



**WEEKEND READS**

**8.26.22**

*Pictured:*  
Maksym Gon  
Ukrainian professor

**Forward**

# This Jewish Ukrainian professor could still be teaching. He chose to go to war instead.

By Helen Chervitz

*Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, a Jewish political science professor was handed a machine gun, and set out to the Eastern part of Ukraine to defend the civic values he had spent years imparting to his students.*

*At 56, Maksym Gon is no young soldier. And while he was drafted into the Ukrainian army, he did not have to go to war. University professors are exempt from service, and he already had his exemption in hand.*

*But Gon decided to go anyway. In February, during the first week of the conflict, the army put him on a train to Dnepr, and from there a bus to the front in the Donbas region to join the fighting. He looks forward to the day he can return to teaching and scholarship — Gon has authored several books and more than 200 papers. But he's not leaving, he said, until he's killed, wounded or the war ends.*

*Here is his story, as told to Helen Chervitz, the Forward's correspondent in Kyiv, who — with the permission of Gon's commanding officer — interviewed him over WhatsApp and email.*

*Translated from Ukrainian, this interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

## **Why did you join the army when you could have remained in safety?**

For more than a dozen years I had been teaching students what civic duty is. For me, those words mean something. We must defend our right to freedom in the broadest

sense of the word. Ukrainians do not want to become an internal colony of the Russian Empire again. We do not want to return to the totalitarian society that modern Russia is.

Also, I believe that those of us who have already turned gray should be the first to go to war and not the boys who are just beginning to live their lives.

**What did your family think about your decision to fight?**

My wife supported my decision. My daughter on the eve of the invasion flew with her husband to Egypt on vacation, and then ended up as a refugee in Poland.

We didn't want to worry our daughter, so we were not totally honest with her. We told her that I was volunteering to help the war effort, always on the road, and could rarely be reached. This went on for some time. Eventually, my wife told our daughter the truth. Despite all the fears, my family understands that it was the right thing to do.

But since the day I mobilized, I have had some trouble communicating with them. The aggressors are fighting not only against the military but also against civilians, mercilessly destroying military but also civilian infrastructure.

**What was your childhood like? What was it like growing up Jewish in Ukraine?**

I grew up in the late 1960s and early 1970s. My brother and I were born in the Western Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk, and graduated from a secondary school in nearby Rivne.

We were raised in the world of books — there was a huge library in our house. Otherwise our childhood was rather typical: school, sports, music classes.

But I had no experience with Judaism. My parents, brought up under the Soviet regime, were both atheists.

Yet, I was conscious of the fact that I'm Jewish. My father explained that to me when I was in high school, while showing me a book about the Nuremberg trials. There was a part describing the execution of Jews in the town of Dubno, not far from Rivne.

I remember my brother reprimanding me when he learned that I was ashamed of my Jewish roots — to be a Jew in the Soviet Union, I would say, was not considered something to be proud of. But I was not guided by the precepts of Judaism and I remain outside the world of religion. My parents didn't give us a Jewish education, and the Soviet system definitely didn't.

In truth, my Jewish identity is far from a determining factor in my decisions and actions. I am among those who oppose the aggressor because I want a simple thing: my daughter, relatives, and citizens of Ukraine as a nation to live in a democratic society. We, Jews and not-Jews, are all united in defending our homeland from a terrorist state for the right to have a future as an independent nation.

### **Have you experienced antisemitism?**

When I was younger, during Soviet times, I served in the Russian army, and experienced prejudice because I was Jewish. This sort of prejudice when I was younger has made me not want to reveal that I'm Jewish.

I will tell you a funny story from when I was in the Soviet army. One day I was sitting in a smoking room with another Jew, Sasha Huberman. Two guys from Central Asia come and turn to us and say: "Guys, we heard that there are two Jews serving in our unit. What do Jews look like? Where can they be found?"

### **What would you like people outside Ukraine to know about the war?**

The democratic world needs to know about Russia's aggression against the sovereign Ukrainian state. It needs to know about Russia's many war crimes, and how it's committing genocide against the people of Ukraine. I could go on, but Europeans and Americans must understand that Russian President Vladimir Putin aims to restore the Soviet empire, and revive a terrorist state that would threaten everyone.

### **Are you well outfitted and supplied?**

I received a military uniform and a machine gun on the day of mobilization. There was some delay before I received a helmet, body armor, and a first aid kit.

### **Have you lost friends during the war?**

Fortunately, not. But two of them are seriously wounded.

### **How long are you going to be at the front?**

Hopefully until the end of the war. Leaving the front before that means being wounded or killed. But I still have plans for the postwar future. I plan to go back to Rivne University, where I headed the political science department and most recently taught in the Department of World History.

I strongly believe that I still have a lot to say to the youth. I also want to write a book about what I have seen in the war and share my experiences.

**How do you feel about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy? What does it mean to you that he's Jewish?**

By and large, nothing. I did not like his populist slogans during the presidential campaign. I didn't vote for him. But his win signified that Ukrainian society had achieved a level of democracy where it could support any candidate, regardless of his origin or religion.

Zelenskyy has tremendous support now. We will see how his political career proceeds. The image of the Jews in modern Ukraine will largely depend on this.

**Have you ever thought about leaving the front?**

To be honest, yes. Both the physical and psychological fatigue have taken their toll. The scale of artillery and rocket attacks has not yet significantly decreased in the Donbas, and the prospect of dying or becoming disabled is scary.

However, were I to leave, someone else would have to take my place. It will not be easy for him either, and his relatives will be waiting for him at home as mine do. That's why I'm not leaving the front lines.

**What would you say to young people who have avoided the draft?**

In my observation, the average age of soldiers in the Ukrainian army is between 35 and 40, though many young people fight as well. Of course there are those in Ukraine who hide and evade the draft.

I would appeal to their consciences. Sooner or later they will have to ask themselves why they didn't join the army and failed to protect the 350 Ukrainian children who have already died in this war, and others who have had to endure the horrors of occupation, bombing and shelling. Evading the draft is a moral question, and not an acceptable choice for the vast majority of the youth of Ukraine.

**What have you learned from your time at the front?**

I know the meaning of human life. I also know — though it would seem unlikely for someone in my profession — how to sleep in a sleeping bag on the ground, and many other skills you learn in the military.

This war has also taught all of us in the army, and Ukrainians citizens in general, that independence is not just a word from the dictionary. Independence is essential for Ukrainians, with its numerous ethnic groups and different faiths, to belong to their communities. That includes, of course, Jews.

# Lenny Dykstra tweets as if he's Jewish. Is it really him behind his words?

By Louis Keene

Lenny Dykstra, the retired Mets and Phillies outfielder nicknamed “Nails,” has been tweeting observations about Jewish culture, public figures, and even religion for years. And some of those tweets are pretty inside-baseball — especially considering that Dykstra, 59, was raised Christian.

The posts have flown under the radar — with a few exceptions. CNN anchor Jake Tapper remarked on the curiosity in 2020 after Dykstra replied to him with a quote from that week’s Torah portion. And the tweets came to the fore again this month when Dykstra, a former three-time all-star, tweeted a disparaging comment about Florida Judge Bruce Reinhart’s Conservative synagogue from his verified account after Reinhart was reported to have signed the search warrant on Mar-a-Lago.

“I hope you all weren’t expecting that the synagogue where go-ahead-and-raid-Trump Judge #BruceReinhart is on the board of trustees is one where the congregation keeps kosher, observes the sabbath, etc. You can bet they’re into ‘social justice’ of course!” Dykstra tweeted Aug. 8 to his approximately 87,000 followers, appending a link to the Florida synagogue’s website.

In a subsequent tweet with a photo of Reinhart, Dykstra added: “What a #ChillulHashem” — a Hebrew expression that means desecration of God’s name.

Dykstra has stayed in the public eye since his retirement, thanks to a profane irreverence that makes him catnip for newspaper profiles and because of a few run-ins with the law. But his distinctively bawdy voice in real life — the one that said, for example, “I get more p—y than God” in a promotional video — doesn’t sound like his verified Twitter account, which posts an odd mix of Jewish content and far-right memes.

That account has also retweeted a post written entirely in Hebrew, a language Dykstra is not known to speak.

The Reinhart tweets were widely circulated and generally ridiculed. And they once more raise the question of whether Dykstra or someone else is crafting his tweets, many of which reflect homophobic, anti-transgender, anti-vaccine and climate change-denying views. Multiple sources point to the same Orthodox Jewish lawyer.

### **A ghostwriter?**

A few hours after the Forward published an article about Dykstra's tweet about Reinhart, a tip came in from someone who said he worked as recently as 2019 with an attorney who boasted of operating Dykstra's account. Another former coworker corroborated the story about the attorney, a man named Adam Taxin.

Did Taxin ghostwrite the Temple Israel tweet?

Reached by email, Taxin said, simply, "No." He added: "I am not in regular touch with Lenny, sorry."

He did not respond to subsequent emails or phone calls.

A message from a Forward reporter to Dykstra on Twitter went unanswered.

But others have, in the past, identified Taxin as the author of Dykstra's tweets. Taxin appeared in a pair of 2018 profiles of Dykstra, when the former ballplayer was attempting to rebuild his reputation after being booked for threatening an Uber driver. Both articles identified Taxin as Dykstra's Twitter ghostwriter.

In its piece, The New Yorker called Taxin "the ghostwriter of his Twitter account, and the prospective co-host of 'Nails Nation'" and quotes Dykstra talking about him: "He's a genius. He's an Orthodox Jew, though, so he's in the hole. He got a law degree in, like, five states, and, like, won 'Jeopardy' three times. I can't even answer a question!"

The New York Post quotes Taxin as a Philadelphia-based attorney "who helps ghost-write Dykstra's Twitter account." Taxin told the Post Dykstra's participation in a Chabad rabbi's Torah class was refreshing: "Most people are on their best behavior around the rabbi," Taxin said. "Lenny comes at it from a very raw angle."

Taxin's LinkedIn profile says he is a lawyer in Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania who graduated from Columbia Law School in 2001. The "About" section reads: "Recruiting; courtroom appearances; social media ghostwriting."

The connection between him and Dykstra was recently underlined. On July 30 Dykstra's account posted a picture of the two together, wishing Taxin a happy birthday: "Happy birthday also to @Adam\_Taxin, who periodically helps with some social media stuff here for #NailsNation."

The bio of Taxin's personal Twitter account, whose last activity came when he liked a tweet Aug. 7, identifies him as "Attorney; Alleged part of #TeamNails."

More than one person can be logged into the same Twitter account simultaneously, and we may never know definitively who wrote the tweet deriding Reinhart's Conservative synagogue. But the panache of the account's banter — jumping into Jake Tapper's mentions to remind him of that week's Torah portion, or citing the portion to make fun of U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — conveys a considerable depth of Jewish knowledge.

### **Dykstra goes to shul**

Is it possible that Lenny Dykstra, fondly remembered for his role in the 'Miracle' Mets' 1986 run to the World Series — and imprisoned for bankruptcy fraud in 2012 — has taken up Judaism in his middle age?

Rabbi Shmuel Metzger of Upper Midtown Chabad, who taught the class chronicled in the Post piece, said in an interview that Dykstra came to three classes in 2018 but had not been back since.

"It made a nice story, you know? He's a friend. He comes around once in a while," Metzger said. He added: "He gives off this 'bad boy' thing, but he's actually a very sweet guy, a nice guy."

The rabbi reached out to Dykstra on the Forward's behalf, and he said Dykstra's response was, "No, I don't want to talk to nobody from the press, I'm not interested."

Metzger said he would follow up to ask Dykstra whether he was the author of his recent tweets, but did not relay any further communications from Dykstra and did not respond to subsequent messages.

The account tweeted a verse from Deuteronomy on Friday with the message "Shabbat Shalom." Two days later on Twitter, he made a joke about MLB umpires at the expense of Black and transgender women.

Other recent tweets include Yiddish expressions and links to [myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com), and express an interest in Israel foreign policy.

On Friday, the Dykstra account retweeted a post written entirely in Hebrew.

### **Online allies**

And while Dykstra's account seems like an honest representation of his politics — for example, he posted a “happy birthday” video message to Trump on Instagram earlier this year, and a history of alleged racist, misogynistic and homophobic comments trails him — the account's far-right activity also largely aligns with Taxin's public profile.

Taxin's YouTube account, for example, holds several clips of Rush Limbaugh commentary and pro-Trump content in addition to interviews with Dykstra. Taxin's Facebook page links to pro-Trump analysis he wrote for Right Side Broadcasting Network, a Trump-supporting media website launched in 2015.

Also notable: Dykstra's more recent appearances on camera do not reflect the linguistic fluency of his tweets or include the sometimes artful and obscure references to right-wing conspiracy that he has posted to Twitter.

In a July 12 Instagram video, Dykstra stands quietly as a man named Daniel Risis — a pawn shop owner who reportedly met the former outfielder in 2018 — addresses Trump, saying he had his golf clubs. In that and another video he posted with Risis Aug. 10, Dykstra seems to be taking a secondary role to someone exploiting his social media clout.

In the Aug. 10 clip, Risis claims he has crucial information that will clear Trump's name and free imprisoned Jan. 6 rioters.

“Lenny, can I count on you to understand that what I'm saying is not a joke, and all roads lead through Lenny Dykstra?” Risis says.

“If it's the best thing for the country, then I'll do it,” Dykstra replies.

Risis did not respond to a request for comment.

**Opinion**

# Nice Jewish kids struggle with addiction, too. It's past time for a Jewish solution

By Rabbi Michael Perice and Marla Kaufman

The stigma of addiction in our community is deeply ingrained and ever-present. We know this because we've each experienced it firsthand.

**Rabbi Michael Perice:** As a young, enthusiastic rabbinical intern at a local synagogue, I once suggested in an "ideas meeting" that the synagogue offer a program addressing addiction and recovery from a Jewish perspective. They responded: "That's not an issue that affects our community." Unbeknownst to them, I was several years in recovery from opioid addiction.

I remember thinking, how could I ever possibly share my story if my fellow Jews don't think Jews can be addicts?

**Marla Kaufman:** Fresh off a summer teen trip to Israel, our older son's quick descent into addiction unfolded. We were leaders in our Jewish community, deeply invested in Jewish life. Facing this devastating crisis, we turned to our synagogue for support. We not only found a lack of resources, but also a profound lack of understanding and compassion. After sending our son (who is now in long-term recovery) away for treatment, the clear message we received is: "Your family's experience is an outlier."

The judgment and shame we faced led us to be unaffiliated for four years.

**Perice & Kaufman:** As Jewish community recovery advocates, we hear similar stories all the time, even though our experiences happened several years ago.

The real shanda lies not with the individuals and families touched by addiction, but with the greater Jewish community when it perpetuates the myth that we are not as vulnerable as others to the ravages of addiction. A mistaken belief that says nice Jewish

kids (and certainly rabbis!) don't get addicted to drugs or alcohol is extremely harmful to those in our community who deserve our help and support.

This denial is confirmed by the fact that no large-scale study of substance use disorder (SUD) in the Jewish community has been undertaken. So while we do not yet have solid Jewish-specific statistics, the larger portrait of addiction in America provides a useful lens.

SAMSHA's (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) annual National Survey on Drug Use and Health for 2020 reported that more than 40 million Americans have an active SUD, with only 6.5% receiving treatment. In May, the CDC released the heartbreaking news that drug overdoses in the U.S. reached an all-time high, killing more than 107,000 souls in 2021. And for those not tracking year to year, that is a nearly 15% increase over 2020, not to mention the 30% jump from 2019 to 2020.

The hopeful news is that over 22 million Americans are in long-term recovery, according to the Recovery Research Institute of Massachusetts General Hospital.

We know that Jews are among these statistics. It's past time for the Jewish community to live up to these words from our Torah: "If there be among you a person with needs, you shall not harden your heart, but you shall surely open your hand" (Deuteronomy 15:7).

The will to truly address addiction in Jewish communities has to come from the highest levels of Jewish leadership and be part of the bigger conversation on diversity, equity and inclusion and mental health. Our national Jewish umbrella organizations and major philanthropic foundations need to embrace this issue as the pressing priority it is, and as such, invest significant time, money and resources.

Robust and ongoing education for clergy and communal professionals through rabbinical and cantorial schools, Jewish education graduate programs, national denomination movements and major organizations needs to be a priority.

Individual Jewish communities must get on board as well by fostering collaboration across the spectrum of synagogues and organizations to put addiction and recovery on the community agenda. Programs and services could include addiction-specific counseling and support groups, recovery meetings in Jewish spaces and increasing awareness through dedicated Shabbat services and holiday celebrations, offering youth prevention education, hosting workshops and speakers and having books on addiction and recovery in synagogue and community libraries.

While some of this is happening in some communities, it's hit and miss, and largely without the necessary consistency to make a real difference.

In 2016, journalist and author Stephen Fried wrote, "It has proved nearly impossible to get most communities — or, frankly, most families — to view mental illness and addiction as daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, lifelong realities and medical illnesses."

This is still true today. It's going to take a great deal of commitment from our community to address the addiction epidemic meaningfully and consistently. Jewish families impacted by this disease deserve to feel seen, welcomed and supported without reservation or judgment. We would have healed faster and had fewer scars had we been embraced with understanding and compassion.

Let's no longer ignore those touched by addiction. The time for change is now, and the Jewish community can do this.

# **Biden's first Democratic challenger is a Jewish philosopher angered by Biden's 'shameful' Mideast trip**

By Stewart Ain

The first person to challenge President Joe Biden for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2024 is Jerome Segal, a 78-year-old retired Jewish philosopher from the Bronx whose decision to run was triggered by what he called Biden's "shameful" trip to the Middle East this summer.

"He explicitly turned his back on any serious pursuit of peace," Segal said in an interview. In the West Bank in July, Biden said "the ground is not ripe at this moment to restart negotiations" between Israelis and Palestinians. Segal also denounced Biden for his move "to fist bump a psychopathic killer," referring to the president's greeting of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who the CIA deemed responsible for the murder of a Saudi journalist.

Though Segal — who announced his candidacy earlier this month and filed with the IRS so he can start raising campaign dollars — ranks low in voter recognition, he is not new to politics. The 2024 presidential race is his fourth bid for public office, and he has for decades worked to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 1987, according to his website, he was part of the first Jewish-American delegation to Tunis to open dialogue with Arafat and the PLO. He then, in 1989, founded the Jewish Peace Lobby.

This summer he came in ninth in the 10-candidate Democratic primary for Maryland governor, with .67% of the vote. He challenged Sen. Benjamin Cardin of Maryland in the

2018 Democratic primary, and ran in the 2020 U.S. presidential election as the candidate of the Bread and Roses Party, which he founded.

Segal considers it a “utopian” party. It calls for “a socio-economic framework that makes it easier to pursue a New American Dream, one of modest consumption, solid economic security and abundant leisure, sufficient to do the things in life that matter most.”

He said despite his decades-long focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he discussed a host of domestic challenges during the 45 debates he participated in during his recently ended campaign for Maryland governor.

### **The trip**

But it was Biden’s recent trip to the Middle East that prompted Segal to challenge him for the Democratic nomination in 2024.

Biden visited Saudi Arabia, where leaders have pledged not to make peace with Israel before Israel brokers a fair peace with Palestinians, Segal said, yet the president “tried to get them to betray the Palestinians” by promoting a Saudi-Israeli agreement first.

Biden’s trip also prompted Segal to resurrect a peace proposal he first announced in 2012. It would have the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine develop a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict — and present it to voters as a referendum — without consulting Israeli or Palestinian government leaders.

“If the plan said the Palestinians would recognize Israel as a Jewish state and that all land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea would be the common homeland of the Jewish and the Palestinian people, I think that would be an acceptable referendum,” Segal said, adding that it would also garner Palestinian support because it would give the Palestinians Gaza, the West Bank and part of Jerusalem.

He also envisions Israel returning to its pre-1967 borders.

### **‘A young 78’**

Segal’s academic career began at the University of Michigan, where he received his doctorate in philosophy. A resident of Silver Spring, a suburb of Washington, D.C., known for its progressive politics, Segal spent more than two decades as professor at the University of Maryland’s Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy.

He described a Jewish upbringing in New York City. Asked if he spoke Hebrew, he said: “Not since my bar mitzvah at my grandfather’s shul in Brooklyn.” He added that he

spoke Yiddish at the Workmen's Circle and taught Torah at a Reconstructionist havurah for a decade.

Segal is also the author of the 2007 book "Joseph's Bones," which his publisher, Penguin Random House Canada, called "a fresh and vigorous reexamination of the oldest part of the Bible."

Asked about his age — a year younger than Biden — and a recent poll that showed that one-third of Americans believe the president is too old to run for reelection, Segal described different types of longevity, and himself as "a young 78."

"A lot of people think Joe Biden is too old. It is not a comment on his physical age, it is a question of what world he is living in," Segal said. "My stuff is creative, cutting-edge and different. I am one of the few people with forward-thinking ideas."

# In the rarified world of Jewish letters, a mind-boggling font of Jewish history

By Andrew Silverstein

In the early 1990s, a new teriyaki sauce reached New York supermarkets with a distinctive label. In faux-Hebrew font, the name “Soy Vay — Veri Veri Teriyaki” was spelled out. The S was Hebraized by exaggerated serifs; the Hebrew letter samekh (o) was contorted into an O; an ayin (v) was passed off as a “Y.”

“You can’t be Jewish, walk by and not buy it,” the brand’s co-founder Eddie Scher told SF Gate in 2003. He was right. My family snatched up a bottle at first sight, and we weren’t the only ones. In 2011, Scher sold the California company to Clorox.

There’s really nothing Jewish about teriyaki, but the branding works. Jews love Asian food and self-deprecating humor. The lettering takes an inauthentic Asian product and makes it Jewish.

You’ve probably seen faux-Hebrew in kitsch marketing or on deli menus, but there’s a darker side to it too. A 1932 Nazi presidential campaign poster spelled out “We choose Hindenburg” in Hebraized lettering, associating Hitler’s Christian opponent with Jews through typographical innuendo. In contrast, “We choose Hitler” was spelled out in German blackletter.

The dichotomy is fascinating. On the facade of the Second Avenue Deli, it feels whimsical, but on a yellow star at an anti-vax rally, it is the font equivalent of a hooked nose.

“It’s a trope,” said Steven Heller, co-chair of the School of Visual Arts MFA program and author of “The Swastika and Symbols of Hate.” And not just an antisemitic one. “The

words' Chicken Soup' in the style of Hebrew lettering," he offered as a positive cliché, "they make you feel better when you're sick and come from a Jewish grandmother's recipe book."

To make the English alphabet feel Yiddish, a designer must reverse the stresses and serifs, reflecting that Hebrew is written from left to right. I asked Heller how much of a technical challenge this was. "You take the Hebrew letter and just adapt it. You stretch it," he said dismissively, adding that some letters can be borrowed unchanged or inverted. "It's easy if you know what you're doing."

Faux-Hebrew is one of many "ethnic fonts." The most well-known are the Chop Suey characters once commonly found on Chinese takeout boxes. Most designers look down on ethnic fonts, calling them "garbage fonts." They are a shortcut to announce ethnicity, often used in marketing, in light-hearted jokes or as vicious slurs. Even if they're not offensive, they're seen as gimmicky and hard to read.

But faux-Hebrew differs from the Chop Suey fonts, which have been criticized in recent years. Chinese- and Japanese-like fonts were first created in the 19th century by white Americans to exoticize and ridicule Asians. Later, Asian Americans co-opted the lettering mainly to market their food to non-Asians. In contrast, Jews themselves are the ones who most often use Hebraized lettering as an inside joke.

Perhaps a key difference is that faux-Hebrew does not play off cultural stereotypes in the same way as the bamboo lettering that invokes Asia or the festive Tamale font that's used in Mexican restaurants. And while Chop Suey fonts are supposed to mimic east Asian calligraphy, they really don't. Faux-Hebrew, like the Greek-like font found on coffee cups, resembles an actual script, giving it authenticity and a more dignified feel.

Still, how far back does faux-Hebrew go? Was it originally playful or hateful or something entirely different? Moreover, who did it first: Jews or antisemites?

Heller said he guessed the font dated back to vaudeville. He generously emailed experts in the font world, including a former rabbi, but no one knew for sure. Likewise, Hebrew typography textbooks only cover actual Hebrew, and while I found critiques of the lettering in academic texts, no one had ever dug into its history.

When I asked a librarian at the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, I'm pretty sure she rolled her eyes. It was the equivalent of asking the American Irish Historical Society about the origins of the "Kiss Me I'm Irish" T-shirt.

Sarah Bunin Benor, a professor of linguistics and contemporary Jewish studies, and director of the Jewish Language Project at the Hebrew Union College, said that her

colleagues view the font with disdain. “A designer for one of my books wanted to use that font for the book title,” she told me. “And I said, ‘No, it’s just not appropriate because it has this mocking or comedic effect.’”

None of this is surprising. A downloadable version of the font is called “Circumcision,” and it’s most often encountered on goofy “I ☆ Shikshas” T-shirts or sappy “Bubbe” mugs, not serious academic texts. Still, I must admit I like faux-Hebrew, and it’s not just because I have a weak spot for tchotchkes. I’m a third-generation New York Jew. Doesn’t English hinting at Yiddish represent my secular Jewish-American identity?

### **So, When Did Faux Hebrew Start Anyway?**

To determine the origins of Faux Hebrew, I started looking in the Vaudeville era. The oldest example I found was the cover art for the sheet music to the 1912 song “Rachel Rubinstein’s Rag.” It looks artful with art nouveau flourishes. The apostrophe and C are borrowed from the Hebrew alphabet, while the other letters are given a Yiddish accent with exaggerated serifs.

The music itself is far from subtle. It’s a Jewish minstrel song, which would have been performed in Jewface: raggedy dark clothes, a fake beard and a hooked nose — the Jewish version of the racist acts that mocked the Irish, Italians, Chinese Americans and, most commonly, African Americans.

Surprisingly, the Jewish songs, which used stereotypical melodies, were mostly written and performed by Jews for a mainly Jewish audience. Al Jolson, a Jewish star of the ragtime era, performed “At The Yiddish Cabaret.” Its 1913 sheet music also has Hebraized lettering.

“The lyrics trafficked in stereotypes about Jews, some funny, some offensive, some both,” said journalist Jody Rosen who in 2008 put together “Jewface,” a compilation of the Jewish dialect music.

“A faux-Hebrew font is analogous. It’s a graphic design stereotype,” he wrote me in an email. “Like the songs that mixed American pop with traditional Jewish musical flavors, the blend of Latin script with Hebrew forms is a visual joke that would have tickled Jews especially.”

So, did faux-Hebrew start as an ethnic joke?

I didn’t think so.

### **A Clue to the Mystery**

I had long known a different side of Faux Hebrew typography from the Bialystoker Home for the Aged, located down the block from the Forward Building on New York's Lower East Side. Above the main entrance, Bialystoker is carved in stone. The letters resemble Hebrew but are not strained or distorted. They're elegant and surrounded by a pattern of the Hebrew letter ayin (v) above engravings of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jewish immigrants from Bialystok, Poland, funded the 1931 art deco building as a home for their elderly landsmen. The elaborate lettering and artwork must have been a substantial expense for the immigrant community during the Great Depression. This faux Hebrew was no joke.

This isn't the only serious example in the neighborhood from that era. In 1930, two renovated tenements on Ludlow Street were given art deco flourishes and branded with the name "Esther Apartments" in Hebrewesque letters. And in 1937, Zion Talis, a Judaica store blocks away from the Bialystoker Home, started running ads spelling out their name in similar lettering, matching their awning.

After the Jewish nursing home closed in 2011, preservationists and community members successfully petitioned the city to grant the building landmark status, saving the historic facade from the whims of developers.

"The sign announcing 'Bialystoker' is one of my favorite details in New York and an amazingly pointed symbol of our history," architectural historian Andrew Scott Dolkart wrote in 2012 to the Landmark Preservation Commission. "Here we have English letters written out as if they were Yiddish script.

"What an amazing statement about immigration and assimilation, as Yiddish becomes English and immigrants become Americans," Dolkart said.

But Yiddish becoming English also implies the loss of Yiddish for most American Jews. In his book "Adventures in Yiddishland," Jeffrey Shandler, Distinguished Professor of Judaic Studies at Rutgers University, laments that Yiddish is often treated not as a living language but as a symbol for comedic or nostalgic effect. Worse perhaps is faux-Hebrew: English masquerading as Yiddish.

Shandler credits faux-Hebrew for being widely accessible and marking words as "distinctively Jewish," but adds, "The use of these fonts thus resembles 'kosher-style' cuisine, preserving manner while altering, even subverting, substance."

Certainly, the Yiddish-speaking Bialystok immigrants didn't stereotype themselves the same way Jewish vaudeville acts did, but was this a celebration of their assimilation?

News coverage at the time did not comment on the artwork, and the artist's name has been lost to history, but there is a clue.

Elissa J. Sampson, an urban geographer, has studied the nursing home artwork. She notes that the use of roundels and illustrations of the 12 tribes of Israel almost exactly match the icons on the bronze doors of Temple Emanuel on Fifth Avenue completed the previous year. This suggests the uptown synagogue and downtown nursing home were designed by the same artist, Joseph B. Abrahams.

Sampson's hunch appears to be correct. Abrahams, the secretary of the Jewish Theological Seminary, illustrator and calligrapher, was born 50 miles from Bialystok. He designed a Hebrew font for a printing of the Talmud and was proficient in Arabic lettering and hieroglyphics. "He can adapt any of them to English script so that the writing is decipherable by the average reader but carries the feeling of another script," *The Patent Trader*, a Westchester weekly, wrote in 1961.

Abrahams used faux-Hebrew to design bookplates, decorative labels placed on the inside covers of books to show ownership. Prominent early 20th-century Jewish American leaders, including Solomon Schechter, the architect of Conservative Judaism, were among Abrahams' customers.

### **When a Bookplate Tells a Story of its Own**

Bookplates, or in Latin "ex libris" (from the library of), were popular from the late-19th to the mid-20th century. Faux-Hebrew appears in many Jewish bookplates in North America and Europe, dating back to 1904, almost a decade before the sheet music I had seen. But here, the lettering is part of a well-thought-out personal statement.

The artist Joanne Bauer-Mayer told *The Jewish Weekly Times of Boston* in 1943 that it took her an entire year to design the ex libris of Dr. Joshua Loth Liebman, a prominent Boston Reform Rabbi, and bestselling author. "A bookplate must be an indication of the background, personality and ideals of the man," she explained.

Bauer-Mayer's final design features Maimonides looking down from a window in the rabbi's temple. Below are the rabbi's favorite religious texts, the seal of Liebman's alma mater, and musical notes for the singing of the Shema prayer. At the bottom is written in faux-Hebrew: "Ex Libris: Dr. Joshua Loth Liebman." The bookplate was later partially replicated on his tombstone.

Bookplates also often feature hobbies, professions and political allegiances. For example, in 1910, Maksymilian Goldstein, a Polish Jewish art critic and collector, commissioned the Polish artist Rudolf Mękicky to design his bookplate. A native of Lviv

(then Poland, now Ukraine), Goldstein is remembered for his heroic efforts to save his private museum of east European Jewish folk art and Judaica from the Nazis, who eventually murdered him and his entire family.

In 1935, Goldstein co-authored a Polish-language book on his vast collection, which reproduced and explained his ex libris. In the center is a book about coin collecting. At the top are two coins from the Jagiellon royal dynasty of Poland; one features a cross. They are connected to a star of David and a menorah, signifying Goldstein's intense interest in Polish Jewish objects. A thorny vine wraps around the illustration, a motif that represents Jewish suffering in exile — imagery borrowed from Christianity.

The bookplate, which features the coat of arms of the King of Poland and Zionist symbols, both Christian and Jewish imagery, distills this complex identity with the Hebrew-looking lettering at the bottom, which reads in Polish: "Maksymilian Goldstein in Lviv."

"It is a kind of mixing of identities," said Nicholas Block, a Boston College professor who has studied Jewish bookplates. "For people to have their names in this faux-Hebrew font shows that they are both of them," meaning both Jewish and American or Polish and Jewish, for example.

What's surprising is that a font that seems so clearly a celebration of hybrid identities has its roots in the Zionist movement, which questioned Jewish assimilation.

### **An Artist Named Lilien Enters the Story**

Searching for a style of lettering can be tedious. It means clicking through endless arrays of online images or flipping through dusty books at the library. But sometimes, the answers are out in the open.

Goldstein cited Ephraim Moses Lilien as the inspiration for his ex libris, so I decided to explore the work of this mostly forgotten turn-of-the-century Jewish artist, considered to be the father of Jewish bookplates. I thought it would be another rabbit hole, but then I immediately saw it.

The letters are perfectly balanced and elegant, the work of a celebrated artist, not a cheap gimmick. At the time, the philosopher Martin Buber wrote a review in the Zionist weekly *Die Welt*, "I enjoy all of it — the cover in our colors: 'Juda' in white beams forth from a dark blue cover; the letters are shaped like Hebrew letters and evoke a sweet homey atmosphere."

Lilien was born in Drohobycz, Galicia (located in present-day Ukraine), and moved to Germany in 1897 to study art. There, he embraced jugendstil, the German counterpart of art nouveau, and became a Socialist Zionist. In “Juda,” his flowery black ink sketches of scenes from the Torah are paired with verses by the Christian poet Börries von Münchhausen. In that era, the Jewface image of Jews as meek, downtrodden figures in dark overcoats was most common. Here, Jews appear as attractive, strong and triumphant epic heroes.

The book became an instant success and was translated into multiple languages. Zionists championed “Juda,” finding in Lilien’s modern drawings a uniquely Jewish art form and an inspiration for the “new Hebrew man.” The following year, Lilien organized the art exhibition of the Fifth Zionist Congress and, in 1906, helped open Bezalel, the first design school in the future state of Israel. He became known as “the first Zionist artist.”

Lilien created the iconography for the Zionist movement, but more broadly, he pioneered the art of a modern secular Jewish identity. Religious symbols like the Star of David or menorahs took on new meaning when paired with art nouveau nude femme fatales and modern, even sometimes Christian motifs.

Lilien’s work was influenced by his era’s leading artists. Many have noted that his illustrations in “Juda” make reference to the drawings of the British Aubrey Beardsley known for his provocative depictions of virile men and female temptresses. He was also inspired by Gustav Klimt and the Czech art nouveau master Alphonse Mucha. Indeed, Mucha used hebraicized lettering in his 1897 poster in Paris for the renowned actress Sarah Bernhardt. While the lettering differs in style, the poster for the play “La Samaritaine,” clearly influenced Lilien’s use of faux-Hebrew.

This suggests an ambiguous start for faux-Hebrew. Bernhardt, a leading actress of her day, was the illegitimate daughter of a Dutch Jewish woman, but was raised French Catholic. In “La Samaritaine,” by Edmond Rostand, who within a year would pen “Cyrano de Bergerac,” Bernhardt plays a Jewish prostitute in Samaria who after meeting Jesus leads her people to convert to Christianity.

Three years later, Lilien, with “Juda,” made faux-Hebrew a truly positive statement of a Jewish-identity, not a way to highlight the exotic and unusual beauty of a sinful Jewess waiting to be saved by Jesus. Lilien turned faux-Hebrew into part of the new Jewish visual vocabulary embraced by Zionists and non-Zionists. Even the 12 tribes of Israel on the Bialystoker Home facade seem to be inspired by a Lilien illustration.

Ori Soltes, a professor at Georgetown University’s Center for Jewish Civilization who researches Jewish art history and identity, told me “Juda” appeared right when the idea

of making Hebrew the Jewish national language was percolating. “I think the reason you have that play with Hebrew letters is in part to put them front and center as an art form,” said Soltes.

It was only after “Juda,” in nearby Leipzig, Germany that Raphael Frank created the first modern Hebrew font in 1908. The clear and crisp Frank-Ruhl font is still the most ubiquitous Hebrew font today.

It’s clear that Lilien’s letters were on the minds of the Hebrew type designers who came after him. Letters like the ones on “Juda” appear on the cover of the landmark 1924 Hebrew typography catalog by the Berlin foundry H. Berthold. Then in New York, the Hebrew Monotype Press uses faux-Hebrew on the cover of their 1927 specimen book, Lilien’s illustrations accompany the Hebrew and Yiddish sample texts. Serious Hebrew font designers saw faux-Hebrew as something more than a cheap knock-off.

Lilien grew up speaking Yiddish in a religious household, but his biggest proponents were educated German-speaking Jews who did not grow up with Hebrew or Yiddish. Block calls them a “post-assimilation” generation — the descendants of German Jews who had lost their traditions now yearned for a Jewish identity.

Block, who is working on a book titled “Schlepping Culture: The Jewish Renaissance Between German and Yiddish,” called the “Juda” cover a bold and confrontational representation of Jewishness for German society, the opposite of Jewface. “This is in-your-face proudly ethnic,” he said. “It’s pushing Jewish ethnicity in the face of its readers.”

If the Bialystoker facade in 1931 represents Jewishness dissolving into the fabric of America, “Juda” in 1900 represents a Jewishness emerging from German society. But this didn’t mean an abandonment of German-ness.

Early Zionists saw themselves as cultured Western Europeans looking to their Eastern roots for authentic Jewishness. This mix is neatly summed up in the masthead Lilien designed in 1901 for Buber’s journal of Jewish art, “Ost und West” (“East and West”).

The O in “Ost” is covered with a flourish that resembles a yarmulke, the head covering of observant Jews, the W in “West” is crowned by a mustache shape, symbolizing the westernization of the traditional Jewish beard,” said Texas A&M University professor David Brenner in his book “Marketing Identities: The Invention of Jewish Ethnicity in Ost und West.”

Lilien never reused the lettering, but he tapped into the zeitgeist. In 1904, Hebraized Cyrillic showed up in St. Petersburg on the masthead of the Russian-language literary

journal “Jewish Life.” Then, in 1916, the first Brazilian-Jewish publication in Portuguese, “A Columna,” chose faux-Hebrew for the title. The following year, “Vida Nuestra” debuted in Buenos Aires. The Spanish-language publication featured Lilien-like illustrations and a faux-Hebrew logo.

Bunin Benor believes the use of the lettering mirrors how Ashkenazi Jews carried over Jewish terms and phrases to their new languages. The faux-Hebrew, she said, represented “part of the shift from Yiddish, which is written in Hebrew letters, to Polish and Russian and Czech and German and English and all the languages Jews acquired in the 19th and 20th centuries.”

### **Font as a Statement of Identity**

In an essay written for a 1993 Cooper Union exhibition that examined everyday graphic design, Sojin Kim and Somi Kim wrote that ethnic fonts are a visual manifestation of anthropologist Michael M.J. Fischer’s concept of bifocality — “seeing others against a background of oneself and oneself against a background of others.”

In the first part of the 20th century, faux-Hebrew’s meaning changed according to the varied circumstances and perspectives of Ashkenazi Jews. Then, during the Holocaust, it took on a very different and indelible meaning. In some countries, the yellow star patches that the Nazis forced Jews to wear included “Jew” written in faux-Hebrew.

In the years following World War II, it’s hard to find faux-Hebrew. Not only was the lettering tarnished, but Soltes explained, the Holocaust brought on “a radical discomfort with how to express or whether to express one’s Jewish identity.” Eventually, though, faux-Hebrew came back.

Bookplates had become passe in the postwar era. Instead, the lettering found a home in American consumer culture.

Shandler dedicated a chapter of his book to dissecting his collection of tchotchkes dating back to the 1940s. Many of the gag gifts, T-shirts and games feature a single Yiddish word, often written in faux-Hebrew. He sees the mock dictionaries and refrigerator magnets as using Yiddish as a symbol, not a language. The gag gifts, he said, were a “gesture of cultural homage, on the one hand, and as a tacit acknowledgment of cultural breakdown on the other.”

Examples of faux-Hebrew are found on the more than 400 Jewish-American record album covers from the 1940s to 1970s that Robert Bennett and Josh Kun include in their 2008 book “And You Shall Know Us By Our Trail of Vinyl.” The Hebraized lettering started appearing in 1950 as a kitschy stand-in for actual Yiddish.

There are, of course, exceptions. The lettering comes across as serious on some Israeli music records, such as a 1950 liturgical record (albeit a pretty unorthodox one for the era, given the cantor is a woman), and a 1971 Zionist audio documentary called “Never Again.” Similarly, the first edition of Leon Uris’ 1958 best-seller *Exodus* uses the lettering in the cover art.

But the lettering is generally used for a comic or nostalgic effect, as in the 1959 album “My Bubba and Zaeda’s Cha Cha Cha,” or the 1960 Yiddish lullabies album “A Mama sings Liede.”

The mid-1960s marked another turning point for faux-Yiddish. By then, according to Bunin Benor, American Jews had become more comfortable with their ethnic identities, and other Americans found an interest in Jewish culture, adapting many Yiddish loanwords. At the same time, the introduction of phototypesetting reduced the price of making commercial fonts.

“The 1960s and early 1970s saw an explosion of new styles,” Florian Hardwig, a Berlin-based designer and managing editor of the online archive “Fonts In Use,” said via email.

According to Hardwig, in 1963, Charles Papirtis, a Lithuanian-American artist, designed the first faux-Hebrew typeset, Papirtis Maseltov. Up to this point, graphic designers had to draw Hebrewesque letters by hand or use typefaces that just happened to have a Hebrew-like feel. Commercial faux-Hebrew fonts allowed businesses to easily use the lettering on advertisements, deli menus and eventually swag.

Papirtis wasn’t making a statement about Jewish identity. Hardwig said that he was the ethnic typeset artist of Photo-Lettering, an iconic New York font company. In this role, he designed fonts with playful names like *Vodka*, *Shish-Ka-Bob*, *Taj Mahal* and *Buddhist* that mimicked Cyrillic, Arabic, Hindi and Thai.

He also went on to create two more faux-Hebrew fonts, the 1964 *Papirtis Shalom* and the 1969 *Papirtis Temple*. His *Papirtis Maseltov* font has been copied into many digital fonts under the names *Tanach* and *Kosher*, among others.

### **A Font Still Flourishes, More Than a Century Later**

When Hebraized Latin became a typeset, it was typeset. Fonts, like other visual cues, work by repetition. Over time, the Hebrewesque Latin script became linked to kitsch. This dulled its associations with Nazis but also drowned out any other possible uses.

Still, it remains popular. The streetwear company Only NY emblazons “NY” in faux-Hebrew on hats and sweaters, as part of their “deli” line. Jake Cohen, the author of the cookbook “Jew-ish,” used the lettering on a promotional tote. When on television or broadcasting to his 1.4 million followers on TikTok, Cohen wears Jewish-themed T-shirts. “I’m trying to convey that I’m proud to be Jewish and proud of our culture,” he said in an email.

I wear faux-Hebrew shirts and hats for similar reasons. As a non-Orthodox Jew, they show my Jewishness in a way that feels authentic to me. The T-shirts that spell out Yankees or Hunter College phonetically in actual Hebrew letters seem too insidious and better suited for someone who actually reads Hebrew, not just sounds it out.

But faux-Hebrew designs are almost always described as “old school” or “vintage style.” They’re stuck in the 1960s, evoking nostalgia and Catskills comedy acts. Long forgotten are its serious uses as a bold representation of ethnicity, a celebration of a Jewish American identity, and a symbol of Zionism.

Israel is the one place where faux-Hebrew is evolving and making a statement. There, Hebrew is being merged with Arabic. Haifa-based designer Liron Lavi Turkenich has invented lettering called Aravrit. Each letter is designed so that the top is a recognizable Arabic character, while the bottom is Hebrew.

The Israeli designer’s goal was to make a font legible to all the residents of her city. A nearly 16-foot-tall sculpture that spelled out “Toward Tomorrow” in Aravrit was displayed in the Israeli pavilion at an International Expo in Dubai. However, Turkenich stresses that her project is apolitical. Mostly, she makes T-shirts and necklaces with words like “Sister,” “Life,” or simply, “Human.”

“You’re connecting stories, you’re connecting letters, and it comes across on very different levels,” she said, adding that the font allowed her to connect with her Arab neighbors and Mizrahi Jews to celebrate an Arabic heritage often stigmatized in Israel.

Of course, Turkenich, a native Hebrew speaker, resisted the label faux-Hebrew; she uses actual Hebrew and actual Arabic. But when I showed her Lilien’s “Juda” cover and the Bialystoker Home, she instantly saw the parallels.

Over a century ago, Lilien infused Latin script with Hebrew to give a voice to a Jewish minority. Now, Hebrew, the language of a majority, is being fused with Arabic to start a conversation. A century later, faux-Hebrew still has something to say.



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