.

One adversary, two protests

Police — who parked more than a dozen squad cars outside the hotel — seemed confused by the two events. When an elderly woman holding a combination Israeli and Palestinian flag tried to cross the street from one protest to the other, a police officer intervened. Though she insisted that the protestors were not opposed to one another, the officer was unswayed. “But you’re always on opposite sides,” the officer said.

The two groups made different demands, however. At the protest organized by Jewish Voice for Peace, chants called for a boycott of Israel. Sanaz Ghodsi, a graduate student at George Washington University, said she didn’t see much common ground with the liberal Zionists across the street.

Ghodsi said she believed the only fair resolution to the conflict was for all the Jews in Israel to be forced to immigrate to Europe or elsewhere.

But others were more optimistic.

Jonathan Kuttab, executive director of Friends of Sabeel North America, a Palestinian advocacy organization, traveled from Pennsylvania to attend the protest. “I think it’s a good thing,” he said of the liberal Zionists protesting across the street, and added that liberal Zionists in Israel needed to join with the Arab parties if they wanted to oust the far-right government led by Benjamin Netanyahu.

“Without the Arabs, they’re not going to win against the fascists,” he said.

At the Americans for Peace Now event, a woman at the front of the crowd held an “I love Israel” sign, and the speakers emphasized that they were there to support the massive Israeli protests against the current government, and not to undermine the country itself.

“We’re here today to say our friends in Israel are not alone,” said Sheila Katz, chief of the National Council of Jewish Women. “We, the American Jewish community, who believe in the original vision and promise of the State of Israel, will not stand idly by.”

Scuffles with police

Security was tight inside and outside the hotel with a heavy police presence. Those officers were called into action twice, first when Jewish Voice for Peace activists, including four rabbis and three rabbinical students, tried to unfurl a banner in the lobby reading “apartheid is funded here,” but an officer quickly snatched it and the group was escorted out.

A few minutes later, IfNotNow, a group opposed to the Israeli occupation, staged its own demonstrations in the atrium, one floor above the Israel Bonds conference. Hotel security wrestled with the demonstrators over two canvas banners, and police eventually arrested several activists as they sang Hebrew songs.

The incidents caused a stir in the lobby, which was full of public officials and others attending a public transit conference in the building. “It’s actually quite beautiful,” one woman said of songs the IfNotNow protesters were singing. “I just wish I knew what it meant.”



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