



# WEEKEND READS

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**Forward**

# **I understand why some Orthodox Jews hate The New York Times' yeshiva report. But ignoring our failures doesn't help Hasidic boys like mine**

By Beatrice Weber

The recent New York Times article on the state of Hasidic Yeshiva education, with its shocking revelations, was news to many of its readers. But for parents from the Hasidic community like myself, the information reported was nothing new.

And yet, as I read the article when it dropped early Sunday morning at 3 a.m., I felt my heart drop and fill with terror. The photos of the children could have been my children or grandchildren. The schools mentioned were the very schools my children attend and the issues discussed were issues all six of my sons have experienced.

Logically, I know that calling attention to problematic issues is the first step to influencing change. Nothing gets resolved by pretending it doesn't exist.

And yet, this report felt so wrong, almost dangerous. And as I thought about what I was feeling, many childhood memories

started coming back to me. I recalled the song that we sang at the Passover Seder about non-Jews: "In every generation, they arise to kill us, but God saves us from their hands."

I grew up hearing the stories of my grandparents running for their lives during the Holocaust in Hungary, hiding from outsiders and doing whatever they could to survive and keep their families safe. I heard stories about their arrival in the United States and their determination to live in a Hasidic neighborhood. They believed that they could only trust their own people, and that they would be safest there. I carry the heartbreaking memories of their lives, the agony of their hope, and the generational trauma resulting from what they experienced.

These lived experiences are not unique to the family system I grew up in, but are part and parcel of growing up as a Hasidic child. There is a fundamental worldview that

virtually every child is taught, that outsiders, non-Jews, and even non-Orthodox Jews are to be feared. If we aren't vigilant and careful enough, they will harm us.

Over the last few days, Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox schools have arranged prayer vigils for students across the state and country, to preempt and prevent "The Harsh Decree" from descending on the community, using language reminiscent of the Biblical harsh decrees meted out by Pharaoh in Egypt against the Jews.

"The Harsh Decree" they are referring to is the substantial equivalency regulations that the Board of Regents unanimously voted for on Tuesday, which will provide some measure of enforcement over the education at private schools in New York state.

I understand where this fear comes from. It is the same fear that I was taught to have as a child. But like all irrational fears, the xenophobic reaction of the Hasidic world to contemporary civil society is a liability. The community and its members are not served by its ethic of living apart from mainstream society and the belief that outsiders are out to harm them.

As I thought about this fear of others and what it does to us, I started recalling other childhood memories that were rarely discussed.

My grandparents survived the Holocaust only because outsiders helped them at great risk to their own lives. One of my grandmothers, who was blue-eyed, got a job at a local hospital in Budapest and was protected by the head nurse who knew she was Jewish. My grandfather from Czechoslovakia had friends who were able to get him a visa to England. The local

priest in my other grandfather's town offered to hide him in 1944 as the Nazis arrived in Hungary and began deporting and killing the Jews.

Despite these incredible experiences, these stories were rarely spoken of in my family. Instead, the visceral fear of outsiders continued to grow larger and larger as the trauma grew more and more entrenched.

When I left my Hasidic marriage in 2014, my parents desperately warned me not to take it to a secular court. But it was only by going to the secular family court that my rights as a parent were protected and I was able to maintain custody of my four younger children. Sadly it is often the case that many women lose custody of their children when leaving a Hasidic marriage.

I am a big believer in the healing power of telling our stories, as well as the powerful impact it can have on others. I have personally written and spoken about my own experiences of leaving the Hasidic community. But the truth is that the fear of outsiders, and of "airing our dirty laundry," has been exploited by leaders in the community to enact and enforce stricter and stricter rules — and to mete out severe punishments to those who speak up to outsiders.

The "Harsh Decree" endangering Hasidic children is not The New York Times, but the choices of the leaders. The dire situation in Hasidic schools is a direct result of leaders telling their adherents that any changes to the school system are against their values and a threat to their Jewish heritage, when in fact nothing could be further from the truth.

Education has always been a Jewish value.

One of the most tragic parts of this scandal is that outside leaders, who are in a position to help, have known — and have chosen to do nothing. For over a decade, parents and former students of Hasidic yeshivas, most notably Naftuli Moster and Yaffed, have been speaking up about this issue. They have been met with tremendous resistance from politicians, lawmakers and organizations throughout the state.

With few exceptions, most outsiders have refused to get involved. The claim was that they didn't want to interfere. This issue was not their "business." They needed to stay in their "lane."

These attitudes are not only wrong, but dangerous. To ignore the plight of Hasidic children is negligence itself. Jewish tradition mandates that we intervene in situations where the well-being of others is imperiled.

I am hopeful that now that the issues are out in the open, Jewish organizations, educational advocacy groups, politicians and lawmakers will join together and help support our children and ensure that they receive the education they deserve.

And I'm hopeful that Hasidic parents who truly want the best for their children, who know in their hearts that all knowledge comes from God and is holy, will challenge the culture of xenophobia that persists in our community.

My grandparents would have never made it out of the Holocaust without the help of outsiders.

I could have never left my difficult marriage without outside support and resources.

And our children and grandchildren will receive the education they deserve when they receive the attention, resources and support of outsiders as well.

# Did Nazis make these Jewish women infertile?

By Hallie Lieberman

In a TikTok that went viral this summer, a young woman asks her 93-year-old grandmother whether she got her menstrual period during the time she was in Auschwitz. “No,” says the grandmother, the telltale tattooed number visible on her arm, “because they put some kind of drug in the food we ate that made the period go away.”

The video by Miriam Ezagui, a registered nurse, has garnered more than 3 million likes and thousands of incredulous comments. “I would have thought it was due to malnourishment,” wrote one user, jenwimpfheimer. “There is no evidence of such a thing,” said another user. “Hunger deprived menstruation.” A third said the Museum of Auschwitz had denied these claims. “She is lying,” claimed a fourth.

Peggy J. Kleinplatz, a professor of medicine at the University of Ottawa, stumbled upon the video while finishing up years of research into the fertility problems faced by Holocaust survivors. The research, with Paul Weindling, a professor of the history of medicine at Oxford Brookes University, was published in the September issue of the academic journal *Social Science & Medicine*. Ezagui’s grandmother, Lilly Malnik, told a story that echoed those of many of the survivors Kleinplatz had interviewed: that the Nazis had put some

chemical into their rations that caused amenorrhea, the scientific term for loss of periods.

Many female survivors had told Kleinplatz the rations smelled and tasted repulsive. In 93 interviews with survivors or their children, Kleinplatz found that 20 were unable to have children after the war, and others reported multiple miscarriages and stillbirths or babies born prematurely; overall, they had a live birth rate of 1.46, compared to 2.6 to 2.9 among American Jews in the 1950s.

“The Nuremberg trial records showed that Nazis wanted to sterilize as many ‘Jewesses’ as possible without their knowledge,” Kleinplatz said in her article. “Something was happening to Jewish women during the Holocaust that was distinctive,” she added, “and nobody’s ever studied its long-term impact.”

The conventional understanding has long been that women stopped menstruating while at concentration camps due to trauma or malnutrition. Kleinplatz began to question this because literature about other atrocities described female victims suffering from amenorrhea after 12 to 18 months, while the Holocaust survivors she interviewed said it happened within 48 hours of arrival at the camps. Her paper cites a 2007 academic

study of 580 Hungarian female survivors that said more than 80% experienced “cessation of menses immediately after internment.”

Marion Kaplan, a historian at New York University who studies the Holocaust, cautioned that Kleinplatz’s sample size is small, but said the research is “still worth a serious discussion and wider dissemination.”

“This is the beginning of important, neglected research,” Kaplan said.

Kleinplatz, a clinical psychologist who has written several books on sex, sexuality and sex therapy, began looking into the Holocaust’s impact on women’s fertility more than five years ago. She wrote brief articles in *Senior Times*, *Lilith* and other publications, asking to speak to female survivors about menstruation. More than 100 responded, most of them nonagenarians.

“It never occurred to me that I was going to get phone calls from survivors not only at the six major death camps, but also the slave labor camps,” she said. “This was much more widespread than I could ever have imagined.”

Malnik told Kleinplatz that she was about 15 years old and worked in the kitchen at Auschwitz, where she was instructed to mix “very light pink chemicals” with the texture of wet kosher salt into rutabaga “soup” as armed guards looked on. The soup-and-chemical mixture was served only to female prisoners so “they don’t get their periods,” Malnik said in the Kleinplatz paper.

Others also told Kleinplatz they’d been served “foul-smelling” soup and believed an

additive in their food had caused them to stop menstruating. One in 10 of those she interviewed said they were given injections or pills that they believe caused fertility problems.

Kleinplatz’s hypothesis is that the additive contained synthetic sex hormones, including synthetic estrogen and progesterin, because she has found evidence that the Nazis were continuously producing large quantities of these hormones between 1943 and 1945.

The hormones were supposedly being used to treat German women’s infertility, Kleinplatz’s research shows, but synthetic estrogen and progesterone can also be used to prevent pregnancy. And Kleinplatz said the amount of sex hormones produced seems much greater than would have been needed for infertility treatments.

Kleinplatz said she thinks this has not come to light earlier because many researchers were wary of delving too deeply into intimate topics like menstruation. One such researcher, Zelda Abramson, a sociologist and author who has interviewed more than 60 survivors, said in an interview, “I’m guilty as she charges for sure.”

“I didn’t think to ask, ‘Why do you think you can’t have kids?’” Abramson said of her book about those survivors’ post-Holocaust lives, *The Montreal Shtetl*. “You’re sort of wary about how deep into intimate relations you can go into.” Of Kleinplatz’s work, she added: “It’s pretty horrific — I can’t think of any other word — if all women in camps were targeted in that way.”

Of 93 women included in Kleinplatz’s study, all but three struggled to have children; two of the three said they had detected chemicals in their rations and avoided

consuming them because of it, and the third was not in a concentration camp.

One Auschwitz survivor, who is now 96, said she and her sister had both sought medical attention after the war, but were still only able to have one child each. “We wanted more,” she told Kleinplatz, according to the academic paper. “We tried. Why didn’t anybody ask me about this before? I wish they had,” she said.

Kleinplatz said that many of the survivors she interviewed told her that dreaming of having big families had helped them endure the camps.

“Most of these women came from large, religiously-observant Jewish homes in Eastern Europe,” she said in the interview. “And for them not to be able to have the kinds of families they wanted meant that they were grieving not only for the past that they had lost, but the future that they had dreamt of recreating.”

# 34 years ago I left Ukraine because it was no place for Jews. I'm not ready to leave again.

By Helen Chervitz

Today, when I walk the streets of Kyiv, I think of the days when my husband and I waited to leave the country with our baby daughter. Ukraine was no place for Jews, and we longed for a better life in the U.S., where the discrimination we faced here would not place limits on our futures.

We became American citizens, and had a good life in the U.S., first in the Boston area, and then in New York. I thought I'd never go back to Ukraine. But I did, long before this horrendous war broke out. Now people ask me, "Why do you stay? You could leave at any time and live your American lives again."

They also ask, as they remind me that I left Ukraine because of antisemitism, "What's it like to be a Jew in Ukraine today?"

As a journalist, I usually write about other people. (And before this war I used to write about fashion, not current events.) But I understand that my story is intertwined with what is happening today in Ukraine, and its history. So I'm sharing, in hopes that it helps to explain the worlds that I've lived in, as much as it tells you about me.

## **Jewish — in Soviet Ukraine**

Even as a small child in Ukraine, it was very clear to me that Jews were treated differently than other people, as second-class citizens. That was the case even though my family was not observant, and didn't know much about Judaism.

On official documents — the fifth line to be exact — from school forms to passports, our nationality was marked "Jewish," not "Ukrainian" or "Russian." Jewish people called it the "damn fifth line." It was like a curse, assuring that we would always be treated with disdain, and barred from educational and professional opportunities.

I experienced antisemitism from both those who acted out of ignorance, parroting the beliefs of their parents, and others who, hostile and occasionally violent, seemed eager to hurt Jews.

When I was ready for college, I had little choice. I was a serious swimmer, and competed on the Ukrainian junior national team. But I didn't want to make a career of athletics, and yet, as a Jew, that was the only college program that would accept me in Ukraine. I then went to Moscow, where antisemitism was not as rampant, and earned a master's degree in math.

After I graduated with honors, I couldn't get a job for a year because I was Jewish.

And in daily life, it seemed antisemitism could strike anywhere, unexpectedly. Strangers would judge me to be Jewish by my looks, and lash out.

There was the time at a restaurant when I, then 19, asked the people at the table next to ours if they could pass the salt shaker. One of them, a man, threw it at my head, yelling, "You think it's not enough that you eat our bread?"

That same year, I was grabbed by my coat and thrown off a bus by a passenger who announced that I was Jewish. I can still hear him addressing my non-Jewish companion: "Do you know who your friend is? Obviously not!"

Some of my friends distanced themselves from me when they found out I was Jewish. Others remained friendly, but let me know that I was cool, unlike other Jews.

No wonder so many Soviet children were taught by their parents to hide their Jewishness. My husband and I wanted to liberate ourselves from this antisemitism, and we didn't want our child to grow up in such a country.

### **An American life**

In the late 1980s, the Soviets finally buckled to international pressure and agreed to allow Jews to leave Ukraine. As soon as we applied to emigrate, my husband and I were stripped of our citizenship and lost our jobs.

We had to wait 10 months before we were allowed to go, and as we left the country, customs officers combed through our

belongings, tossing most of what we had packed into a trash can, including my swimming medals and our baby's formula.

We made our new home north of Boston, because our sponsor, my husband's uncle, lived there, and quickly came to understand that the North Shore is home to a vibrant Jewish community.

Two weeks after we arrived, I applied for a job as aquatics director at the Jewish Community Center of the North Shore in Marblehead. There were 12 applicants and three rounds of interviews, and when I got the offer, the feeling was beyond happiness. This could never have happened in Ukraine, regardless of my qualifications.

I also discovered that in my new home, being Jewish was something to be proud of, not hidden. At the JCC, most of my colleagues and many of the children I taught were Jewish. Other Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union became our friends, and among them, many began to learn about and practice Judaism, and became active synagogue members.

My husband and I never became observant, yet we connected our daughter to Jewish life and culture. She spent summers at Jewish camps and twice went to Israel for cultural and educational trips organized by American Jewish organizations. She now works at the Vilna Shul in Boston.

As for me, I was proud of my work at the JCC, where I took the swim team from last place in the league to a championship title. But I wanted to do what I couldn't in Ukraine — to study and work in the art world. My husband was doing well as a stockbroker, which enabled me to open a gallery on Boston's Newbury Street. There I curated

contemporary exhibits, including one showcasing Soviet artists — both those who stayed and those who had left.

Bostonians' appetite for modern art wasn't all I hoped for, so I accepted an offer as a marketing director for a fashion designer whose pieces I consider works of art. That led to courses in fashion design, and trips to Paris for Fashion Weeks. I learned French so I could conduct business in France. The brand I worked for took off in Europe, the U.S. and Japan. That's how, in middle age, my career in fashion began.

My family was prospering in the U.S., and my gratitude to the country and American Jews for the sanctuary given to us is beyond words. I have never regretted our decision to leave Ukraine. I swore I would never set foot in the country again.

Yet here I am.

### **A different Ukraine**

After 25 years in Swampscott, Massachusetts, and five in New York, my husband and I moved back to Ukraine. He had a business venture he wanted to pursue. The idea was to stay for just a year.

But we have been back for a decade, due to changing political and economic circumstances.

Readjusting to life in Kyiv was hard. But the city grew on me. And it is now a very different place from the one I left as a new mother.

The world has opened up to Ukraine, and it has moved far in the direction of democracy, freedom and tolerance. People began to study about other religions and cultures.

And antisemitism is not ever-present. On the contrary, being a Jew in Ukraine is even kind of cool. Some of the non-Jewish students I tutor in English search for Jewish ancestors, study Judaism and wear Magen David necklaces.

Gone is the state-sponsored antisemitism Jews endured under the Nazis and the Soviets. And incredibly, in 2019 Ukrainians elected a Jewish president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, by a landslide — 73% of the vote. At one point, Ukraine was the only country in the world, outside Israel, with a Jewish president and prime minister.

And after the mass exodus of Jews from Ukraine in the wake of the Soviet Union's fall, those remaining have managed to resurrect old Jewish communities and to build new ones. There are an estimated 100,000 Jews in Ukraine today, and in recent years, synagogues, Jewish schools and cultural centers have cropped up.

Importantly, most Ukrainians see Jews as part of Ukraine's history.

Of course there is still antisemitism in Ukraine, just like there is everywhere. In the last five years, it has festered in particular within nationalist groups, who have a long history of anti-Jewish leaders and alliances. Streets and statues around Ukraine, some of them newly erected, pay tribute to the nationalists who collaborated with the Nazis. They make Jews here uncomfortable.

And even though Ukraine is now proud of its Jewish president, it still doesn't have the will or tools to effectively prosecute hate crimes against Jews. Ukrainian officials, at best, charge perpetrators with "hooliganism."

Still, what I notice in Ukraine now, is that the talk about Jews centers on their cultural and spiritual contributions to the country — not their otherness or victimhood.

I live in the heart of Kyiv, around the corner from its main thoroughfare, Khreshchatyk Street. When the war broke out I saw its citizens suffer. They waited in lines for food even longer than in Soviet times, and feared the Russian army would move closer.

Life is much better here than at the war's start. Children are back in school and my gym has reopened so I have resumed swimming. But however scary it was to remain in the city after Vladimir Putin's invasion, there were many Kyivites like us, who decided to stay and defy his attempts to terrorize us.

We, who once risked everything to leave Ukraine, now feel tied to this city and its people — Jews and non-Jews alike.

# Back from war, Hank Greenberg took a hard swing for the pennant

By Frederic J. Frommer

Contending baseball teams often make midseason trades to improve for the pennant race. But in the summer of 1945, the Detroit Tigers made a move that drastically improved their roster without having to give up any players in return, welcoming back slugger Hank Greenberg after he served 4 ½ years in the military during World War II.

Greenberg, a future Hall of Famer, had been the best Jewish player of his generation and one of the biggest stars in the sport. In 1933, his rookie season, “there were Jewish baseball players that had made it to the majors, but there had never been a Jewish baseball star,” wrote Joe Posnanski in *The Athletic*. “In truth, there had never been a Jewish-American sports superstar at all.”

Greenberg soon changed that. In 1935, he won the American League MVP, leading the Tigers to a World Series title. In 1938, he nearly matched Babe Ruth’s single-season home run record of 60, swatting 58. And in 1940, the year before he enlisted, he led the Tigers to the American League pennant with another monster season, pacing the league with 41 homers, 50 doubles and 150 RBIs, while batting .340 and winning the MVP again.

But he was 29 in 1940, in his prime. The *Sporting News*, known as the “Bible of Baseball” back when baseball reigned as the nation’s supreme sport, was among the doubters as Hammerin’ Hank prepared for his July 1, 1945, return at Briggs Stadium in Detroit.

“Nearly five seasons have elapsed,” the publication observed. “Greenberg now is 34 years of age. Quite obviously he is not in possession of the physical qualities which made him the highest salaried ball player of 1941. Perhaps, while in the service, Hank became rusty in the game.”

But 26-year-old Ted Williams, who was finishing up his third and final year of wartime service, had a different take. “Greenberg will hit, and you can count on that,” he said. “At the end of the season, he’ll be the most dangerous hitter on the Detroit team.”

## Enlisting — and enlisting again

Greenberg had actually enlisted twice in 1941. He was drafted into the service on May 7, the first baseball star to enter the military, a day after hitting his first two home runs of the season in a victory over the New York Yankees. They would turn out to be Greenberg’s only homers that year, as he

missed the rest of the season serving in the military. Newsreel cameras and photographers documented his induction while a 13-piece WPA orchestra played swing music, according to Greenberg biographer John Rosengren.

Greenberg was honorably discharged in December. Two days later, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, and he joined the Army Air Corps — the first pro baseball player to re-enlist.

“This doubtless means I am finished with baseball, and it would be silly for me to say I do not leave it without a pang,” he said. “But all of us are confronted with a terrible task — the defense of our country and the fight of our lives.”

“The decision announced last week by Hank Greenberg gave the game and the nation a special thrill,” wrote longtime Sporting News publisher J.G. Taylor Spink, on Dec. 18, 1941. “Fans of America, and all baseball, salute him for that decision.”

Greenberg served in the China-Burma-India Theater of Operations, flying B-29 bomber missions, returning home with the Presidential Unit Citation and four battle stars. He rejoined the Tigers in mid-June 1945.

“His return reversed the question that had affected every team throughout the war,” wrote Bill Gilbert in “The Seasons,” a book about 10 memorable seasons in baseball, starting with 1945. “Instead of wondering which teams would be the most affected by the military draft, the question became which teams would be helped most by players returning from military duty.”

Before seeing game action, Greenberg worked to get himself into playing shape.

“After 10 days or two weeks, I’ll have a lot better idea than I have now of how much or how little I can help the club,” he said. “I believe it will be a matter of timing. I know I need plenty of batting practice.”

When he made his 1945 debut on July 1, the Tigers were in first place, 1 ½ games ahead of the second-place New York Yankees. The Tigers hosted the last-place Philadelphia Athletics in a doubleheader that afternoon in front of a season-high crowd of nearly 48,000. In the first game, Greenberg started in left field and batted cleanup, going hitless in his first three at-bats and drawing a walk in his fourth turn. Then in the bottom of the eighth inning, he hit a home run over the left field wall, earning a standing ovation. The Tigers won 9-5.

The New York Times featured a prominent photo of Greenberg crossing home plate with a teammate waiting to congratulate him, with the caption headlined: “A glad hand was out in Detroit for an old hand.”

### **A heroic hit for the pennant**

Over the season’s final three months, Greenberg helped carry the team down the stretch by hitting .311 with 13 home runs and 60 RBIs in just 78 games. He finished 14th in the MVP vote — a remarkable feat for a player who missed half the season. Detroit soon pulled away from the Yankees, but they wound up having to fight off a surprising challenge from another team, the Washington Senators, who usually roamed at the bottom of the American League standings.

The exciting pennant race came down to the final day of the season. The Senators had already finished their schedule, and the Tigers were scheduled to play a doubleheader against the St. Louis Browns, the defending AL champs. Detroit needed just one win to clinch the pennant. A Browns sweep, on the other hand, would set up a one-game playoff between the Tigers and Senators in D.C. to determine the pennant winner.

After eight innings of the first game, the Browns led 3-2, on a rainy afternoon in St. Louis. Greenberg came up with the bases loaded in the top of the ninth inning. He smashed a line drive down the left field line. As he recalled in his autobiography:

“I stood at the plate and watched the ball for fear the umpire would call it foul. It landed a few feet inside the foul pole for a grand slam. We won the game, and the pennant, and all the players charged the field when I reached home plate and they pounded me on the back and carried on like I was a hero. There was almost nobody in the stands to pay attention, and there were few newspapermen. Just the ballplayers giving me a hero’s welcome.”

“Never was a title won in more dramatic fashion, before,” The Associated Press declared. “Premature darkness was settling over the field and a light mist was falling as big Hank stepped up with his team a run behind ...”

Utility infielder Eddie Borom was especially excited. The AP reported that he “leaped around Greenberg’s neck and planted a kiss on his check at home plate.”

The team returned to Detroit and a welcoming party of thousands of fans at the train station.

Greenberg continued his hot hand in the World Series, hitting .304 with two homers and three doubles, as the Tigers beat the Chicago Cubs in seven games. (That would be the Cubs’ last trip to the World Series until 2016.) The next year, he proved his shortened 1945 season was no fluke: leading the league with 44 home runs and 127 RBIs, in what turned out to be his last season with Detroit. He retired a year later after a single season with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

In 1956, Greenberg became the first Jewish baseball player elected to the Hall of Fame.

In his autobiography, Greenberg, who died in 1986, said he took a special satisfaction at knocking out the Washington Senators after returning home from the war.

“The best part of that home run,” he recalled, “was hearing later what the Washington players said: ‘Goddam that dirty Jew bastard, he beat us again.’ They were calling me all kinds of names behind my back, and now they had to pack up and go home, while we were going to the World Series.”

# Kushner offered to pay to get the Abraham Accords ceremony on White House lawn, a new book reports

By Jacob Kornbluh

Jared Kushner, the former White House senior advisor and architect of the Abraham Accords, committed to personally cover any potential costs of the White House signing ceremony for the deal after facing resistance from first lady Melania Trump, according to a new tell-all book about the Trump administration.

The ceremony was slated for the South Lawn, but the first lady's office controls the use of the White House grounds and Melania Trump "was worried about the grass," journalists Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, a Washington, D.C. power couple, write in their forthcoming memoir, titled "The Divider." The Forward obtained an advance copy of the book, which is set to be published on Tuesday.

The lawn had just been resodded in August, after Trump supporters tromped on it as they watched the president deliver his nomination address to the 2020 Republican National Convention.

"Kushner and his team were dumbfounded," Baker, chief White House correspondent for

The New York Times, and Glasser, a staff writer for The New Yorker, write in a book that includes accounts of several exclusive behind-the-scenes episodes during the Trump administration. "After all the delicate bargaining to bring Israelis and Arabs together, resolving part of the world's greatest geopolitical turf battle, the final obstacle to their day of celebration would be the actual turf?" they write of the historic normalization deal between Israel and several Arab countries.

After considering other alternatives that were ruled out due to COVID-19 restrictions and security concerns, Kushner appealed to his father-in-law, the president, who agreed the South Lawn was the best option. But the first lady's office "refused to bend" because they said it would cost too much to resod again if the crowd — estimated at about 700 guests — tore it up.

"How much?" Kushner reportedly asked about the cost of resodding. About \$80,000, the office responded. "No problem," Kushner said. "It's on me."

Kushner, whose net worth was estimated at about \$800 million in 2019, said he would “personally write a check to cover any expense if the grass was damaged,” Baker and Glasser write. The event eventually took place on Sept. 15, 2020, on the South Lawn. “When the trumpets stopped playing and the documents were all signed, the grass turned out to be just fine. Kushner could keep his check,” they write.

### **If I forget thee, O Jerusalem**

The book details how normalization deals were made possible thanks to personal relationships Kushner forged with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and then-crown prince and de facto leader of the United Arab Emirates Mohammad bin Zayed. The two met with Kushner in 2016 at the suggestion of Tom Barrack, a Lebanese American investor who is now under indictment for illegal foreign lobbying.

Even some Republicans were disturbed by the degree to which non-government officials could influence foreign policy in the Trump White House, according to Baker and Glasser. They write that former Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee, who was chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was “dazzled” when he was called to Trump Tower in New York to interview for secretary of state and found Trump conferring with GOP megadonor Sheldon Adelson.

Adelson, who was the largest single donor for Trump in the presidential election, demanded that Trump announce the relocation of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on the first day of his presidency, Corker recalled in an interview with the authors. “Trump was eager to oblige,” said the former Republican senator,

who later learned that Trump “had to be talked out of literally announcing the embassy move in the first hours of the presidency.”

A year later, weeks after his decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Trump offered Jordanian King Abdullah II control of the West Bank, the book reveals. “Abdullah, we have got a great deal for you,” Trump reportedly told the king in a quick phone call while he was meeting with then-Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2018. “We are going to give you the West Bank.” Trump then hung up the phone, the authors write.

The Palestinian Authority had cut off ties with the Trump administration after the embassy relocation was announced in December 2017. A phone call between Trump and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas abruptly ended after a long rant on the day before Trump made the decision public.

“I thought I was having a heart attack,” Abdullah told an American friend in 2018. “I couldn’t breathe. I was bent doubled-over.” Taking possession of the occupied Palestinian territories would have led to the collapse of the Hashemite monarchy.

### **Trump country**

The authors report that Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared “unimpressed” with Trump’s popularity in Israel after the former president bragged during a 2019 meeting about the Israeli government’s intention to build a new settlement in the Golan Heights and call it “Trump Heights” in honor of his decision to recognize Israel’s control over the Golan.

“Maybe they should just name Israel after you, Donald,” Putin told Trump in the conversation that took place during the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan, their first one-on-one meeting since the release of the Mueller report on the Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

Putin was also popular in Israel at the time, maintaining close ties with then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“For all of Trump’s schoolboy crush on Putin, aides could not help noticing that it did not appear reciprocated,” Baker and Glasser write. “He gave the impression to American aides watching their interaction that he couldn’t care less about winning Trump over.”

# Supreme Court's only Jewish member warns of judges 'undermining their own legitimacy'

By Beth Harpaz

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan spoke Monday at a Manhattan synagogue about her “quasi-bat mitzvah,” her admiration for Louis Brandeis and her famous “Chinese food on Christmas Day” line. But she also offered a not-so-oblique critique of the high court’s turn to the right.

“If we go around doing politics, doing policy, imposing our personal preferences on people, why should anybody accept this?” she said at Temple Emanu-El in front of nearly 1,000 people. “Nobody elected me and the only reason people should accept what judges do is because they’re doing law.”

She said that judges “undermine their own legitimacy” when they “stray into places where it looks like they’re an extension of the political process.”

Earlier in the evening, Kagan recounted the story from her 2010 Senate confirmation hearings in which Sen. Lindsay Graham asked her where she was on Christmas. “I said, ‘like all good Jews, I was probably at a Chinese restaurant,’” Kagan recalled.

Kagan is now one of just three liberal justices on the high court and its only Jewish member. She never explicitly referred to the court’s current partisan divide. Nor did she mention the court’s recent *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, which found there is no constitutional right to an abortion.

But she said that when a new judge arrives, “and all of a sudden the law changes on you, what does that say? It just doesn’t seem a lot like law if it can depend so much on which particular person is on the court.” Following precedent, she added, is essential “to ensure that people see courts not as political actors.”

## Chinese food on Christmas

“There were a lot of people who thought it was very funny. There were also a lot of people who were extremely confused.”

She said Sen. Charles Schumer “had to explain why it was that Jews went to

Chinese restaurants on Christmas.” Graham later told her, “I knew you were going to get confirmed after this.” Her nomination was confirmed by a 63-37 vote.

### **A ‘half-bat mitzvah’**

Kagan, 62, was introduced at Temple Emanu-El as having had the “first bat mitzvah” at the Lincoln Square Synagogue, a modern Orthodox synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where she grew up. But she clarified the distinction, saying it was “not a full bat mitzvah.”

She recalled wanting a bat mitzvah after her older brother’s bar mitzvah. But in 1973, “Orthodox synagogues did not give bat mitzvahs,” she said. After a “negotiation with the rabbi,” they settled on a “half-bat mitzvah” or “quasi-bat mitzvah,” called a “bat torah.” It took place on a Friday night, not Saturday, and she read a haftarah portion instead of a Torah portion.

“So it was compromised in various ways for those of you who know about Jewish-type stuff,” Kagan said. Still, she expressed an “enormous amount of respect for the rabbis”

at Lincoln Square who were “pioneering in this endeavor.”

### **The Brandeis ‘horror story’**

Kagan spoke for more than an hour in conversation with Alison Nathan, a judge on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. Nathan noted that Kagan holds the seat once occupied by Brandeis, who was the high court’s first Jewish justice.

Kagan described Brandeis’ nomination hearings as “a horror story” due to antisemitism. “It was an incredible thing to get him confirmed through that feeling of ‘no Jews here,’” she said. “It didn’t end when he got to the court. One of his colleagues would turn his back on him when he started to talk.”

Referring to that judge, Justice James Clark McReynolds, Kagan added that he was a “nothing justice. Except that he was an antisemite, you wouldn’t know what his name was. And Justice Brandeis was one of the greatest justices, the most brilliant justices, of all time.”



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