WEEKEND READS

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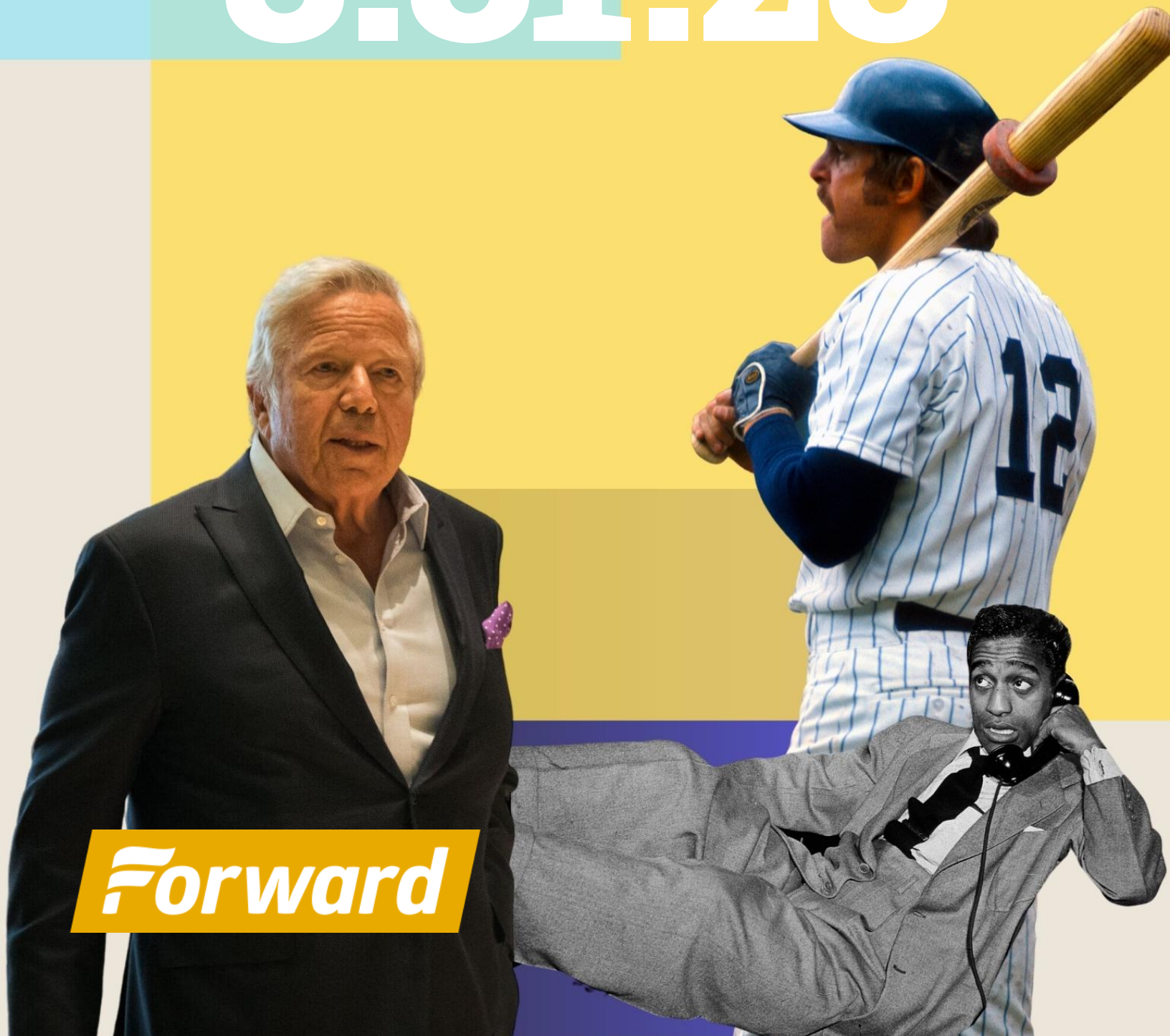


Forward

Robert Kraft will spend $25 million running ads against antisemitism. Is this the right way to protect Jews?

By Arno Rosenfeld

In what may be the most ambitious public awareness campaign about American antisemitism since the 1950s, Robert Kraft, the billionaire Jewish businessman, plans to spend $25 million flooding television airwaves with wrenching depictions of hatred against Jews over the next six weeks.

The effort, launching Monday, will aim to show the advertisements to every American adult at least ten times — for a total of more than one billion impressions — and ask them to post a blue square emoji on social media to draw attention to antisemitism.

“We believe this is the most effective way to start a conversation with people across the country,” said Matthew Berger, the director of the Foundation to Combat Anti-Semitism, which is managing the project. “We need to show people outside the Jewish community what antisemitism looks like.”

The move by Kraft, who created the foundation in 2019, is the newest and most expensive entry in a growing field of advertisements condemning antisemitism aimed at the general public. While a host of philanthropists appear eager to bankroll these appeals, some observers question the efficacy of pouring millions of dollars into public campaigns whose impact is difficult to measure.

“We don’t have people who are asking, ‘Hey, is this a good strategy?’” said Jonathan Sarna, a scholar of American Jewish history.

Critics question whether portraying Jews as a uniquely embattled minority group is accurate or productive. The campaign leans heavily on an interpretation of polling data and statistics that makes hatred against Jews appear especially dire.

Kraft first ran an advertisement against antisemitism last fall during an NFL game featuring the New England Patriots, which he owns. But JewBelong has been running billboard campaigns against antisemitism since 2021 and Shine A Light, a coalition of nearly 100 leading Jewish groups funded by the South African billionaire Natie Kirsh, ran

a national advertising campaign about antisemitism over Hanukkah.

There have been other smaller and more sporadic projects, including ten digital billboards produced by the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles in December meant to highlight pithy words of Jewish wisdom. And that's not counting the proliferation of social media awareness campaigns — which require far fewer resources to produce — by organizations launched in recent years like #EndJewHatred.

Kraft created FCAS, which is based in the Boston area, after he won the Israeli Genesis Prize, pledging $20 million to the new foundation and announcing two $5 million gifts from others, including Roman Abramovich, the Russian Jewish billionaire who has recently been ensnared by controversy over the war in Ukraine.

At the time, Kraft said one of his primary motivations was "to counter the normalization of antisemitic narratives that question Israel's right to exist," though he stayed away from that rhetoric in announcing the new media blitz.

Instead, the focus is on what many metrics have shown to be a rising number of antisemitic incidents in the country. "There is a role for each of us to play in combating a problem that is unfortunately all too prevalent in communities across the country today," Kraft, who declined an interview request, said in a statement. "We must stand up and take action against the rise of all hate."

This rise includes antisemitic stunts, like banner drops and laser projections by white supremacist groups, as well as the offensive acts by celebrities, media figures and politicians like Donald Trump, who dined with Nick Fuentes, a Holocaust denier, in November.

Kraft has long been close with the former president, including donating $1 million to Trump's inaugural committee, and his new ad push steers clear of political components of antisemitism.

Highlighting 'upstanders'

The minute-long ads, directed by Derek Cianfrance, who made the film Blue Valentine, feature harrowing depictions of antisemitism followed by moving interventions from people outside the Jewish community. In one, a young girl is confused to see the message "No Jews" painted alongside a swastika on her family's garage door. When her mother returns from dropping her off at school, a neighbor has painted over the graffiti. "1 in 4 Jewish Americans were the victim of hate last year," the ad concludes.

That figure comes from an American Jewish Committee survey released in February, and refers to the 26% of Jews who reported being targeted by an offensive remark in person or online, or a physical attack. Respondents were not polled about antisemitic vandalism like that depicted in the video, which is exceedingly rare. The Anti-Defamation League found that vandalism targeting homes represented a tiny fraction of overall cases last year: about 12 out of more than 3,600 incidents.

In another spot, a teenage boy is sitting on his bed when he starts receiving antisemitic comments on a TikTok video of his bar mitzvah. "Could your Jew nose get any bigger???" one reads. Moments later, a

Black a capella group sends him a video in which they sing a Jewish prayer. Another statistic flashes on the screen: “70% of Jewish Americans faced antisemitism online last year.”

The AJC found that 13% of American Jews had been “the target” of online antisemitism, like the boy in the ad. That number jumps to 69% after including those who had seen antisemitic content online that was not directed at them at least once in the past year.

Berger said the scenes depicted in the ads were based on real incidents and that they represented a fair portrayal of antisemitism.

“Not all antisemitic incidents are to the level of what we describe in our videos, but I believe everyone in the Jewish community is fearful that they’re the next target,” Berger said in an interview.

The campaign, called #StandUpToJewishHate, is focused on the idea that Jews are a tiny proportion of Americans but the targets of most religious hate crimes. The blue square emoji, which takes up a small share of television and phone screens, is meant to represent the 2.4% of Americans who are Jews.

The square is contrasted with the 55% of religious hate crimes that the FBI said were aimed at Jews in 2020, the last year for which reliable data is available. Like other figures used in the campaign, that statistic is also complicated. There were 959 hate crimes against Jews reported in 2020, or about 8% of all such incidents if you include hate crimes of all categories. FCAS shows both the 55% and 8% figure on its website.

The emphasis on rising antisemitism, and the need for non-Jews to intervene, is a common theme in recent public campaigns about the issue. Shine A Light, which was launched in 2021 but expanded with a $4 million budget last year, used the hate crime statistics in social media ads, while JewBelong directs many of its arch appeals to the general public: “Does your church need security cameras? ’Cause our synagogue does.”

But do they work?

Jewish ad campaigns against discrimination became popular in the 1930s and many ran through the 1950s, using a combination of billboards, bumper stickers, pamphlets and radio messages to promote an inclusive society.

These public appeals, which did not focus on antisemitism, were funded by the ADL and American Jewish Committee, though they eventually fell out of favor in the 1960s as the sponsors realized they had no idea if the ads were working.

“It was virtually impossible to demonstrate to financial contributors in the Jewish community, for example, that costly mass media programs were having a significant impact on public opinion,” Stuart Svonkin, a scholar of antisemitism, wrote in his book Jews Against Prejudice.

There have been sporadic attempts to run ads decrying antisemitism and raising Holocaust awareness in the decades since, although they did not become common in the U.S. until recently.

In 2004, the Union of Jewish Students in France canceled a series of ads condemning antisemitism that portrayed the

French phrase for “Dirty Jew” above images of Jesus and Mary, a pairing that managed to offend both Catholics and many Jews.

And in 2001, two ad campaigns were canceled for doing more harm than good. A billboard in Berlin meant to raise money for a Holocaust memorial showed a pristine mountain landscape under the words “The Holocaust Never Happened,” intended to offer a jarring example of what forgetting the genocide might look like. It was taken down early. That same year in the Czech Republic, a series of government-sponsored television ads, billboards and transit posters meant to ridicule neo-Nazis alarmed many locals by using the confusing slogan, “Be Kind to Your Local Nazi.”

Sarna, a professor at Brandeis University, said it wasn’t just the effectiveness of advertising against antisemitism that has gone untested. Almost none of the recent boom in philanthropy focused on keeping Jews safe has been rigorously analyzed.

“Our tendency is to think — and it’s not wrong — that every piece helps,” said Sarna, who complimented Kraft for finding a niche in a crowded field. “But it seems that evaluation could tell us much more about what’s effective, what works, what doesn’t work.”

‘Universal values’

Sharon Goldtzvik, a communications consultant who works with Jewish groups, said that the support of a single donor like Kraft, who is worth an estimated $7.2 billion, may have enabled a campaign that is divorced from a larger strategy.

“You can do something that has really, really significant penetration and you don’t have to first do a lot of deep narrative thinking and work,” said Goldtzvik, who designed a recent guide on how progressives can talk about antisemitism in a productive manner for Bend the Arc and the Collaborative for Jewish Organizing, a network of nine liberal groups.

Goldtzvik said the scenes in the FCAS ads were moving and would likely resonate with many Jews. But she said they also risked portraying Jews in competition with other minority groups — for example, when it comes to who is the victim of more hate crimes — and make Jews who see the ads feel isolated.

“When you portray it in that way, I think it could have the effect of just making Jewish people feel more afraid,” she said.

Berger said the ads, with a focus on people outside the Jewish community intervening to correct antisemitism, are meant to encourage the opposite.

“We’re highlighting a problem that is very specific — and how prevalent it is today — but also, at the same time, reinforcing values that are universal,” he said. “The same values we would expect people to respond with if they were addressing racism, gender inequality, LGBTQ hate.”

The #StandUpToJewishHate campaign will be backed by a coalition of more than 100 organizations, including many outside the Jewish community like AARP, the League of Women Voters, National Urban League and the National Governors Association.

After an initial six-week push, Berger said the goal is to target similar videos and ads to specific populations. For example, they could target messages on social media to

users who follow a celebrity that has made offensive comments, or toward residents of a city where an antisemitic incident took place.

The campaign by FCAS, which has a staff of 10 and has mostly focused on tracking online antisemitism, also includes a notable break with much of the recent advocacy around antisemitism by leading Jewish organizations: it doesn't mention Israel.

Both Shine A Light and JewBelong, backed by most national Jewish organizations, have condemned anti-Zionism as a form of antisemitism and made aggressive defenses of Israel a central part of their work.

But Berger said Kraft's new campaign will not mention Israel or Zionism.

"Our approach is really focusing on what antisemitism looks like to the American Jewish community and how it impacts them," he said. "We're not really focused as much on what precedes it or what causes people to engage that way."

First Person

How one Black and Jewish family keeps rewriting the Haggadah to reflect their history — and dreams

By Toni and Jon Michaels

As a half-Black, half-Ashkenazi family, we've always curated our own holiday and life-cycle celebrations. A Catholic judge with deep Jewish roots married us in 2005 under a chuppah draped in Ghanaian kente cloth. To close the ceremony, we jumped over a broom and shattered a glass all in one motion — and, to everyone's surprise, without ending up in the ER. To offset the Christmas-ish programming in our kids' school in suburban Los Angeles, we performed a glorious 20-minute Hanukkah-Kwanzaa crossover extravaganza in 2019.

And we have always made our own bespoke Haggadah, weaving the sometimes parallel and sometimes overlapping stories of Jewish and African American slavery and liberation.

Hebrew prayers, Black spirituals

At first, our competitive nature led to some heated exchanges as we tried to outdo one another with tales of our respective people's woe, pain, and misery. If the old Maxwell House standby seems sluggish (surely a ploy to provoke instant-coffee sales), our pulpy parade of horribles threatened to send guests into cardiac arrest. Dayenu, we said to ourselves and each other, and agreed to tone things down.

Alas, we are two lawyers accustomed to redlining everything from appellate briefs to "happy birthday" texts, so "toning things down" is a relative concept. We agreed that we did not need to name-check either the shuttering of Grossinger's or the premature cancellation of A Different World. Jon suggested skipping some of the old sages to make room for Harriet Tubman and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.. Toni interspersed Hebrew prayers with Black spirituals, and strung together passages by Hannah Arendt, Frederick Douglass, Emma Lazarus and Fannie Lou Hamer.

Our cluttered Seder plate commemorates life not only in ancient Goshen but also antebellum Georgia, with collard greens and a cotton ball dipped in vinegar alongside the traditional shank bone, egg, parsley and the rest.

Next year in Jerusalem?

One of the few lines we never touched — or even, really, gave much thought to — was "Next year in Jerusalem." Until we did.

Next year in Jerusalem. Those words of longing and hope at the close of the Seder fortified generations of Jon's people as they were shunted from shtetls to ghettos to camps. That sentiment likewise succorred generations of Toni's forebears as they were trafficked from shipholds to auction blocks to plantations.

In our Seders during President Barack Obama's tenure, as a young, idealistic couple thrilled by the environmental, socioeconomic and civil rights progress happening right here in America, that line felt less like a wistful goal than a reminder of how far we (seemingly) had come. And any corresponding intimation that we were still toiling in Pharaonic Egypt seemed downright churlish. We and most people we knew believed the United States was on the verge of an even broader rights revolution.

But, alas, mann tracht un gott lacht — man plans, God laughs. Instead of Hillary Clinton, we got the hateful and imperious Donald Trump. And instead of Merrick Garland replacing the right-wing Justice Antonin Scalia, we got an archconservative in Neil Gorsuch.

In the years that followed, we bore witness to Christian nationalist demonstrations of force; state-sanctioned vigilantism; threats of violence and abuse directed at high officeholders, teachers, public health experts, and election officials; restrictions on reproductive autonomy and sensible gun-control measures; efforts to marginalize disabled and LGBTQ people; blatant campaigns of voter disenfranchisement and suppression; and a bona fide insurrection.

Tocqueville famously warned that democracy makes every man forget his ancestors. So, too, the absence or suppression of democracy is a powerful reminder of our past.

So we again took our red pens to our Haggadah.We forced Grammy and PopPop's matzo ball soup to simmer longer in the kitchen while we connected present-day democratic decay to lynchings, pogroms, the Black Codes and the Nuremberg Laws.

We also gave "Next year in Jerusalem" the attention it always merited. In fact, we researched an exodus plan. Like thousands of families heeding warnings by such scholars of tyranny as Tim Snyder, we renewed our passports. Given Israel's Law of Return, we started wondering — and Googling — "maybe soon in Jerusalem."

The annual Haggadah tune-up

But yet again, we planned and God laughed. As we take out our Haggadah for its annual tune-up, today's Jerusalem fills us with sadness and anger.

Jerusalem remains, for better or worse, more identifiably the capital of a secure Jewish state than at any other time since the fall of the Second Temple. But instead of a beacon of hope and light, Jerusalem feels like yet another site of persecution and oppression as the government lurches further to the right.

For Palestinians and Arabs in general, it has been this way for some time. Now, basic freedoms are under threat for Israeli Jews as well.

The government today is seeking to gut the independent judiciary, reimpose the death penalty, annex more land in the occupied

West Bank, narrow the aforementioned Law of Return, more severely curtail citizenship rights — all while continuing to coddle and lend legitimacy to extremist thugs close by and overseas. All of which has Jon threatening some provocative revision like “next year in Vancouver” or Accra or Kigali.

Though these are seriously enticing landing spots, we’re far from ready to give up on Jerusalem — or Washington, for that matter. We’re not willing to do so lest we turn our backs on those suffering most acutely under oppressive policies here and in Israel. And, we’re not willing to do so lest we also turn our backs on our ancestors who demonstrated tremendous patience, resiliency and strength in overcoming tyrants far more imposing than Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu.

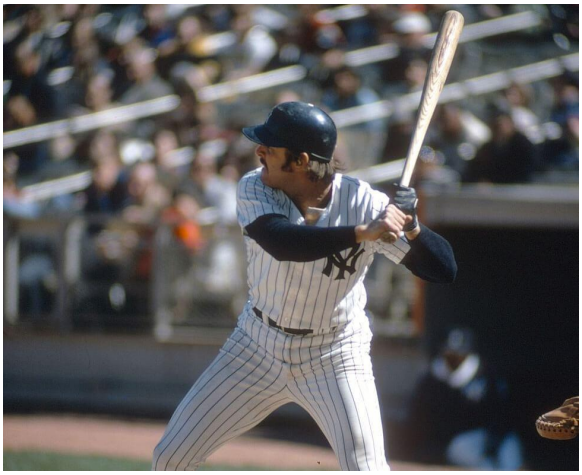
So we’ll continue to hack away at what’s become a very messy, jumbled Haggadah. Next year, we always promise, we’ll tidy it up and make it more legible and accessible for guests.

And next year, we continue to hope, in the Jerusalem of our imaginations.

50 years ago, a Yankee became the first designated hitter — and 'designated Hebrew'

By Frederic J. Frommer

A half-century ago, a young Jewish player on the New York Yankees made history for not doing something on the baseball diamond. After taking an at-bat in the top of the first inning against the Boston Red Sox at Fenway Park, Ron Blomberg stayed on the bench as his glove-toting teammates took the field.



Blomberg had become major league baseball's first designated hitter. Or, Designated Hebrew, as he dubbed it in his memoir, *Designated Hebrew: The Ron Blomberg Story*.

Baseball, he wrote, brought his Jewishness into relief, in that he didn't identify strongly as a Jew until he got drafted by the Yankees and moved north, where New York Jews made him one of their own. The designated hitter rule assured his place in baseball history.

In 1973, the American League added the designated hitter — originally called the designated pinch-hitter, or DPH — to boost offense at a time of declining attendance. Because a team's pitcher is almost always the worst hitter in the lineup, the new rule allowed a team to designate another player to bat in his place.

Although it's long been an accepted part of the game in the American League, and the National League finally adopted it last year, back in the early '70s, the DH caused a stir, with one pitcher griping that it robbed "the pitcher of his manhood."

Blomberg, who is now 74, wasn't initially impressed either.

"When I first heard about the new rule, I thought it was a big joke," he wrote.

But after he pulled a hamstring at the end of spring training in 1973, the DH gave Blomberg a chance to contribute. The team slotted him in that role so he wouldn't have to play the field. That injury made him an unlikely player to become the sport's first

designated hitter at just 24 years old on opening day, April 6. Teams frequently DH older players who might not have the skills to play in the field anymore. Boston's DH that afternoon was 35-year-old Orlando Cepeda, in his second-to-last season.

Hitting sixth in New York's lineup, between Graig Nettles and Felipe Alou, Blomberg came to bat in the first inning with the bases loaded. Perhaps fittingly for a position where less is required, he walked, driving in a run to give the Yankees a 1-0 lead. After the Red Sox finally got the third out with Blomberg at third base, he found that old habits die hard.

"When the inning ended, I was waiting for somebody to run out there and throw me my glove," he recalled in his memoir. "Dick Howser, our third-base coach, told me to come sit next to him on the bench. I was so used to playing in the field that I had forgotten that as the designated hitter I was going to spend a lot of time on the bench."

On that cold and windy New England afternoon, Blomberg went into the clubhouse and enjoyed some hot chocolate while listening to the game on the radio.

He finished 1-for-3 in a game the Yankees lost 15-5, despite jumping out to a 3-0 lead. Blomberg's DH counterpart, Cepeda, went 0-for-6. There was another historic debut that day — the first Yankees game under the ownership of George Steinbrenner.

"One at-bat changed the game — and my life — forever," Blomberg wrote. "Some say the designated hitter rule screwed up the game, but I'd rather be associated with a controversial rule than be forgotten."

Forty reporters were at his locker after the game. "That was the first time I sensed that I was part of history," he observed. "Up until then, the significance of being major league baseball's first DH was totally lost on me."

'The Yiddish Yankee'

Although a young player, Blomberg had already made a big impact in New York with the city's Jewish fans — and with some high-profile Jews outside the Big Apple. But first he had to overcome some stereotypical expectations for Jewish boys.

"When I was a kid, most of my friends did not believe that a Jewish player could make it in the major leagues," he wrote in a chapter of his memoir called "The Yiddish Yankee."

"Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg had done it, but they were viewed as exceptions. My friends thought I was crazy for wanting to be a baseball player," and most of his Jewish friends planned to become doctors or lawyers.

The Yankees made him the No. 1 overall draft pick in 1967, and signed him to a $90,000 contract (about $810,000 in today's dollars), after Blomberg hit .472 his last year of high school. "I feel that Ronnie is the best pro prospect to come around in several years," gushed Yankees general manager Lee MacPhail.

Blomberg, who is from Atlanta, wrote that growing up in the South, he didn't have much of a Jewish identity until he came to New York, where Jewish fans made him feel welcome on and off the field: "I felt as if I were one of the chosen, simply because of how I was viewed and treated by the city's Jewish population … Every Jewish mother

in the world wanted to introduce me to her daughter, and each letter included a photograph."

He recalled eating at a Jewish deli called Roxy, and seeing customers reading Jewish newspapers. ("I had never even seen a Jewish paper before arriving in the Bronx.") And he wrote of meeting Koufax and Hank Greenberg, and receiving gifts from Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir.

After appearing in a handful of major league games in 1969, Blomberg had a breakout rookie season in '71, hitting .322 and slugging .477. But what stands out from that year was a meaningless game against the Cleveland Indians in late September on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. The Yankees were in fourth place and way out of contention, and as the sun sank in the sky, there was no end in sight of the game, which was tied 2-2 in the 9th inning.

With the announced crowd of 9,177 dwindling, Blomberg came up with runners on first and third and one out. He hit a ball over the center fielder's head to win the game — just in the nick of time.

"If the count had been 3-2 and the sun went down, I would have left for temple," a jubilant Blomberg shouted in the locker room.

"Wow. What a quote," wrote Gerald Eskenazi, the Jewish New York Times reporter covering that game, in a retrospective essay last year. "So he would have left the game to go to services? All the writers were scribbling on their notepads, and Blomberg looked as if he had just capped a World Series game. He was ecstatic. He was at that moment a Jewish ballplayer who had just won the right to go home and celebrate one of the most important holidays of his religion. I shared his excitement."

Another money quote from Blomberg after that game: "It's my day! Why do you think I did it? I knew sundown was coming."

The headline on the Times story the next day across the top of the page blared, "Blomberg Gives Yanks 3-2 Victory in Ninth and a Happy New Year."

And then the perfect subhead: "Sundown Kid hits deadline single."

Opinion

I'm a junior in high school. Why do I need to apologize for Israel?

By Anya Geist

Whether they are about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's proposed judicial reforms or an IDF raid in the West Bank, everyone has thoughts about Israel.

While I don't mind discussing Israel with my family, the conversations I have with my peers can be grating, the posts I see on social media are burdensome, and learning about student activism against Israel feels oppressive. Flyers at the college campuses I visit as a prospective student advocate for a Boycott Israel week. Some of my fellow classmates' profile pictures on social media show an outline of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza with a Palestinian flag overlaid on top.

Waves of opinion crash into me: Israel can't do this; let's stop Israel from doing that. It's berating and relentless, and too much. My own complicated relationship with Israel feels on display, poked and prodded by those around me. And for some reason, I end up apologizing for Israel.

"*It's not all Israelis*," I say. "*I'm sorry*."

I want to stop apologizing for Israel, however, because I'm not qualified to do that. I'm just an American high schooler —my family has lived in the United States for generations, and I've never visited the Jewish state. Yet, as a liberal teenage Jew, I still feel guilty about its actions.

My Jewish community in Worcester, Massachusetts, is strong, but it is small. There is something lonely about being the only Jewish student in a class learning about the Holocaust. When I have had opportunities to be surrounded by other Jews, including at sleep-away camp and Jewish youth programs, it is amazing how different it is. We are bound by similarity and camaraderie, having grown up with the same prayers, values and experiences. It feels safer and easier to confront the world's antisemites when I'm surrounded by people like me. There is a strength in our numbers.

In my mind, that is how Israel appears: a fantasy land, a place where I someday hope to visit. There, I imagine I could always have a home full of Jewish history, Jewish culture, and Jewish pride, far away from the painful hatred that infects the edges of my life. Israel is important to me because it represents an ideal where I am free from persecution and surrounded by my community.

But then I feel bad, because I know that Israel is not a utopia, and that the reality of the Jewish state is much more complicated. It is impossible not to hear about the

occupation: the Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories, the Palestinian civilians killed by Israeli soldiers. It hurts, because I cannot justify many of these acts, but they occur again and again in the place that I dream about, and are reported regularly on the news.

It hurts to hear about Israel doing things I disagree with, but it's not my place to say sorry because Israel isn't mine to apologize for. I have no influence over the actions of its military or its government. I don't control what it does.

I have grown up hearing stories of the discrimination and hatred my ancestors faced, from the pogroms to the Holocaust, and I continue to see those issues in my own life. Antisemitism lurks in American society — it hides in the words of a classmate, and in the comments of celebrities and politicians. It isn't bound by the political spectrum, either; while some far-right Americans in Charlottesville chant "Jews will not replace us," another American at an anti-Israel protest in Miami held a sign that said "Jesus was Palestinian, and you killed him, too."

I'm scared that people think I'm different because I'm Jewish, and that they believe this difference justifies hatred and violence. Antisemitism spreads quickly, and it is easy to feel alone, especially living in a city with not many Jews. When I see Kanye West spreading hatred of Jews on Twitter, or politicians using antisemitic stereotypes, I feel alone, targeted because of my identity. I want to imagine Israel is a haven from this hatred.

My relationship to Israel is unique and complex, influenced by my Judaism, my politics, and my values. In a messy, complicated way, Israel is important to me. I shouldn't feel the need to explain that importance.

I want to be entitled to my own complicated feelings about Israel, without feeling as though I must justify them to my classmates and those around me. I can feel happy about Israel, and I can feel sad, and those are my feelings.

I am not responsible for Israel. I cannot apologize for it. All I can do is be myself.

Culture

The real story behind Sammy Davis Jr.'s conversion to Judaism

By Beth Harpaz

Sammy Davis Jr. was a short and skinny Black man with one eye. His wife was white, his mother was Puerto Rican and he was a convert to Judaism. In the crass and racist world of mid-20th century comedy, he was a walking punchline, even in his own routines.

"When I move into a neighborhood, I wipe it out," was his standard self-deprecating gag. The line received knowing laughs in the 1950s and '60s when many towns forbade property sales to Blacks and Jews, and whites often fled when Black families moved into their neighborhoods.

Jokes by his fellow entertainers were crude. In a live skit at the Sands in Las Vegas in 1963, Dean Martin physically lifted Davis up (he weighed a mere 120 pounds) and said, "I'd like to thank the NAACP for this wonderful trophy." At a Friars Club roast, comedian Pat Buttram said that if Davis showed up in Buttram's home state of Alabama, folks "wouldn't know what to burn on the lawn."

Jewish comedians got their licks in, too. Milton Berle cross-dressed as Davis' white wife, May Britt, and sang, to the tune of "My Yiddishe Mama," "My Yiddish Mau-Mau," a reference to an anti-British rebellion in Kenya.

At another roast, Joey Bishop said he'd "never been so embarrassed" in his life as when he met Davis in synagogue. When the rabbi came in, Bishop said, "Sammy jumped up and hollered, 'Here come the judge!'"

This cringeworthy line was delivered by Davis himself in a show at the Copa: "I don't know whether to be shiftless and lazy, or smart and stingy."

Some of these jokes implied that it was preposterous for a Black man to convert to Judaism. But for Sammy Davis Jr., being Jewish "was the most logical thing in the world," historian Rebecca L. Davis told me. "Over and over again, he made this analogy between being Jewish and African American. He was very admiring of the Jewish millennia-long struggle against oppressors and overcoming all kinds of obstacles." He saw himself as "an outsider and very marginalized, and he could see in the Jewish experience a similarity that really drew him in emotionally."

Davis, a history professor at the University of Delaware (and no relation to Sammy), has done extensive research on the entertainer's conversion, his career and how he was perceived. Her article, "'These Are a Swinging Bunch of People': Sammy Davis, Jr., Religious Conversion, and the Color of

Jewish Ethnicity," appeared in the American Jewish History journal in 2016, and she included a chapter about him in her 2021 book, Public Confessions: The Religious Conversions That Changed American Politics. Her take is that Davis was not only one of the most successful entertainers of the 20th century despite the many racist barriers in his way, but that his Jewish faith was utterly genuine.

The fateful accident

Davis lost his eye when he crashed his car driving home to California from Las Vegas in November 1954. One of several stories about what sparked Davis' path to conversion originates with the aftermath of the accident. He wrote in his 1965 autobiography, Yes I Can, that his friends Tony Curtis, who was Jewish, and Janet Leigh, who was not, arrived at the hospital and Leigh gave him a religious medal with St. Christopher on one side and a Star of David on the other. "Hold tight and pray and everything will be all right," Leigh told him.

Davis later told Alex Haley in a Playboy interview that he gripped the object so tightly that the Star of David left a scar on his hand, "like a stigmata." He took it as a sign that he should convert.

Davis also felt that he owed his career to a Jewish man, Eddie Cantor, who ironically had been one of vaudeville's best-known blackface performers; Cantor's act earned him a spot with the Ziegfeld Follies. Decades later, Cantor gave Davis his first big break, a solo televised appearance on the Colgate Comedy Hour in 1952, and became a father figure to him. "He saw Cantor's Jewishness as part of what made Cantor a good person," said Rebecca Davis.

In another version of how his car accident led to his conversion, Sammy Davis said that a mezuzah Cantor gave him had mistakenly been left behind in a hotel room the day of the crash. That story transformed the mezuzah "into a talisman," Rebecca Davis observed, another signpost on the road to his conversion.

Identifying as a Jew

In his memoir, Sammy Davis recalled Rabbi Max Nussbaum, of Temple Israel in Hollywood, telling him, "We cherish converts, but we neither seek nor rush them." But he began to publicly identify as Jewish before formally converting. In 1959 he refused to film scenes for the movie Porgy and Bess on Yom Kippur, while Ebony ran a photo of him holding Everyman's Talmud.

He also repeatedly compared the oppression of Jews to that of African Americans. In his 1989 book, Why Me?, he wrote that he was "attracted by the affinity between the Jew and the Negro. The Jews had been oppressed for three thousand years instead of three hundred but the rest was very much the same." When he visited the Wailing Wall in 1969, he said Israel was his "religious home."

The reception from Black audiences

American Jews by and large loved him, and his reception in the Jewish press, including the Forward, was also positive, Rebecca Davis said. But it was more complicated for Black media. On the one hand, she said, he was "this exemplar of Black success, very

wealthy, very famous, very successful" in an era of rampant racism.

On the other hand, there was "confusion and anger" about why — as a prominent Black activist who joined marches, raised money and was the United Negro College Fund's largest donor — Sammy Davis so often connected the civil rights cause to Judaism. While there were a "disproportionate number of Jews who were passionate about civil rights and were willing to put their personal safety on the line to stand up for civil rights," at the same time, Jews were part of a "broader American culture that saw African Americans as inferiors. That was the prevailing cultural norm among white people in the 1950s," Rebecca Davis said. Other critics felt that he had converted to ingratiate himself with whites as a way to get ahead.

And when he "let himself be the joke" as part of the Rat Pack — a loose ensemble of performers that included Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra and Peter Lawford — that "really angered a lot of African Americans who saw him more as performing for white audiences than for Black audiences."

He formally converted with Britt shortly before their wedding in 1960. She was as serious about it as he was, making sure, even after they were divorced, that their children went to Hebrew school and that their son was bar mitzvahed.

Disinvited from JFK's inauguration

But their marriage also resulted in one of the most painful episodes of his life, when he was disinvited from John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration. The Democratic coalition that elected JFK included Southern white Democrats, and they did not want a Black man married to a white woman performing at the celebration. "They forced Davis out," Rebecca Davis said. "He was so stung by that. Here he was on stage and on film with Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra and the biggest stars of the day, and they all got to go to the inauguration, but he didn't."

That rejection helps explain Davis' subsequent embrace of Richard Nixon. "Nixon, who was politically very devious, figured he could use Sammy Davis as a token African American supporter by overdoing it and inviting him to sleep in the Lincoln bedroom," Rebecca Davis said. That made him the first Black man to spend the night as a guest in the White House.

Some African Americans saw Davis' alignment with Nixon and the Republicans as a betrayal. Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier stopped returning his phone calls, Rebecca Davis wrote, and a year or two after he performed at the 1972 Republican National Convention, he was booed at an event organized by Jesse Jackson.

He responded to the boos by saying, "I get it. I understand. But I need you to know, I always did it my way. It's the only way I've got," Rebecca Davis said. "Then he sang 'I've Gotta Be Me,' and they gave him a standing ovation."

A steadfast Jew until the end

His third wife, Altovise, was a churchgoer, but Sammy Davis remained a steadfast Jew until the day he died. Everything he said about Judaism "was said with the utmost sincerity," Rebecca Davis said. "He never once looked back and said, 'Oh, that was just a phase I was going through.' And he never talked about it in terms of his career.

He only talked about it as something that spoke to him on a deep level."

Davis died of throat cancer in 1990 at age 64. Sinatra, Berle, Liza Minnelli, Stevie Wonder, Dionne Warwick and many other celebrities were among thousands of mourners who backed up traffic for 8 miles en route to the funeral at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in LA. Rabbi Allen Freehling presided at the service, but the eulogy was given by Jesse Jackson.

"To love Sammy was to love Black and white, Black and Jew," he said, "and to embrace the human family."

The service also included one last standing ovation for Davis, when they played a recording of – what else? – "I've Gotta Be Me."

Trader Joe's has brand-new matzo. Here's what you can do with it

By Mira Fox

It can be hard to find kosher-for-Passover foods. My local grocery stores usually have matzo — but it's never kosher for Passover. Yes, even in Brooklyn! I know, I know, I am shocked by it every year.

But now, Trader Joe's, the grocery store beloved for its fun snack products and aloha shirts, is launching its own matzo brand. And thankfully, Daddy TJ's did their research, and the product, which is made in Israel, is going to be certified kosher for Passover, meaning anyone who lives near a Trader Joe's will have access to kosher-for-Passover goods. Once they're on shelves at least; so far, the matzo is not even on the website, though a rep confirmed its existence.

(You also may not live near a store; Trader Joe's tends to only open stores in locations with a high average household income and population, and there are big gaps. When I used the company's store locator to try to find a location in Missoula, Montana — a university town — the closest location was in Spokane, Washington, a three-hour drive away.)

This isn't the first time Trader Joe's has sold matzo; they previously carried Holyland matzo, which was also kosher-for-Passover. But this is the first time they've sold matzo under their own brand. (Thankfully, we were spared any cutesy-yet-questionable branding like Trader José's, though the chain did once sell bagels branded as Trader Josef's.)

Trader Joe's often partners with third-party manufacturers — sometimes with big, recognizable names — to make products sold under their own brand, often at a cheaper price, and some online sleuths have traced back some of the manufacturers. Has Trader Joe's now partnered with Holyland to create its matzo? Both are imported from Israel, after all. We may never know; the company refuses to share information about who is making their products.

But Trader Joe's has been importing kosher products from Israel and beyond for years. So we've come up with some fun toppings and Passover treats made from ingredients you can find at Trader Joe's.

A disclaimer: Trader Joe's has plenty of kosher products, but doesn't offer many products that are certified kosher-for-Passover — beyond the matzo, of course. Obviously, I could've kept this to things that don't need certification, like fresh produce, but where's the fun in that? I've done my best to avoid chametz, but use your discretion.

A tangy twist on the matzo pizza

Have you ever had a salad pizza? It's a wonderful invention, pairing the richness of pizza with the refreshing crunch and acidity of fresh salad on top. So fire up your toaster oven and make a matzo pizza, however you like it, and pile on some bagged arugula or romaine, drizzle on some olive oil, and top it with some of Trader Joe's feta imported from Israel.

Garlic matzo

The Trader Joe's Garlic Spread — a riff on the Lebanese condiment *toum* made from garlic emulsified with lemon juice and salt — is, in my humble opinion, one of the most delicious things known to man. If you're having some bread withdrawal on Passover, maybe spread some matzo with butter and the *toum*, and do your best to imagine it's garlic bread.

A matzo mille-feuille

Trader Joe's is one of the most reliable options for frozen mango. It seems like a perfect, if untraditional, filling for a mille-feuille, a form of pastry that involves layers of puff-pastry, usually with fruit and cream piped in between.

You could improvise a little riff on the forbidden patisserie by stacking matzo pieces with pastry cream and some sweet mango chunks — defrosted — or even throw in some mascarpone for richness. Maybe crumble some freeze-dried berries in to flavor the cream. Trader Joe's even offers a "sweet cannoli cream" dip that you could sub in for the pastry cream, but the reviews are meh.

Matzo ice cream sandwich

Trader Joe's has plenty of fun ice cream flavors, and a horchata flavor caught my eye. Like the matzo, it's a limited edition. Admittedly, matzo is no real stand-in for a cookie, but try dipping two pieces in chocolate to jazz them up, scoop some horchata ice cream in between and put it in the freezer to set. Drink with coffee or even actual horchata. (If horchata isn't your thing, try an ube ice cream, which is a vibrant purple and has the slight nutty flavor of the namesake yam.)

To avert extinction, the gefilte fish I loved had to evolve

By Yona Eichenbaum

For me, just saying the words “gefilte fish” was a portal to another time and place. To my childhood and my parents and their history. But with that generation almost gone, gefilte fish was losing its luster, often politely described as an acquired taste. I worried about extinction, imagining a future where even the words would disappear from our lexicon, the portal closed.

My parents, Holocaust survivors from Poland, hardly spoke of their past. What little I knew, I learned from our dinner table. Gefilte fish was in the pantheon of revered foods resurrected from their vanished world, Rosh Hashanah and Passover unthinkable without a platter of homemade fish passed around the table.

I wondered if, like the gene that makes cilantro taste delicious, there’s a gene that could make you love gefilte fish. But if there was one, I feared mine had mutated. I loved eating gefilte fish, but the smell of it cooking made me gag. It did as a child, and I never outgrew it. I remember the smell of boiling fish that permeated every inch of our small apartment in Montreal. I gagged waking up, rushing to raise my bedroom windows in a futile effort to freshen the air.

To make her fish, my mother bolted a medieval grinding device to the countertop and pushed raw chunks of pike, carp, whitefish, and onion through the top. As she cranked the handle, the mixture was extruded into a bowl.

She worked by instinct, tasting raw bits of the mixture, while adding salt, pepper and sugar. Satisfied with the flavor, she shaped small handfuls into ovals, and gently lowered them into a pot of simmering water. There, they bobbed with carrots and glassy-eyed fish heads that flavored the broth and symbolized good fortune, especially important at Rosh Hashanah. Arranged on a platter, each piece of fish was crowned with a slice of cooked carrot. The broth was poured into a bowl to cool and gel in the fridge alongside the fish.

At dinner, my mother placed fish and a dollop of gelled broth on everyone’s plate, while crimson beet horseradish — the bright yin to the fish’s quiet yang — was passed around the table. She beamed, reminding me that not everyone’s broth gelled like hers. I think it was her way of celebrating a small triumph in a life too often defined by loss.

Her fish remains my gold standard, its salty-sweet balance a terroir of where you came from in Poland. For my mother, too sweet was a deal breaker, rendering the

meal beyond redemption when we were guests. Going home, she could only muster a sigh, “Such sweet fish…”

After my children were born, my parents celebrated holidays with us in Chicago. Before that first trip, the question of gefilte fish loomed large. I vetoed my mother’s original idea: fish and broth packed into checked airplane luggage. Horrified, I pleaded, “What about lost luggage? Delays? Would you risk poisoning your grandchildren?”

I proposed assembling the ingredients. The fishmonger would grind the fish. She would do the rest. To protect her grandchildren, she agreed.

Her Chicago premiere opened to rave reviews from guests and family. But I’d forgotten about the gag-inducing pot of boiling fish. I raced around opening windows, slamming bedroom doors shut, desperate to avoid beds redolent of boiled fish.

Holidays played out that way for years. But as my parents grew older, traveling consumed more energy. We needed a new plan. With Passover a few months away, I began researching recipes. Unlike other beloved dishes, I wasn’t trying to replicate my mother’s gefilte fish. I hoped for something delicious that could be made without opening every window. Something more evolved for survival in the New World.

Leafing through The New York Times Passover Cookbook, a halibut and salmon gefilte fish terrine caught my eye, its introduction irresistible: “This recipe is from Ellen Goodrich, one of the five thousand Jews who live in Alaska (the ‘Chosen Frozen’ as they call themselves). The fish is baked in a bundt pan and unmolded, for a festive look.”

Alaska! Salmon and halibut. Baked not boiled. And brightened by lemon juice, bits of carrot and dill — so totally New World! Thank you, Chosen Frozen.

A month before Passover, I did a trial run. The recipe required multiple appliances and a morning’s worth of work. I didn’t gag once. I was hopeful.

Holding my breath, I inverted the bundt pan over a platter. A moment later, a sculpted terrine, its coral blush punctuated by a mosaic of carrot and dill, greeted me. Who knew gefilte fish could be gorgeous? I hoped it tasted as good as it looked.

It did. But a few tweaks were in order. I consulted my friend, Wendy, an excellent cook and gefilte fish lover. Bite after bite, we deconstructed flavors to optimize the recipe.

Feeling confident, I called my mother with the news, “This Passover, I don’t want you to work so hard. I’ll make the fish.”

“You don’t know how to make my fish.”

“It’s not your fish. It’s a recipe from the Jews of Alaska.”

“Jews live in Alaska?”

“They do.”

“Jews who know how to make gefilte fish?”

“Yes. They make it with halibut and salmon baked in a bundt pan.”

Silence. An expert baker, she was trying to imagine fish baked like a coffee cake.

“It’s not too sweet?”

“No, it’s perfect. If you hate it, we won’t have it again.”

“Fine.”

I knew she didn’t mean it.

Arriving from the airport, she peered at the terrine in the fridge. Unable to imagine how it would taste, she admitted it was beautiful. A good start.

At the seder, I anxiously brought the platter into the dining room. The dramatic terrine drew admiring comments. I served my parents first, waiting anxiously as my mother, and father — the planet’s least adventurous eater — took a bite. “Not too sweet?” I asked.

“Delicious!” my mother exclaimed.

My father asked for another slice. I told him about the fish. He was intrigued by the back story: Jews in Alaska, surviving in what he understood to be an untamed, beautiful wilderness. Still being Jews. Still eating gefilte fish — albeit a different kind. Where he came from, this was a story with a happy ending.

Many years have passed since that night. I still hold my breath inverting the bundt pan over the platter. When the terrine emerges intact, I text a photo to my family — my signal that the holiday is imminent.

Passover is only weeks away. Young grandchildren will be at our seder table. “Gefilte fish” will be heard as the platter is passed around the table. At least for now, the portal remains open.