

WEEKEND READS

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Culture

Stepping into the ‘Funny Girl’ spotlight, Lea Michele tries to save the show — and herself

By Irene Katz Connelly

“Funny Girl” establishes its stakes early. Early in the show, when aspiring thespian Fanny Brice auditions to be a chorus girl at a seedy vaudeville house a problem immediately arises: She can sing and dance, and she’s even funny, but she’s unwilling and unable to fit in with a crowd. After she botches a group routine, the proprietor, Mr. Keeney, scrutinizes her suspiciously. “There’s something different about you,” he says. “But I can’t put my finger on it.”

Premiering as a musical in 1964 and a film in 1968, with Barbra Streisand starring in both, “Funny Girl” is (very) loosely based on the real life of Fanny Brice, an early 20th-century Jewish actress who clawed her way from burlesque shows to Broadway stardom, her professional success a stark contrast to a ruinous marriage with gambler and criminal Nick Arnstein. Cementing Streisand’s own status as a Hollywood icon, the show chronicled a Jewish performer’s journey from margins to mainstream at a time when Jews were finally assimilating into white American society. Even as it premiered, it was already looking back in time, retelling the past to explain the present.

In the film, the “something different” about Fanny is obvious. The other chorus girls awaiting Mr. Keeney’s judgment are blonde, conventionally graceful, and silent. As played by Streisand, Fanny mouths off, bungles the dance steps, and displays her distinctive nose as much as possible. Though she’s nowhere near as homely or klutzy as the movie would have us believe, her performance affirms that her difference stems from her quippy, irrepressible, child-of-Henry-Street Jewishness. The joke, here, lies in the fact that Mr. Keeney could absolutely have put his finger on it.

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In the “Funny Girl” revival currently running at the August Wilson Theater, which as of this week stars Lea Michele, things aren’t so straightforward. This gaggle of chorus girls is a far more diverse one, which, though Broadway has hardly become a beacon of equity, is de rigueur in 2022. And any novelty surrounding Jewish performers has long given way to the infamous “Spamalot” maxim, “You won’t succeed on Broadway if you don’t have any Jews.”

Under these conditions, the joke doesn’t quite land. Instead, Michele neatly sweeps it out of view with her rendition of “I’m the Greatest Star.” It’s her first big number, and it sets the tone: For the next two and a half hours, the show will rely on Michele’s star power, her ability to belt out a technically brutal score and even her controversial history to prop up a revival that is pedantically faithful to the original and willfully blind to its own anachronisms.

The first revival since Streisand originated the production in 1964, “Funny Girl” debuted in April with supremely lovable up-and-comer Beanie Feldstein as Fanny. Reviews were tepid; a representative one from The New York Times described Feldstein as “not stupendous.” Though critics also griped about the book, the sets and the pared-down orchestra, Feldstein seemed to absorb much of the blame for lackluster ticket sales. When she unexpectedly departed “Funny Girl” in July, writing cryptically on Instagram that “the production decided to take the show in a different direction,” many speculated she’d been ousted.

Meanwhile, Michele had been hankering to star in “Funny Girl” for pretty much her entire career. She first encountered the film as a source of teenage inspiration while starring in “Spring Awakening.” As her prima donna character Rachel Berry in the television series “Glee,” she performed several anthems from the show and even, in the show’s fifth season, starred in a revival that was, at the time, entirely fictional.

But her arrival at the real revival wasn’t the happy homecoming her “Glee” storyline envisioned. In 2020, her fellow “Glee” star Samantha Ware accused Michele of bullying and toxic behavior on set, including racist comments about her hair. The revelation unleashed a wave of criticism from Michele’s coworkers on several different projects; a “Spring Awakening” understudy posted on Instagram that she was “nothing but a nightmare” to work with. In a New York Times profile ahead of her debut as Fanny, Michele gave the standard speech of a celebrity trying to put a scandal to bed, assuring readers that she’d spent appropriate time in self-reflection and conceding that her perfectionist personality “left me with a lot of blind spots.” While Michele is hardly responsible for the politics of Feldstein’s departure, many on social media perceived her as usurping another star and cementing her status as a villain.

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But if the audience at Wednesday's matinee had been reading up on the drama, they were definitely in Michele's camp. Applause burst out as soon as she stepped onstage, in the first measures of most songs, after each of her solos — you get the picture. Before she'd even finished "Don't Rain on My Parade," the first act's final number, everyone around me had risen for a standing ovation.

It's hard to argue that Michele's performance didn't deserve it. Wisely, she decided not to imitate Streisand's insouciant interpretation of Fanny. Instead, she exudes the athleticism and polish that come with working on Broadway since the age of 8. (Her first job was the dual role of Young Cosette and Young Éponine in "Les Misérables.")

The sheer array of strenuous activities she performs while singing had me panting: Michele sings while hoisting herself onto a piano, while climbing out of the orchestra pit and while tap dancing, which she learned for the show. At one point, she breaks off mid-measure to hoot like an owl, before returning to the song with perfect rhythm and pitch. Michele's Fanny isn't unstudied or spontaneous like Streisand's; one senses that the idea of spontaneity is anathema to her. But the unabashedly try-hard spirit she brings to the role reminded me why it's worth shelling out money, schlepping to Midtown, and contorting my legs into airline-quality seats in order to see really good singers live.

Which is pretty lucky, since the show depends entirely on that commanding performance. While the musical version of "Funny Girl" is roughly the same length of the film, the book (originally written by Isobel Lennart and just barely updated for this production by Harvey Fierstein) rushes through events that are developed far more satisfactorily on-screen. On the other hand, when the show deviates from Fanny's professional rise to focus on her relationships with her mother and her lover, it becomes sluggish. As Nick, Ramin Karimloo is perfunctory and a little passionless. It's difficult to imagine being sufficiently enamored of him to sink \$68,000 into his obviously doomed casino venture, as Fanny fatefully does. When he's left to sing on his own, things get positively torpid.

Perhaps most mystifying is the way the revival treats the unraveling of Fanny's marriage. When a hurricane washes away Nick's casino and his hopes of becoming a successful paterfamilias, he spirals into a self-pitying funk with which it is difficult to fully sympathize, given that Fanny is bending over backwards to support them both without making him feel bad about the money he lost. Spurning his wife's attempts to help him professionally, Nick gets involved in an unspecified criminal enterprise and is soon arrested for embezzlement.

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The movie and original musical blame this unfortunate turn of events not on the embezzler in question, but on Fanny herself. She loved Nick too much, the script tells us, and didn't respect him enough. By happily providing for their family and investing in his doomed business ventures, she emasculated him. By offering to pay for a lawyer, she demonstrated a reprehensible desire to micromanage.

The he-left-because-you-smothered-him angle was antiquated when first written in the 1960s. In 2022, it's nearly impossible to sit through the bewildering lecture delivered by Fanny's mother (a valiant Tovah Feldshuh), who alternately hectors Fanny for choosing a crook and accuses her of loving him the wrong way. Just as the revival might have tweaked the big nose jokes to make a more contemporary point about perceptions of Jews in public life, it might have reworked this segment to express something more than tired stereotypes about overbearing Jewish wives. Had the show toned down the blame a few notches, it could have delivered a powerful comment on the human tendency to lavish love where it isn't deserved. Instead, it regurgitated a plotline that was never all that convincing. By the time Nick slinks back from prison to definitively ditch his marriage, I just wanted him to get off stage so she could continue singing.

Fortunately, that's exactly what happens. In a typical display of his considerate nature, Nick dumps Fanny right before she's set to go on stage, and she has about 15 seconds to cry it out before shedding her dressing gown to reveal a slinky beaded costume. Reprising several of the show's most iconic numbers in the finale medley, this matured, hardened Fanny grits out lyrics that she once trilled. Finally, she appears neither as an uncomplicated show girl or an irredeemable wife, but as an impressive and flawed woman, a performer whose determination and brash self-confidence render her blind when it matters most.

You can see that Lea Michele is playing herself. And it's working.

A new New York law requires museums to label art looted by Nazis — but is it constitutional?

By Samuel Breslow

Last month, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul signed a law requiring museums to label artworks known to have been looted by the Nazis. Hochul hailed the first-of-its-kind measure, which passed unanimously in both the state Assembly and state Senate, as a way to honor Holocaust victims. But some legal scholars say the requirement may not be constitutional.

Hundreds of thousands of artworks were stolen from Jews after the Nazis came to power in an attempt to enrich the regime and erase Jewish culture, and many have ended up in museum collections around the world — including an unknown number in New York. In recent decades, Jewish heirs of collector families have sued to try to get works back, with mixed success.

“It’s vital that we be transparent and ensure that anyone viewing artwork stolen by the Nazis understand where it came from and its role in history,” wrote the law’s chief senate sponsor, Long Island Democrat Anna Kaplan, in a press release.

But however well-intentioned the law, it strikes multiple First Amendment lawyers interviewed by the Forward as a possible example of “compelled speech,” which judges generally frown upon to avoid forcing anyone to say something they would rather not. Still, even if the statute can’t withstand judicial scrutiny, museums may have ways to sidestep it. For several reasons, scholars say, the law may amount to little more than a statement of political will.

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A ‘shaming sign’

Eric Goldman, a professor at the Santa Clara University School of Law who studies compelled speech, said it was unclear how courts might interpret the measure if it were challenged.

“One way of framing the law is that it’s an incursion into the museum’s artistic decisions,” he said, in which case it could be struck down. “It tells a museum how they must present their art and that has implications for the museum’s ability to speak, to make its own artistic statement.”

But another way to view the law, he continued — that it simply requires museums to disclose the details of a work’s ownership history — could put it on more solid ground.

Goldman said it’s difficult to predict which path a judge might take because a look at prior compelled speech cases shows that “the law itself is just anarchy,” with courts applying it “in wildly inconsistent ways using a variety of tests.”

In one such case, the Supreme Court ruled in 1943 that schoolchildren cannot be forced to salute the U.S. flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance. And in 1977, it ruled that New Hampshire cannot require vehicles to use license plates with the state’s motto, “Live Free or Die.”

However, in other situations, the government has been able to make the case that it has a legitimate reason to compel speech, particularly in the commercial realm, where consumer protection laws require manufacturers to include nutrition facts or health warnings on their products.

Rebecca Tushnet, a First Amendment professor at Harvard Law School, was less ambivalent than Goldman about the law’s prospects in court.

“I don’t think it’s constitutional,” she said. “The government needs a really good reason to stop you from speaking in the way you want and to require you to say something that you would rather not say. And if you’re not a commercial seller, then it’s very rare that there’d be a good enough reason.” (The new law applies only to museums, not art galleries or auction houses.)

She noted that, because the law requires museums to provide the information “prominently” on “a placard or other signage,” rather than just in an online database, the courts may be less likely to see it as merely an ownership disclosure. “This is a shaming sign,” she said.

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(New York law already requires works that were transferred during World War II to be registered with the Art Loss Register.)

Tushnet added that the government sometimes inappropriately uses compelled speech when it wants to incentivize an action, in this case restitution, but would find doing so directly too complicated or politically unpalatable. “If the government interest is not really in informing the public, it’s in getting the stuff back, then the correctly tailored law gives the stuff back,” she said.

And if New York’s interest is merely in educating museumgoers, not returning works, then courts would likely force the state to say what it wants to say directly, to avoid confusion about whether speech is coming from the museum or the government, she said. “When there are other options, like a public education campaign, courts often find that the government should have to take that path instead.”

A spokesperson for Kaplan, the bill sponsor, took issue with the idea that the law raises constitutional questions, writing to the Forward that “the legislation was vetted by the Senate’s counsel, the Assembly’s counsel, and the governor’s counsel, and at no time was an issue raised that the legislation presents any First Amendment concerns.”

Her office did not respond to further inquiry.

A law that ‘sends a message’

“Museums are unlikely to be excited about this law, because any disclosures they make in relation to the law could very well become the basis of a lawsuit against them,” Goldman said. “The potential plaintiffs would treat that as an admission that would potentially fuel their case to try and reclaim ownership of the item.”

But the law may remain safely on the books — less because of its constitutionality than because of its toothlessness. To get struck down by the courts, it would first need to reach them — and because it lacks any mechanisms for enforcement, museums may find it easier to just ignore it than to incur the expense and reputational risk of challenging it.

“Our legal codes are littered with laws that are never enforced,” said Goldman. “This was a messaging bill in my mind. This law wasn’t really meant to be law. It was really meant to send a message to voters.”

And even if New York attempts to enforce the law, its text leaves a lot of room for interpretation and evasion. It was amended during the drafting process to require the

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disclosure only “to the extent practicable,” which provides a loophole, Goldman said. “Museums could easily take the position, ‘it wasn’t practical for us to do this.’”

Provenance research is also inherently complicated. “It’s not necessarily like, either it was stolen by Nazis or it’s fine,” said Victoria Reed, the senior curator for provenance at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and a leader in the field of restitution. “There were a lot of ways in which art was lost during this time.”

Goldman agreed. By treating an artwork’s status as a binary — looted or not — “the disclosure could potentially mislead the viewers by suggesting that there might be issues with the integrity of the ownership when in fact maybe it’s clean,” he said.

The law applies to all art “which changed hands due to theft, seizure, confiscation, forced sale or other involuntary means in Europe during the Nazi era,” which Reed noted appears to include works that were returned immediately after the war and later acquired by museums, not just those with contested ownership.

And even museums not seeking to cover up a questionable acquisition might find that the space taken up by the disclosure crowds out other educational information they’re seeking to convey. “Some of these objects are small decorative arts objects that are in cases where the space for a label is really quite limited,” said Reed. “You can’t make four points in a label. You can really make one point in a label.”

Reed noted that the American Alliance of Museums has published detailed guidance for curators about how to handle Nazi-era provenance issues and how to communicate transparently about them, but that many smaller institutions struggle to find the resources needed to conduct proper research.

The institutions that are subject to the new law, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the largest art museum in the Americas, have so far stayed mum about it. The Met did not provide comment to the Forward.

Separate from the new law, museums are facing mounting pressure to return looted works — and not just those stolen by Nazis. Investigators seized 27 artifacts worth more than \$13 million from the Met on Sept. 2, asserting that they had been looted from Italy and Egypt.

“Museums are being held increasingly accountable to their public and to their visitors,” said Reed. “And I do think that our visitors want to know the stories, perhaps more than they did 20, 30, 40 years ago.”

Section TKTK

Who runs the largest Jewish federations? Not women.

By Arno Rosenfeld

On paper, Jewish federations across North America have made great strides in promoting women to leadership positions in recent years. Women now lead 43% of the roughly 150 federations in the United States and Canada, up nearly 10% from a decade ago.

But the federations, secular nonprofits that organize, fund and represent Jewish communities across North America, have realized these gains almost entirely at small and midsize federations. Women remain a rarity at the largest and most powerful federations — institutions serving the biggest Jewish populations, and often commanding assets of more than \$100 million, with the power to fund or starve local nonprofits and influence public policy.

Joy Sisisky, who was hired to run the San Francisco federation in June, joined Erika Rudin-Luria in Cleveland to become one of just two women running one of the 20 federations in the Jewish Federations of North America system's top size tier.

"Why is it easier to get a woman on the Supreme Court than to get a woman in charge of a large-city federation?" asked Shifra Bronznick, who founded the advocacy group Advancing Women Professionals in the Jewish Community more than two decades ago.

A Forward analysis of data from the Jewish Federations of North America and other sources shows that women have long been concentrated in the smallest organizations but now fill nearly half the roles in midsize federations, creating a potential pipeline that some advocates believe will soon lead to women being tapped to head the largest institutions.

The numbers tell the story of how small Jewish communities in places like Wichita, Kansas, and Lexington, Kentucky, reached rough gender parity in senior leadership at least 30 years ago. Midsize federations — think Dallas or New Orleans — have closed in on parity in the last decade.

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But a thick glass ceiling remains firmly in place in the top-tier federations such as New York and Los Angeles; San Francisco was the first of that group to hire a woman chief executive, in 2010. Montreal also had a female leader, Deborah Corber, from 2011 to 2017. Because the Forward analysis was based on a snapshot of four years — 1992, 2002, 2012 and 2022 — it's possible that some other large federations had women chiefs in the intervening years.

Looking at the gender asymmetry another way, through a solely financial lens, women leaders controlled about a quarter of federations' total assets in 2020, the last year for which reliable data is available.

The failure of top federations to hire female directors mirrors trends in the Jewish nonprofit world more broadly, where, despite significant progress made since the 1960s — when virtually no women held senior leadership positions — and a renewed emphasis on diversity spurred by the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, men continue to oversee the most powerful organizations.

"The more money is on the line, the more the old boys network tends to be at play," said Rebecca Sirbu, executive vice president at the Jewish Funders Network, "and the harder it is for women to get hired."

Women pushed aside

Jewish federations began popping up in the early 20th century to consolidate fundraising across a vast and disconnected network of social service and advocacy organizations. The idea was to allow Jews who wanted to support their communities to give a single donation to a federation instead of weighing solicitations from dozens of different groups, many with overlapping missions. The federation, in turn, would dole out grants to individual organizations — and cajole mergers to streamline the world of Jewish philanthropy and community work.

But while those earlier, smaller charities had often been the purview of female volunteers, the new federations — with their focus on raising and distributing money rather than providing services to the needy — were professional organizations that swiftly became dominated by men.

"Women remained part of the framework of Federation, but they were atomized and set apart from many of its central workings," Beth Wenger, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in a 2017 history of how men came to dominate New York's federation system.

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That trend continued across the country until the feminist movement in the 1970s led Jewish women to demand access to leadership roles, from the rabbinate to the philanthropic C-suite. Jacqueline Levine, a civil rights activist, delivered a landmark speech at the Council of Jewish Federations conference in 1972 decrying the lack of recognition of female leaders, and significant changes followed. In 1975, 6% of the top jobs at the nation's federations were held by women; four years later, it was 17%.

By the 1990s, nearly a third of those roles were held by women. Barry Kosmin, research director of the Council of Jewish Federations at the time, explained the gender disparity in a 1993 Jewish Telegraphic Agency article by saying that “the job requires financial management skills that most women do not possess.”

Women saw other factors at play.

“Lay leaders and search committees do not always see women on equal footing with men,” one told researchers in a Federation study the following year. “They cannot see a female candidate beyond wife and mother.” Another said: “Women are not seen as fundraising professionals.”

Thirty years on, some such biases remain. A study released last year by Leading Edge, a group that helps Jewish nonprofits with workplace culture, noted that the boards of large organizations expect their chief executives to be on call at all hours of the day and may assume women want clearer boundaries between work and home.

Those who hope to see more women running federations in major metropolitan areas say that despite longstanding efforts, the barriers have been persistently stubborn.

Pipelines to the corner office

Liz Fisher, chief talent officer for the Jewish Federations of North America — which became the successor to the Council of Jewish Federations in 1999 — pointed to a series of career development programs the group has run for senior women working in the federation system in hopes they might move up to more prominent positions.

“We have a lot of work to do to ensure that the biggest federations in our system really are led by people who represent the diversity of the community and that for sure includes women,” Fisher said. “It’s 100% a challenge that we recognize and continue to focus on.”

JFNA breaks its 146 member groups into four tiers – large, large-intermediate, intermediate and small – based on a proprietary ranking system that takes into account both financial assets and population of the community being served.

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A note on methodology: The Forward's analysis was based on a review of several sources, including the American Jewish Yearbook, federation websites and direct outreach to federations to determine the gender of their top staff leaders. We did not find any executives who identified as non-binary.

While JFNA tracks some of this data in aggregate, a spokesperson said the group had misplaced reports for the early 1990s and 2000s. While we relied on data back to the 1970s, most of the analysis focused on the individual years 1992, 2002, 2012 and 2022 to outline the broader trends over the past 30 years.

In some of those years, a federation may have had a vacancy in the top role. For example, the Jewish Federation of New Mexico does not currently list a director or chief executive. And while the JFNA lists 146 member federations, some of these – like the Jewish Federation of Northeastern Pennsylvania and the Jewish Community Alliance of Northeastern Pennsylvania – are essentially the same institution. Both these factors slightly skewed the total percentages of male and female executives across different ranks.

Fisher pointed to progress at mid-size federations — like New Haven and Louisville — as a bright spot, noting that many such organizations have relatively large budgets that only appear small when compared to the powerhouse federations in Boston and New York.

Of these, the number of women-led federations in the JFNA's second tier, known as the "large-intermediates," indeed soared this year, to 47%, up from 24% in 2012 after remaining largely static in 2002 and 1992. That group included four female executives in 2012 but now has eight, including new hires in Houston, which reported a \$14 million annual budget in 2020; Rochester, New York (\$8.5 million); and Kansas City (\$7 million).

The federations that have been run by women are among the smallest ones. The Mid-Kansas Jewish Federation, for example, has been directed largely by female executives since the early 1990s; based in Wichita, it serves around 650 Jews and had about \$2.2 million in assets in 2020. Similarly, the federation in Peoria, Illinois — Jewish population about 800 and \$1.3 million in assets — has had a female chief for at least the last 30 years.

"Small and medium federation systems are harder jobs, actually," said Bronznick, the founder of Advancing Women Professionals, "because you have fewer resources."

There remain very few women CEOs of the very largest federations, which because of their outsize dominance in fundraising, means that men continue to control an outsize share of philanthropic dollars across the Jewish community.

Overall, 78 of the 140 identified chief federation executives in the United States are men, or 56%. But those men run organizations that control 74% of the \$8.8 billion that federations reported in total assets during 2020, the last year for which reliable data was available, or \$6.5 billion. (Some federations are connected to separate foundations,

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which may not be included in those reported assets. Canadian federations are not included in this count.)

Looking at the 17 federations that reported more than \$100 million in assets in 2020 — a slightly different group than those that JFNA describes as “large” — four are headed by women: Sisisky in San Francisco, which has the third-largest assets of all the nation’s federations, Audra Berg, who took over in Broward County near Miami this year, Danielle Minson in Cincinnati, who was hired last year, and Rudin-Luria, who started in 2019 in Cleveland, which has the fifth-highest total assets.

Despite that lopsided ledger, some who advocate for women’s leadership say the growing number of women at the midsize federations bodes well for change at the larger ones in the future. Sirbu, of the Jewish Funders Network, noted that federations often hire from within the system, so the top-tier organizations will now have a wider pool of talent to consider.

“They’re building it now — that’s the good news, the trend is going in the right direction,” Sirbu said. “It’ll take another 10 years until they crack the larger ceiling.”

How to put a woman in charge

San Francisco became the first major federation to hire a female chief executive, Jennifer Gorovitz, in 2010; she resigned four years later, and was replaced by a man, Danny Grossman, in 2015. When Grossman announced that he planned to depart at the end of 2021, Sisisky, who had been the federation’s chief philanthropy officer since 2016, was appointed interim CEO.

Michael Jacobs, a Silicon Valley patent attorney who co-chaired the federation’s search committee for the permanent position, said having “a diverse pool of candidates” was “really right at the center” of the process from the start.

Jacobs and others said that meant not limiting candidates based on how many years of experience they had in similar roles, or only looking at individuals who had managed organizations of a similar size or budget. They tried to focus on a prospect’s potential rather than solely examining track record.

Sisisky, 46, began her career with AIPAC and worked overseas for the Joint Distribution Committee and as executive director of the Jewish Women’s Foundation in New York City before joining the San Francisco federation. She said in an interview that she has received “conflicting messages” as a senior female leader at Jewish organizations.

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She recalled a previous job where she'd had pictures of her kids around her office. One colleague stopped by and told her she should "take down those photos of your children," Sisisky said, because "it just reminds people that you're a mother."

She did. Only to have a different coworker come by a few weeks later with different advice: "You're a really tough professional and having photos of your children will help soften you."

Nonetheless, Sisisky said she had always felt empowered to climb the Jewish nonprofit ranks. She grew up in Richmond, Virginia, with a grandfather who was the state's first Jewish member of Congress. Richmond's federation was led at the time by a woman, Marsha Hurwitz.

"Starting at a really young age I had the opportunity to see women in those executive positions," she said. "As a kid, it didn't really occur to me that, if that was a job that I wanted, I couldn't have it."

Sports

Sue Bird just retired. Here's what she means to her Jewish fans.

By Louis Keene

For hoops-obsessed Jewish girls growing up in the Pacific Northwest since the turn of the century, Sue Bird has been a Rainier-esque lodestar of work ethic, competitive spirit and (of course) game for nearly two decades.

Bird, whose father's ancestors changed their surname from Boorda at Ellis Island, has racked up nearly every accolade the sport has to offer in her 19-year WNBA career, the entirety of which she spent with the Seattle Storm. She is the league's career assist leader, and it's not close. She has won four WNBA championships and five Olympic gold medals.

And now, with 41-year-old Bird retiring following the Storm's elimination from the WNBA playoffs Tuesday night, Jewish women who have looked up to Bird since elementary school are reflecting on her influence.

For Leah Hasson, Bird has been an inspiration since she was taking her first backyard jump shots. The Storm point guard's Jewish background gave Hasson's admiration a personal dimension.

"You have this player who's obviously one of the best in the league, and she's Jewish," Hasson, 30, said. "So as a kid who loves basketball and celebrates similar holidays, it's like, wow, this is someone who's not just a player, but can also be a role model."

Bird was on the cusp of her first game with the Storm when Hasson, then in third grade, joined Seattle Hebrew Academy's team on the Amateur Athletic Union circuit.

Back then, Bird was a sprightly sharpshooter fresh out of UConn, where she had won a national title and the Naismith Women's Player of the Year trophy as a sophomore. The

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young Hasson, also a point guard, took her cues from Seattle's first-overall draft pick, absorbing her court vision and pass-first mindset.

"She can read plays before they happen," Hasson gushed. "She's able to be not just a player, but a coach at the same time."

As Bird grew into the most esteemed floor general in the 'W,' Hasson too evolved, becoming SHA's team captain and suiting up for Northwest Yeshiva High School. Bird secured Israeli citizenship to facilitate a career in European basketball — as many WNBA players do to earn money in the offseason; Hasson played for three years at Ma'alot, a college in Jerusalem.

And by the time the 13-time all-star took the Storm on its final playoff run, Hasson had embarked on a coaching career, leading the next generation of girls who look up to Bird at Northwest High School, a secular private school in Seattle.

Jed Davis, who has been coaching Jewish girls basketball in the Seattle area since 1998, sometimes tells his players to emulate the 5-foot-9 Bird.

"They'll say things like, 'You asked me to guard this girl, and she's so much bigger, and she's fast,'" and I'll say, 'Look at Sue Bird,'" Davis said. "She's not the fastest, she's not overpowering with her size, but look at the way she passes. Look at the way she put that team together. Look at the way she's always thinking. You can do that."

He said that message especially resonated with his Jewish girls teams, which are often undersized.

Davis, 70, said Bird's greatest impact locally was keeping Seattle basketball on the map after the Sonics relocated to Oklahoma City.

But nationally, he said, she had changed people's perceptions about women more broadly.

"Sue is sort of a pioneer in that she's professionally legitimized women's sports," Davis said.

"She's done it all," he added. "But she's also done it with class."

Leah Menashe, a junior at Northwest Yeshiva High School, echoed Davis' words, calling Bird "simply an insane baller."

Menashe's been playing since kindergarten, and said she loves the way Bird can be "the 'mom' of the team."

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As was the case with Hasson, Bird's Jewishness was as inspiring as anything she did on the court.

In a 2018 interview with the Washington State Jewish Historical Society, Bird spoke about how growing up in a Catholic and Jewish household offered her the "best of both worlds." Bird has said she doesn't necessarily identify as a member of either religion, but she did apply for Israeli citizenship under the country's Jewish Right of Return law.

"Sue Bird has shown me what pride means," Menashe, 15, said in an email. "She seems proud when talking about Judaism, and that inspires me — how much she emphasizes Judaism and the importance to her."

Opinion

Even American Jews ignored the Holocaust

By Nora Berman

In the opening minutes of “The U.S. and the Holocaust” — a new three-part Ken Burns, Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein documentary, we hear the blunt truth that still haunts our nation today: “The exclusion of people and shutting them out has been as American as apple pie.”

The documentary lets no one — including American Jews — off the hook.

Of the film’s many characters, two Jewish leaders fighting back this impulse to save the Jews of Europe stood out to me: Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and Peter Bergson. Both men believed that they represented the “true” opinion of the Jewish people. And both of them were labeled as “radical,” despite having very different beliefs.

Rabbi Wise, a quintessential American Jew, ultimately held greater faith in his American identity and government than were deserved. The tactics of Bergson, a foreign militant Zionist, were ultimately more effective at persuading the U.S. government to save Jewish lives.

A charismatic rabbi vs. the State Department

Born in Hungary, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise immigrated to the United States as a child and was an early leader in the American Reform movement. A founding member of both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Jewish Congress, he differed from his Reform colleagues in his zealous support for civil rights and Zionism.

Wise tirelessly pushed President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to loosen immigration quotas and urged boycotts of German goods, with little success. He was ultimately the one who broke the news to the American public during a press conference on Nov. 24, 1942, of the comprehensive German plan to murder all of the Jews of Europe.

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Yet despite Wise's great faith in FDR, he was unable to convince the American president to intervene more directly to save the Jews. Even after the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps had finally become front page news in 1945, Americans still did not want to admit refugees, with only a meager 5% agreeing that the U.S. should accept more.

In the most tragic of ironies, the U.S. State Department during WWII boasted the most antisemites, racists and isolationists of any other governmental office at the time. The department was led by Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, who notably loathed Rabbi Wise and believed, without evidence, that Jews were especially dangerous to the U.S. Long called the hundreds of thousands of desperate German Jews already on the waitlist for a visa "a perfect opportunity for Germany to load the United States with Nazi agents."

Long's explicit goal was to bring immigration, particularly Jewish immigration, to a full stop, and the State Department under his direction intentionally made it as difficult as possible. Under his direction, refugees were not permitted to come to the U.S. if they had a job, as that took a job away from an American, but they could also not receive a visa without a job, as that meant they would need government assistance.

A divided people

But Wise wasn't just fighting antisemites in office: He was fighting resistance from his fellow Jews. From the beginning of the Nazi regime, American Jews were divided on how to respond to Hitler's persecution of German Jews. "I think a lot of American Jews were torn between wanting to ring the alarm, and not seem too alarmist," writer Daniel Mendelsohn says in the documentary. "They had just precariously established their identities as Americans." Renowned Holocaust historian and current U.S. Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt goes one step further: "There was a legitimate fear that if we talk too much about this, Americans are going to say 'Well, it's right! Jews are like that! Jews are conniving.'"

Rabbi Wise abhorred these attitudes and excoriated those who held them. Recent immigres who had successfully navigated Long's bureaucratic maze received anxious letters from family members trapped in Europe, begging for the \$5,000 fee to obtain a visa — a sum that for the time represented a year's salary for the average working American. Still, American Jews, particularly those in positions of power and wealth (like the leadership of the American Jewish Committee), were more comfortable quietly exhorting FDR to do something for German Jews than publicly demonstrating.

Shortly after Hitler gave a speech on Jan. 30, 1939, that called for "the annihilation of the Jewish race," a bill that would permit 10,000 Jewish children per year to come to the

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U.S. died in committee without being brought to a vote — there were, again, fears its passage would negatively affect the well-being of American Jews. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, possibly the highest ranking Jewish American in government, privately told FDR that there was no possible way this vote would ever reach consensus among Congress, let alone among Jewish Americans.

Nearly a quarter of American Jews had opposed the proposed legislation, even as German Jews were losing their businesses, forced to wear yellow stars and desperately applying for visas to get out of Nazi Germany.

The man who likely did convince FDR to devote government resources to saving Jewish refugees found the American Jewish response to the mass murder of Europe's Jews bafflingly timid. Peter Bergson, a founding member of the Irgun (a British Mandate-era precursor to the IDF), dismissed Wise as “a timorous American of Hebrew descent and not an authentic member of the Jewish nation” and believed that American Jews were not responding to the crisis at hand with the sense of urgency it required.

Direct action

Bergson had a history, to put it mildly, of not playing by the rules. Born Hillel Kook (nephew of Israel’s first chief Ashkenazi Rabbi, Avraham Kook), Bergson changed his name in 1937 to protect his family from retribution for his political activities when he was sent to Poland to coordinate an underground network that was smuggling Jews into Palestine. Bergson’s mentor, Ze’ev Jabotinsky, sent Bergson to the U.S. in 1940 with the stated goal of raising a Jewish army to fight Hitler.

Two days before Yom Kippur in 1943, Bergson organized more than 400 Orthodox rabbis to march on Washington in protest of the Roosevelt administration’s perceived indifference to the mass murder of European Jews. This protest is believed to have influenced the creation of the War Refugee Board in early 1944, an organization that ultimately saved tens of thousands of Jews in the last years of the war. FDR did not meet with the rabbis on the advice of his Jewish advisers, who said that Bergson and his rabbis did not represent the mainstream Jewish opinion.

These advisors were not wrong: a significant portion of the American Jewish community did not want to draw attention to their Jewishness during WWII by advocating for the Jews of Europe. They feared antisemitic reprisals by their neighbors; despite their assimilation, they felt the tentative status of their relative acceptance in American society. There was also a palpable divide between wealthier, assimilated, largely German-American Jews and their poorer Eastern European brethren. A rabbi in the early 20th century said of the new Yiddish-speaking arrivals: “We are Americans and they are not. They gnaw the bones of past centuries.”

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This attitude was, unfortunately, quintessentially American. Over and over, in Gallup poll after Gallup poll, Americans clearly said they did not want more Jewish immigrants. In 1938, shortly before the events of Kristalnacht, 60% of Americans believed that German Jews were responsible for their own persecution. In 1944, 76% of Americans believed that the gas chambers were real, but only 20% believed over a million Jews had been killed (at this point, the real number was 5 million dead).

Having visited the sites of concentration camps myself, I can understand the disbelief Americans experienced when confronted with the horrors of the Nazis' extermination campaign. The breadth and scale of the Shoah confound the mind, and I was not surprised to see in the documentary the initial skepticism displayed by American journalists, politicians and citizens upon learning of the death camps.

Yet it was shocking to learn how mixed the response was within our own American Jewish communities. We are not immune from what seems to be the classic American immigrant cycle: as soon as our generation is allowed through the Golden Door, we want to shut it behind us.

News

They were forced to sell their beloved synagogue. 7 decades later, they finally have a chance to buy it back

By Sarah Nachimson

The Las Vegas, New Mexico, Jewish community is determined to buy back its synagogue.

It's an opportunity few saw coming. The Santa Fe Archdiocese has owned the Montefiore Synagogue for some seven decades, and consistently refused to sell it back to the local Jewish community, despite repeated pleas.

But a \$121.5 million settlement related to a Chapter 11 lawsuit about sexual abuse in the New Mexico church has pushed the archdiocese into bankruptcy — and forced a sale of the historic building, which Jewish leaders in the city of 13,055 have long aspired to make a new center of Las Vegas Jewish life.

Sure, the community has to drum up the funds to purchase the building. But "it will be bought by us," said Zelda McCrossen, treasurer for the Las Vegas Jewish Community. "That's a given."

A GoFundMe page to help the community purchase the Montefiore Synagogue — which, per the archdiocese's bankruptcy agreement, the archdiocese must sell within 30 days of signing — had raised more than \$78,000 as of Wednesday afternoon. According to court documents, the Las Vegas Jewish Community and Archdiocese of Santa Fe entered a deal for the community to buy the synagogue and an adjacent house for an undisclosed amount on Aug. 23.

Since the Las Vegas Jewish Community does not have sufficient funds to meet that price on hand, they are crowdfunding to cover the costs.

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A history, and a rebirth

The Montefiore Synagogue dates to 1886, a time when a large Jewish community had settled in Las Vegas and nearby Santa Fe. A train station was added to Las Vegas in 1899, making it more accessible.

However, by the 1950s, the Jewish community had dwindled, and could no longer afford to maintain the synagogue. The archdiocese purchased the property, and transformed it into a private facility for students at the nearby public Highlands University for students to learn about Catholicism.

The Jewish community of Las Vegas, which has been growing in the past decade, has, McCrossen said, made multiple offers to buy back the building in the past few years.

Tom Macken, a representative of the Santa Fe Archdiocese, said the church would be “delighted” if the synagogue returned to the Jewish community as planned.

The Las Vegas Jewish community today, McCrossen said, is a “mixed community” without any official denomination. “We do have a lot of converso and crypto Jews in northern New Mexico,” she said. But, she said, “we’re from all over.”

In recent years, the community has hosted major events at the city’s Episcopal Church, including Passover seders and Hanukkah celebrations. It also held Hebrew classes over Zoom during the pandemic.

The community does not have an in-person rabbi, but visiting rabbis from Albuquerque regularly help with events.

The community plans to hold High Holiday services this year in the synagogue after reclaiming it, and to use it as a community space. At least for the moment, weekly services don’t appear to be in the community’s future, but there are plans in the works for the synagogue to host a museum and community events, and to serve as a center for Jewish education.

“The only way we’re going to fight antisemitism is through education,” McCrossen said, “and that’s part of our goal in wanting to have this building back.”



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