

WEEKEND READS

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Forward

A Neil Diamond show heads to Broadway. Just don't call it a jukebox musical

By Jim Sullivan

Four years ago, Neil Diamond and Bob Gaudio, two longtime friends and colleagues, were having a chat. Gaudio was one of the original Four Seasons and had produced six of Diamond's albums. Diamond, who'd released his last album of original material, "Melody Road" in 2014, had seen "Jersey Boys," the jukebox musical based upon the life and career of Frankie Valli and his Four Seasons mates. Diamond really liked it, and he was in the mood to look back.

"One day Neil said, 'Hey, what about doing one about my stuff?'" recalled Ken Davenport, Gaudio's friend and a two-time Tony winner himself. "And Bob said, 'We can make that happen.'" And they did, with Davenport and Gaudio as co-lead producing partners of "The Neil Diamond Musical: A Beautiful Noise."

Boston, then Broadway

The show is playing a pre-Broadway run at Boston's Emerson Colonial Theatre through Aug. 7. It was supposed to open long before now, but COVID-19 knocked it off course. (And, actually, another wave of the COVID subvariant forced the company to scrap 11 of the Boston preview performances in June.)

But now it's finally Broadway-bound. Previews start Nov. 2 and the opening is slated for Dec. 4 at the Broadhurst Theatre, directed by two-time Tony-winner Michael Mayer.

There are two Neil Diamonds in the show. Older, or current, Neil is played by Mark Jacoby, 75, and younger, performing-era Neil is played by an electrifying Will Swenson, 49. Yes, there are songs — plenty of them and they're energetic and imaginatively choreographed. But the framework of the musical has a reluctant old Neil entering

psychotherapy to unearth the roots of his long-simmering depression and low self-esteem.

‘This is a bio-musical’

Diamond, who was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 2018, didn’t care for the designation of “jukebox musical,” which sounded vaguely dismissive and formulaic to him. Neither did Davenport.

“I don’t like that term,” said Davenport. “Here’s the thing: This is a bio-musical. We are using the songs to tell the story of his life. When we met Neil Diamond, he said he wanted to do a musical about his life with the music being the backdrop and the foundation. And also, when was the last time you went into a bar and saw a jukebox and it was all one artist?” The “jukebox musical” label “doesn’t make sense,” he added. “I don’t think the term qualifies for musicals based on preexisting catalogs.”

Before the curtain rises, there’s a fanfare, a big triumphant blast of Diamond’s music and a voice-over, introducing “The No. 1 recording artist in the world!” You expect to see the curtain lift and young Neil jumping right in, strutting his “Hot August Night” stuff, maybe opening with “Brother Love’s Traveling Salvation Show.” Nope. What happens is Jacoby and the therapist played by Linda Powell stare at each other in a terse, uneasy silence.

A psychotherapy journey

“This isn’t working,” old Neil grumbles. “I don’t like to talk about myself.” But Diamond’s reluctant psychotherapy journey is about to commence.

Soon, “A Beautiful Noise” becomes a weave of old Neil looking back at young Neil, sometimes ruefully, sometimes with pride, and young Neil pursuing his life and career. He’s rejected, then accepted; he starts to play in a New York folk club; he signs a record deal with a mob-run record company. He becomes hugely popular, tours for decades and still feels lonely. Then, he faces the declining years. There are marriages and divorces in that mix, too, and a fair amount of internal and external conflict.

“It’s all based on the conversations the book writer had with Neil himself,” said Davenport. “That was the process, with Neil and Anthony McCarten, who’s very well-versed in this type of material. He wrote ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ and ‘The Theory of Everything’ and he specializes in biographical drama, musical or otherwise. All the conversations came out of that. Neil read the early drafts and he helped to make it so that what we’re seeing is a real accurate portrayal of himself. What’s amazing about Neil is he showed it, warts and all.”

For McCarten, it was an easy decision to join the team: He grew up surrounded by Diamond's music, the singer being one of his mother's favorites.

The Jewish Elvis

Diamond, who is now 81, was a songwriter before he was a public singer. His "I'm a Believer," covered by The Monkees, was the springboard to his career, but he thought he was too shy and reserved to perform. Eventually, though, dressed in sparkly, sequined costumes, he flipped that self-image around and became known as "the Jewish Elvis." ("I love that expression!" said Davenport.) But the offstage depression, the "clouds" as Diamond put it, came back and hovered when the stage went dark and real life resumed.

One major attitudinal clash was with Neil's first wife Jayne Posner (Jessie Fisher) who wanted to celebrate what he called "the little things" – i.e., the hits. He was always looking ahead to the "big picture," unable to savor the success at the moment as it happened, fearing more moments wouldn't come. And, as his fame increased — as his paid entourage swelled — Diamond found more comfort with his "road family" than his real family, a tension not unfamiliar to stars of his stature. When you're loved by thousands night after night, how do you come home to only one?

The inspiration for his songs

If you didn't know it before, you'll learn during this musical that many of Diamond's songs had deeply personal roots. "Coming to America" was sparked by his family's emigration from Europe to America; "Song Sung Blue" was about depression; "Solitary Man," about isolation; and "You Don't Bring Me Flowers," inspired by the deterioration of his second marriage to Marcia Murphy (Robyn Hurder).

Then, near the end, there's the show-stopper, "I Am ... I Said," performed by both Swenson and Jacoby. That song came directly out of Diamond's earlier therapy experience. In 2008, Diamond told MOJO magazine that it "was consciously an attempt on my part to express what my dreams were about, what my aspirations were about and what I was about."

"When I first read the script," Jacoby said, "my gut reaction was 'This is a life, you're just describing a life.' You reach adulthood, your prime, and then there is a decline into the later years. Most people, whether they're people of eminence like Neil Diamond or more ordinary people, for lack of a better word, that's what happens. We're not at our peak when we're 80 years old and that's a big thing for everybody, to accept declining strength, declining abilities. Everybody who reaches old age can say, 'I can't do that

anymore.’ And even if it’s predictable — it’s normal, it’s understandable — it’s still ‘Oh my god, I can’t do that anymore!’”

A simple man, lacking in artifice

Diamond came to the first reading of the musical in January 2020, Davenport said, and gave them some notes. He watched video of workshops and saw rehearsals at points along the way.

For Jacoby, one of the more surreal or meta moments came in rehearsal, with the real Neil watching him play old Neil, who in turn was watching Swenson play young Neil. “It was unlike anything else I’d ever done or thought about doing,” he said. “It was very strange to sit down at the rehearsal hall in New York and sitting 8 feet away is the person you are playing.”

As for input, Jacoby said, the team got feedback from Diamond’s “camp,” though “not directly from Neil. There was indirect input as far as the specific actor is concerned. His current wife [and manager Katie McNeil] is more or less his caretaker and she conveyed to the creative team the ideas that she would like to see emphasized or de-empathized.”

Jacoby, who has a palpable gravitas onstage, says his learning curve was far different from Swenson’s. “Neil Diamond was his father’s favorite male singer and composer and Will had a pretty good Neil Diamond impersonation in his bag of tricks well before this project was even thought of,” Jacoby said. “His performance is driven.”

Jacoby was more of a fan of Broadway musicals than pop music growing up, and was only vaguely familiar with Diamond’s music. Yes, he knew “Sweet Caroline,” but says “I didn’t have encyclopedic knowledge of his canon. I watched a bunch of interviews and performances.”

When they met, Jacoby says he found Diamond to be “very personable, very nice to be around, a very simple man. I don’t mean simple as in limited intelligence. For all the gaudiness of the performance style he developed, he’s pretty simple, fundamental, lacking in artifice.”

A secular life

The Jewish aspects of Diamond’s life are in the mix, but “Neil has had more or less a secular life, ethnically speaking,” Jacoby said. “In reading about him and studying him, he doesn’t make a big thing about his ethnic Judaism. I don’t believe him to be religiously Jewish.” Emphasizing Diamond’s Jewishness, Jacoby added, “has not been

discussed except for the context of what is actually in the script. I think that I'm Jewish enough that I don't have to focus on it."

What Diamond learns over the course of the show — his psychotherapy sessions interwoven with the belted-out songs and dramatic sketches — has to do with what Jacoby calls "a classic therapy thing — where you come to realize the influence of your origins, your parentage. ... I may form relationships, I may have good times, but what I am is the influence of that, my parents."

What's likely to change between the out-of-town tryouts in Boston and the show on Broadway?

Probably not much. "There's a line in the theater," says Davenport, "that we're never done because we're live every night. So, we learn a lot. This is in the tradition of creating a musical. We listen to audiences and have our own instincts and we're able to go back in the laboratory. But we're very happy with the response we're getting, how it's working for us, and, frankly, Neil was very happy. The joke I've been saying is that when you've got a catalog like Neil's, it's not like we're going to rewrite the second act."

In Brooklyn race for Congress, a chorus of candidates condemns BDS

By Jacob Kornbluh

Almost all of the eight Democratic candidates vying for the right to represent Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan neighborhoods in Congress strongly denounced the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement during a candidate forum in Brooklyn on Tuesday.

Their stances on BDS and Israel matters to many Jewish voters, who represent about 22% of the 10th District, which includes the Borough Park and Park Slope neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Lower East Side and East Village in Manhattan. The primary is set for Aug. 23.

"I categorically denounce the BDS movement. It is anti-Zionist, it is antisemitic," said candidate Dan Goldman, former lead counsel for the House Democrats in the first impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump. "And let's make something really clear: It's not a First Amendment issue."

Some Palestinian activists have argued that those opposed to BDS have tried to quash their right to speak on the issue.

Omar Barghouti, the co-founder of the BDS Movement, has stated that the goal of BDS is to apply economic pressure on Israel to end its occupation of the West Bank and to abolish Israel as a Jewish state.

A 2021 Pew Research survey showed that American Jews overwhelmingly support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state living peaceably alongside a Jewish and democratic state of Israel. A recent poll showed that more Americans who have heard at least something about BDS oppose than support it.

"We disagree with a lot of things just like we disagree with democracy at home, but we must have unconditional support for Israel," Goldman, who is Jewish, said to applause.

The BDS supporter

Assemblywoman Yuh-Line Niou, who appeared virtually because she was exposed to a campaign staffer who tested positive for the coronavirus, sought to clarify her recent defense of the BDS movement.

“I share the movement’s commitment to human rights, equality and freedom for everyone in the region,” she said. “I do not support calls to oppose the BDS movement. At the same time, I do not always agree with every single statement that’s made or all of its demands, nor do I embrace all of its tactics.”

“No movement is perfect, just like no person is perfect,” she said.

But Niou, who has the backing of the Working Families Party and a number of officials affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, refused to say whether she herself would or would not engage in boycotts or commit to traveling to Israel as a member of Congress.

“I personally have not participated,” she said of BDS boycotts. “But I think that it’s a movement that needs to be heard.”

The anti-BDS chorus

Rep. Mondaire Jones, a first-term congressman from the Hudson Valley who moved to the redrawn district to run for reelection, said he has a long record of opposing BDS, going back to the time he was in college, and said he has the courage to forcefully advocate for a two-state solution.

He recalled that on his first trip to Israel earlier this year — sponsored by the liberal pro-peace group J Street — he confronted then-Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, “looked him in the eyes” and said, “There’s an entire generation of young American Jews that has some real issues with what your government has been doing.”

Former Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman said she is “totally opposed to the BDS movement” and that she is a strong advocate for human rights. Holtzman, 80, told the crowd she fondly remembers the day Israel was created in 1948 when she and her twin brother sat on their grandmother’s lap listening to radio coverage. “I never want you to forget this day as long as you live,” she recalled her grandmother telling them. “And so I haven’t,” Holtzman added, noting her role in building the feminist movement in Israel.

City Councilwoman Carlina Rivera said she doesn’t support “BDS policy” because it doesn’t advance the ultimate goal of a peaceful two-state solution. “We can have a safe and secure Israel and, of course, a free and independent Palestinian state,” she said.

Rivera traveled to Israel in 2018 with colleagues on a trip sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

Assemblymember Jo Anne Simon echoed those remarks and said she'd love to visit Israel.

The other Jewish candidates – Brian Robinson, a small business owner, and Maud Maron, a former public defender — also expressed their opposition to BDS, declaring that anti-Zionism is antisemitism.

The candidates also addressed the rise in antisemitic attacks against Jews in New York and shared their views on the government's role in enforcing secular education standards in yeshivas, as well as their favorite bagels and kosher eateries in the district.

The forum was hosted by the Forward in partnership with Congregation Beth Elohim, a large Reform synagogue in the district, New York Jewish Agenda, and the Jewish Community Relations Council of NY. It was co-moderated by this reporter and Rabbi Rachel Timoner, the senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Elohim.

Of secret hookups and chocolate ice cream: Inside the Israel teen-tour COVID hotel

By Elijah Marche

There were two known hookup spots in the COVID-19 hotel near the Israeli coastline where I and other teenagers who contracted the dreaded virus during Reform movement summer trips bided our time until testing negative.

One was behind a building. The other was any vacant room in the Hadassim Youth Village, near Netanya. Those rooms lacked air conditioning or mattress covers. But when you put a bunch of bored teenagers in a small space, neither such minor discomforts nor any amount of congestion or sore throats will stop them from making out. I never went into any vacant room without knocking.

The rules of the “hotel” included “no sneaking out,” but almost every night I was there, we’d all nonetheless sneak out of our respective rooms to find our friends. We were not really afraid of being caught because it’s hard to punish someone who doesn’t have privileges you can revoke.

It was about a third of the way into my month-long summer tour of the holy land when I saw the second line show up on my mandatory daily rapid test. By that point, about 15 of the 79 kids in my group — all rising juniors from Habonim Dror summer camps across North America — had already dragged their virus-ridden selves to the so-called COVID hotel. My positive came in the parking lot of a music festival in Tel Aviv, where I then had to wait about three hours for the COVID-19 taxi driver.

Stressed about all I’d miss over the coming week, I arrived to find friends from my group sitting around playing cards. They were a lot happier to see me than I was to see them.

Hadassim, which was set up to house refugee children after World War II and now is a boarding school for troubled youth, had been pre-booked by the National Federation of Temple Youth, the Reform movement umbrella organization that oversees summer Israel trips that this year enrolled about 600 kids. It looked somewhat like a juvenile detention facility from the outside and a psych ward from the inside.

The second I entered I was greeted by a young man named Yotam, who walked along the cold, sticky floors barefoot; I don't think I ever saw Yotam in socks, let alone shoes, during my stay.

"Welcome to the COVID hotel, the most mediocre place on earth!" he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. Yotam was the big brother of the hotel. He made us feel like we'd known him for years by playfully making fun of us and showing genuine interest in our lives.

When I first arrived, Yotam sat me down in the hangout room — a bomb shelter that had been filled with board games and sofas — to go over the rules of the place, which included "no boys in the girls' rooms with a closed door and vice versa." Midway through, an older woman named Robin entered the room.

Robin, a longtime educator with the Union for Reform Judaism, had been parachuted in from New Jersey to oversee the COVID hotel. She introduced herself by offering me leftover Shabbat chicken, which she brought out of the fridge before I accepted.

Robin was the bubbe of the hotel. She taught us how to do our laundry, gave us throat lozenges and of course worried about us all getting enough food.

My seven days at Hadassim followed a similar loose, substanceless pattern. After getting showered and dressed, we'd try to find a card game to play or a random topic to gossip or argue about. Often, it was rumors about the hookups that had happened the night before.

One of the best things about the hotel was our food situation. The only time we ate as a group was on Shabbat, when we all helped set the table and said the blessings together as we sat down. It felt like we were a family, even though we were a family for the dullest of reasons.

On weekdays, breakfast was all-you-can-eat cereal and fruit. For lunch and dinner, we'd order food for delivery off an Uber Eats-type app. Which meant that every 10 minutes between noon and 8:30 p.m., somebody's meal would arrive.

We all quickly found our favorites. There was one girl who ordered nothing but chocolate ice cream for every meal, landing her the nickname “Chocolate Ice Cream Girl.”

The whole experience kind of felt like a retirement home; we just sat around eating and playing cards. Characters like Chocolate Ice Cream Girl were the highlight of the hotel. She spent most of her time by herself on a bench eating out of her tub.

We’d often huddle around in self-pity and look at pictures of the tour we were missing, posted on social media by our friends who didn’t have COVID-19. It was only when I stopped looking at their trip that I was able to appreciate what I’d been given alongside my positive test: the rare privilege of having to do absolutely nothing.

Even though they are ostensibly vacation, these Israel tours have intense, tightly packed schedules. At the COVID hotel, I had the exciting opportunity of having no exciting opportunities.

At the COVID hotel, I never felt the stress of having to try to find something fun to do, which was freeing. It was a vacation from the stress of vacation.

‘You grab ahold of your people’: Former MLB star Ian Kinsler leads a new team in Israel

By Hillel Kuttler

RAANANA, Israel – For the last game of the 2017 season, Detroit Tigers manager Brad Ausmus assigned his second baseman, Ian Kinsler, to take over for him. Kinsler jumped at the opportunity to lead. The unconventional move gave the player his first shot as a manager.

“Brad was trying to pass on the torch then,” Kinsler said on a visit to a baseball field here in mid-July.

The Tucson-raised Kinsler is once again a manager — this time for Israel.

A four-time All Star, two-time Gold Glove winner, and member of the 2018 World Series champion Boston Red Sox, Kinsler was one of Major League Baseball’s top players during a 14-year career running through 2019. He now follows Ausmus — who, like Kinsler, is Jewish — by managing Israel’s team at the World Baseball Classic, among the sport’s top international tournaments.

Kinsler, 40, is now preparing to lead a squad that will likely be heavy with American Jewish players.

This is the second trip to Israel for Kinsler, who now lives in Texas. He came in early 2020 to complete paperwork to become a citizen so that he could play for Israel in the 2021 Olympics in Tokyo.

The visits forge a connection, “to my heritage, my past, my father’s side of the family,” Kinsler said during a break from watching the Israeli and American baseball teams

compete in the Maccabiah Games last week. The field was newly dedicated in memory of Ezra Schwartz, an aspiring baseball player from Sharon, Massachusetts, killed in a 2015 terrorist attack.

“To come to Israel, to come to Jerusalem, to see everything here that’s still standing, to touch it and feel it — it definitely brings out the emotions that [I] never experienced before. Every year, those feelings get a little bit deeper, a little bit stronger,” he said.

“You grab ahold of your people and you hold tight.”

Kinsler’s parents, wife and two children came with him on the trip, which was arranged by the Israel Association of Baseball. They toured Jerusalem and the Galilee, visited residents of communities hit by Gaza-launched rockets and attended the Maccabiah’s opening ceremony, where Kinsler was a torch-bearer.

The eating was good too.

“I love the food here,” Kinsler said. “There’s nothing better than eating some of the pita with all of the options. Breakfast, lunch or dinner, I’m all in.”

‘Intense’

As for Kinsler’s managerial style, his father, Howard Kinsler, said the players on Team Israel should expect grit and seriousness — and high expectations.

“He was one of the most intense baseball players on the field,” Howard Kinsler said. “He’ll realize that not everyone has what he has. It’s going to be interesting to see how he [handles] that.”

Kinsler’s youth and commitment to the sport made him an attractive candidate for manager, said IAB President Jordy Alter.

“We wanted somebody with a major-league feel,’ Alter said. “We got to see he’s a very focused individual. Everything is done with thought. He’s a serious guy. He’s an analyst, as far as I’m concerned. He’s very, very focused on professionalism.”

The American immigrants like Alter who oversee Israel’s baseball program got to know Kinsler after luring him out of retirement to play in Tokyo. In 2017, Kinsler played for the U.S. team that won the WBC championship.

That year, defying expectations, Israel broke through with a sixth-place finish. Kinsler said he and his American teammates “were all paying attention” as Israel advanced in the tournament and “made a huge impact on the world of baseball.”

Recruiting

That performance, and its presence at the Tokyo Olympics, has drawn attention from Jewish major leaguers. Kinsler announced here that San Francisco Giants outfielder Joc Pederson committed to play for the WBC club. Pederson is recruiting other Jewish major leaguers, Kinsler said.

A strong squad is needed to emerge from a group that includes powerhouse teams from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Venezuela.

Kinsler is now assembling a coaching staff and will “put together the most competitive roster we can,” he said.

Pederson is noteworthy as the first active MLB player ever to compete for Team Israel. Several former major leaguers, along with minor leaguers, collegians and a sprinkling of sabras, represented Israel at previous WBCs and in Tokyo.

Matan Sachs, a 16-year-old outfielder from Modiin who attended Kinsler’s hour-long clinic and conversation with the American, Canadian and Israeli Maccabiah baseball teams, figures that Kinsler can draw top Jewish major leaguers.

“His name can bring other stars, like Alex Bregman and Max Fried,” he said, citing the Houston Astros third baseman and the Atlanta Braves pitcher.

Fried has been among baseball’s best starters this season and was selected for last week’s All-Star Game in Los Angeles.

Ausmus and Kinsler, in Detroit together from 2014 to 2017, were a rarity in MLB history as a Jewish manager-and-player combination.

In his first managerial experience, Ausmus, a longtime major league catcher, guided Team Israel in its 2012 WBC debut, falling in the qualifying round.

Since taking the WBC job, Kinsler said, he’s consulted with Ausmus, a coach for the Oakland Athletics, and Gabe Kapler, who worked with Ausmus on the 2012 team and is Pederson’s manager with the Giants.

Said Kinsler: “You try to put the right people around you.”

I was up onstage with Bob Dylan at Newport the night he went electric

By Barry Goldberg and Dan Epstein

The 1965 Newport Folk Festival started out like a wonderful dream for me — and then it became a nightmare, and then it became a wonderful dream again.

We rolled into Newport Thursday, the first day of the festival. For a lot of the guys in the Butterfield Band, this was their first time away from Chicago. The festival was a major event for us, and Newport itself was just so beautiful. It was a gorgeous summer day, and everyone seemed to be singing, playing or just talking about music.

I quickly realized that I wasn't exactly dressed for the occasion. I was wearing my tapered pants and pointed shoes — the whole “cool Chicago jazz guy dating Playboy bunnies” thing, totally wrong for Newport. Everybody else was walking around in jeans and sandals; at one point, I caught a glimpse of Joan Baez running through the fields, beautiful and barefoot.

Inappropriate clothing aside, I was so excited to be there. Little did I know that my world was about to crumble.

When I met up with the Butterfield Band to rehearse our set, Paul Rothschild — the Elektra Records A&R guy who was going to produce the band's debut album — took one look at me and said to Paul Butterfield, “I don't hear keyboards with the band. I don't want him here.” And that was it. In one minute, I went from having the greatest time to being completely alone and having no gig. It just destroyed me.

I wanted to go home, but I couldn't. If I'd had the money for a plane or train or even bus ticket out of there, I would have been gone in an instant. Instead, I had to wait around for a couple of days so I could drive back to Chicago with the Butterfield guys. I was

stranded, which was horrifying because everybody else was grooving and having fun, and I was miserable because I'd been relieved of my duties. It was a real bummer.

I don't remember much from the next day or so of the festival, probably because I was in such a daze over my sudden rejection. But Saturday night, I found myself at a party with Michael Bloomfield and Bob Dylan. Bob had done a short acoustic performance at the festival that afternoon, which was what everybody expected from him, but now he was talking to Michael about getting a band together for his festival-closing performance Sunday — something people were definitely not expecting.

"I don't know if anyone's going to show up to play with me tomorrow night," I overheard him saying to Michael. "Al Kooper was supposed to come, but I don't know for sure that he'll be here, and I might need a band." Michael called me over and introduced me to Bob. "Barry's a great keyboard player," he said. "Hey, why don't you use the Butterfield Band to back you up?" "That's a great idea," Bob responded, and they went off together to discuss it.

To be honest, Bob's earlier folk stuff hadn't really been my kind of thing. I was not a peace-and-love, protest kind of guy. But "Like A Rolling Stone," which had just come out a month earlier, seemed a little cooler to me. See, Bob was a rock and roller at heart, just like we were. Bob grew up listening to Gene Vincent and Little Richard and Buddy Holly and all those great rock and rollers, just like Michael and I did.

Michael and I had a territorial and maybe even sartorial connection with Bob, too. We were three Jewish guys from the Midwest who had similar backgrounds, similar attitudes, and even the same clothes — when I met Bob at the party, he was wearing tapered pants and pointed boots, just like I was. Bob could tell we were cool, that we were at Newport to play music and not just to "make the scene." He knew we weren't putting him on some kind of folk-protest pedestal, either; if he wanted to play electric music to a folk festival crowd, that was fine by us.

Michael and Bob came back over to where I was standing. "Would you like to play with me?" Bob asked. "Are you kidding?" I said. "Of course!" And that was it. Bob Dylan, on the spur of the moment, had decided to form a gang, and decided that Michael and I had what it took to be part of it. And as soon as he invited me to play with him, it was like Newport went back into "wonderful dream" mode for me.

We did our soundcheck the next afternoon, and I was in heaven. I knew that Bob was taking the next step toward something new in his life and music, and it felt magical to be part of it. At one point during the soundcheck, he started playing "This Land Is Your Land" on the organ, and I sat down next to him and fell right in with him on the instrument.

It seemed symbolic for him to be playing that Woody Guthrie song while all these musicians were up there onstage with him, plugging in their electric instruments and finding their sound levels. It felt like he was saying, “This is where I’m going now. I respect everything you gave me, but we’re going to do something really radical now.”

Michael was on guitar, of course, and we had Jerome Arnold and Sam Lay from Butterfield on bass and drums. Al Kooper showed up during soundcheck, which gave us both piano and organ — a combination that would be popularized by The Band, Procol Harum and others in the next few years, but was still pretty unusual for the time. We went through the songs Bob wanted to play: “Maggie’s Farm,” “Like A Rolling Stone” and “Phantom Engineer,” later retitled “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry.”

It all sounded great, except Jerome wasn’t getting the changes on “Like A Rolling Stone”; he was a blues bass player, and that song was a little out of his comfort zone. “I can play bass for ‘Like A Rolling Stone,’” Al suggested. Jerome was cool with handing Al the bass for that song, and I took over from Al on the organ. It was all kind of spontaneous. Bob was wearing this great polka-dot shirt, and he just looked so cool and in control, even though we were all totally winging it.

In some ways, the soundcheck was just as intense as the set we’d play later that night. Peter Yarrow, who was on the festival board and was going to emcee the evening’s show, kept yelling at us to turn down. Every time Yarrow yelled at us, I could see Michael glaring back at him like, “Oh, just you wait, motherfucker. Just you wait.” He hated these pompous folk guys anyway, the pseudo-intellectual know-it-alls, and Yarrow was the epitome of all of that.

Albert Grossman, Bob’s manager, spent the whole soundcheck fighting with Alan Lomax. Lomax was famous for discovering and recording all these old folk and blues singers, and he hated the very idea of electric music being performed at a folk festival. Grossman was there to support his artist, and neither one of them was backing down. These two old hipster guys wound up rolling around on the ground, punching each other.

It was really bizarre. Yarrow was screaming at us, and Grossman and Lomax were down there fighting. I sensed that a battle line was being drawn, and we all were on a mission together. Bob was our leader, but the more uptight people were getting over what we were doing, the more I also saw that look in Michael’s eyes that said, “I’m just going to shove this down your throat.”

When we went onstage with Bob that night, I was terrified. I was used to playing blues clubs and bars and mafia joints, not festival stages in front of thousands of people.

The thing with me, though, is that I've always been terrified before going onstage. Playing the very first note after I get up there, that's the hardest part; but by the time I get to the second note, it's just automatic.

The magic was definitely there that night, for all of us, as soon as the lights went on and we saw Dylan coming out, all in black, with that Stratocaster strapped on. That was a statement in itself, but it was also so much more. You felt how important his presence was, and how important what he was doing was; you knew it had meaning.

I wasn't even aware that there was that much of a negative reaction from the crowd, to be honest. I mean, I wasn't deaf, but I heard the cheers mixing with the boos, and I knew that there were some people out there that dug what we were doing. The others weren't even listening; they were in shock, reacting to the moment and their feeling of betrayal. They were so angry that Bob was turning his back on the folkies, they couldn't get their heads around what he was doing. For years, Bob had done his folk thing, and now all of a sudden it signified the end of the folk era as they knew it. Bob's performance was closing that particular chapter, but he was also opening up a new one by creating folk-rock — an accomplishment that was more important than the crowd's reaction.

To me, the song that really came off well was "Like A Rolling Stone." Kooper's bass playing really made a difference on the bottom end, and Bob's vocal performance was really, really cool. When we played "Maggie's Farm," Michael responded to the boos by turning his amp all the way up; he started really burning, blasting them in the name of rock and roll. I heard later that Pete Seeger tried to cut the power with an ax, because he was angry that Michael's guitar was drowning out Bob's vocals, but if you listen to the tapes of the show, Bob's vocals are loud and clear. I knew Michael was playing a little too loud, but so be it. We were warriors on a mission to back up the leader of the gang.

By the time we finished our short set, the mixture of cheers and boos was even louder and more intense than it was when we started. Yarrow went up and told the crowd, "Bobby's going to come back onstage and play a song on acoustic," and Bob eventually got back out and played "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" by himself. But we didn't hang around for any of that. We had done our thing, and now it was time to pack up and go. I walked offstage that night feeling like a hero, and I didn't want anything to break that spell. I had done my thing with Bob, and that was more than I could have ever hoped for, to go from not being able to play at the festival to taking this momentous jump into the musical unknown. I knew that some kind of force, some kind of fate, some kind of thing had come along and touched me, and I wasn't going to fuck with it.

Volunteering for a Jewish burial society showed me how to live a more sacred life

By Hannah Lebovits

The first time I touched a dead body was in a sanitized room inside a Dallas funeral home. I was stationed next to Ana's toenails, with a small toothpick and a Q-tip. While firmly holding onto her foot, I silently cleaned away any dead skin, dirt or debris that might be found under her nails or between her toes.

Though Ana's primary residence was several hours from the city, and she was not affiliated with any local synagogues, a burial plot in Dallas had her name on it. In Dallas, Ana's family requested a Jewish burial service, including a plain, pine coffin and a ritual cleansing. The funeral home alerted the local Chevra Kadisha, the organization that prepares bodies in accordance with Jewish law, to perform the tahara or purification rituals, and, along with four other women, I volunteered.

Jewish death and Jewish life seem vastly different to me since joining the Chevra. Jewish life gets more and more public every day. Last year, an online Jewish organization paid for prime advertisement space in Times Square to fight antisemitism. Netflix offers Jewish experiences on demand, including the nuanced, scripted "Shtisel," and the unabashed, reality-TV show "My Unorthodox Life." Meanwhile, on Instagram, TikTok and Twitter, one can find countless accounts dedicated to informing the public about Jewish life and interfaith experiences.

Yet, while Jewish life seems to be increasingly visible, Jewish death rituals remain private, intimate and authentic. Narcissism and self-promotion are left at the entrance to the funeral home. Inside the tahara room, individual opinions, personal comfort and even your schedule are entirely secondary to the needs of the deceased. The experience is calming and comforting specifically because it is not about you. It's a lesson for all of us who consider ourselves to be representatives of and in service to Jewish life.

If we can take a few moments to disconnect from the noise and selfishness of everyday living and instead focus on accountability — particularly in our interactions with those who may never repay us — we can maintain a certain purity of action in living an authentic Jewish life.

Prior to walking into the tahara room, I helped to prepare the casket. The first thing we realized, upon opening the box, was that there were not enough wood shavings to properly prepare her casket. Ana's head was to be propped up on a pillow filled with wood shavings, and her body to lie on a sheet covering an arched bed filled with more wood shavings. We laid out the burial shrouds across the aron (casket) and waited for a funeral home manager to find more of this important material, but no additional wood could be found.

We asked her to keep some on hand for the future, set up what we had and hurried into the tahara room, unwilling to make the body wait for even another second.

After cleaning Ana's nails and checking her body for any open wounds, I picked up a pot full of water. Starting with Ana's hair, I poured the water from the pot onto her body as another member of the Chevra Kadisha washed her with a simple white linen cloth. We made our way down the right side of her body as another pair of women did the same on the left. Her body was cold to the touch.

Towels covered her body, and we lifted those towels only to reach a specific spot. Once the area was cleaned of any residual dirt or blood, we covered it again. Any bleeding that we had found during the process would be collected and buried in the casket with her.

I watched as her head remained elevated the entire time. Ana could be seen yet she herself could not see, and as such, we kept her face and eyes covered, out of respect.

Before washing Ana, I washed my own hands. In line with the ritual practice, I poured water from a cup onto my right hand, making sure the water spread from my wrist to the ends of my fingers. Then, I did the same for the left hand. I repeated this three times, in silence. After Ana's body was cleaned, we washed again, replaced our gloves and filled three more buckets with water.

Ideally, Ana's body would be entirely submerged in a mikvah. However, since that is not feasible in our community, we are required to pour water in a manner that will ensure that the flow does not stop, simulating a complete immersion. Ana's body was completely uncovered as three women poured the buckets of water over her, beginning with her head and ending with her feet, making sure that the flow from the bucket was continuous. After the three women poured, we all proclaimed Ana's purity, and one

woman read the prayers. We then immediately covered and dried Ana's body and began to dress her in burial shrouds.

Local traditions vary across places as different leaders (the "Rosha") will follow specific customs they've been taught and have found to work. The practices followed by our Chevra include specific outlined rituals, local traditions and tikkunim, or "perfections." A tikkun is a practice that assists in the performance of the ritual and serves as a reminder to the members of the Chevra that they must treat the body — which once held the soul and is now in transition — with the utmost respect.

One tikkun our Chevra keeps is placing a sign with the deceased's Hebrew name in the tahara room, so that there is no time lost waiting to recall the name as we say the prayers. While dressing Ana, we turned the garments slightly inside out so that Ana's body would not have to be moved more than necessary as we pulled them up her body — another tikkun we performed.

Before we closed up the casket, the leader put egg wash and vinegar on Ana's eyes, sprinkled earth from the Holy Land on her face, as well as over her heart and the top of her pants, and situated small pieces of broken pottery on her eyes and mouth.

When the tahara was complete, we asked Ana for forgiveness. In English now, we expressed regret in case anything we had done was upsetting to her and asked that she grant us forgiveness if we had wronged her or mistreated her. We paused for a moment of silence, and I began to tear up. I thought of the wood shavings and the slight bit of height that Ana's headrest was missing.

No one would know about the wood shavings, just as no one knew exactly what happened in the tahara room and how meticulously we cleaned, washed and observed the process to be certain it was perfect. But at this moment, as we asked Ana to understand our intentions, the living people in the room were held to task. We had to give an accounting — not to others — but to ourselves.

This is the only moment during the tahara process where the spotlight falls on us, the burial society. It is not a self-congratulatory moment, nor is it a time to explain or to provide a rationale for why we couldn't find the wood shavings. Because ultimately, no one mattered except Ana, and she already knew what we had done.

We could not pretend or perform. We could only do our best and ask for forgiveness.

Members of the Chevra Kadisha do not advertise our services. We are called to serve and do so with regularity. When the funeral asks for us, we are there. When the loved ones of the deceased decide we are necessary, we emerge.

Forward

Our work exists without any fanfare or publicity. We do not even pause while setting up the casket to describe to the funeral home manager why we do what we do or the purpose of each item, as this is time that belongs solely to Ana. It is the deceased who own this experience, it is not ours to co-opt.

Perhaps, this is why it is a chesed shel emet — the most truthful kindness. Only in that room, while in front of someone to whom we are accountable and who will never be able to judge or share, can we finally achieve true honesty.

I believe that this honesty need not only be for those who have passed. Jewish living also deserves a quiet, non-performative, technical yet emotionally connective side.

Caring for others should be the norm in our communal settings. And doing so without fanfare and without a public relations group or social media helps to maintain its sanctity.



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