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### News

## Are high rates of mental illness connected to a spike in anti-Semitic violence?

By Molly Boigon

Oniel Gilbourne was arrested in September after allegedly beating a 64-year-old Hasidic rabbi with a paving stone in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. While the community wondered aloud what was in Gilbourne's mind, he likely heard a drumbeat of acronyms – MMPI-2, MCMI-II, WAIS-R – representing some tests used to assess mental illness.

Violent attacks on the visibly Orthodox have become a disturbing pattern in Crown Heights, a neighborhood that not only has a high concentration of Hasidic Jews, but also a sky-high rate of mental illness compared to the city as a whole, along with a recent influx of homeless shelters.

Law enforcement officials have indicated that about a third of the recent anti-Semitic attacks in New York were committed by people with documented psychiatric issues, though it is impossible to get more specific because the city has refused to release records regarding these cases despite repeated requests under the Freedom of Information Law. Few of the suspects' names have been made public, which makes it difficult to know how many cases involved a

psychiatric evaluation. And, the police department did not respond to a question about how many of the incidents lead to arrest.

The New York Police Department recorded 234 anti-Semitic hate crimes in 2019, up from 186 the year before, officials said last Monday. Crown Heights saw people attack Orthodox Jews with stunning regularity in the late summer and around Hanukkah, and in all different kinds of ways: Slapping, punching, kicking, knocking kippot off their heads, beating them with belts.

As the trend has emerged, a 2018 city report said that Crown Heights and its eastern neighbor, Prospect Heights, have a psychiatric hospitalization rate nearly twice that of the city at large. While the city saw 676 psychiatric hospitalizations for every 100,000 adults, Crown Heights and Prospect Heights saw 1,149.

"There are people, some of whom have mental illness, who are vulnerable to influence by the trends that are occurring around them in society," said Dr. Paul Appelbaum, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia

University. “In a context in which anti-Semitic rhetoric is prevalent, they will pick that up.”

The former director of the New York Police Department’s Intelligence Analysis Unit, Mitchell Silber, was the first to quantify the number of hate crime suspects who are mentally ill in a December New York Times op-ed. He said city and state governments need to “treat mental health issues as the serious threat that they are.”

A spokesman for the Brooklyn District Attorney told the Forward in an email that Silber’s “ballpark figure sounded accurate.”

At least four high-profile cases of anti-Semitic violence in 2019 involved suspects with psychiatric issues, including Gilbourne and Tiffany Harris, a woman who allegedly slapped Orthodox Jews on the street in December. Harris’ case has generated controversy because she is accused of attacking another woman a day after her release without bail.

Lisa Schreibersdorf, a Brooklyn Defense Services attorney representing Harris, said New Yorkers with mental illness get good treatment in hospitals, but the city does not have adequate health care for patients once they get out. She said mentally ill people struggle to find affordable housing and reliable treatment options after discharge and are picked up by the shelter system— or worse, by the police.

“We pretty much drop them off a cliff,” she said.

In 2017, Mayor Bill de Blasio and his wife, Chirlane McCray, launched Thrive NYC, an initiative aimed at improving mental-health services in the city. Thrive has a \$242.8 million budget, but critics say the initiative focuses too little on people with serious mental illness. For example, a significant chunk of the budget goes to school social workers and other referral services that don’t directly provide treatment.

“The ability to get care in New York City is inversely related to need,” said D.J. Jaffe, executive director of a group called Mental Illness Policy Org. “The least seriously ill go to the head of the line, and the most seriously ill go to jails, shelters, prisons and morgues.”

Mental-health experts and advocates stressed that the vast majority of mentally ill people never become violent, and in fact, are more likely to experience violence themselves. In a statement, a city official

denied that a high concentration of psychiatric hospitalizations in Crown Heights is contributing to recent anti-Semitic violence.

“While hospitalizations may be elevated in a certain neighborhood, it should not be equated with incidents of crime,” Department of Health and Mental Hygiene spokesperson Patrick Gallahue said in an email.

In the Crown Heights area, more than thirty percent of residents are using at least half their paychecks to pay rent, according to American Community Survey data. The climbing cost of living in Crown Heights leaves few affordable transitional housing for people leaving one of the neighborhood’s 13 shelters, three of which opened in 2017. Crown Heights hosts about 1,800 people in its shelters, most of which serve families with children.

About 25 percent of the country’s homeless population is seriously mentally ill, according to a 2015 assessment by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Schreibersdorf, of Brooklyn Defense Services, says people with recent criminal history can end up in homeless shelters because their records can make them ineligible for public housing, which perpetuates the cycle of instability, exacerbating symptoms that might lead to crime.

“They need to be in a structured, stable place so that they can get the treatment that they need,” she said.

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## Opinion

# Take it from a Holocaust survivor: We need Non-Jews to stand up against anti-Semitism

By Rachel Epstein

As a Holocaust survivor, I know how hatred spreads until it is inescapable. When I was a child, the crimes committed against Jews and others who were persecuted in the Holocaust were part of my daily life.

I grew up in Compiègne, France in the 1940s. Anti-Semitism came to my city and overwhelmed the streets. It infiltrated my school. I was called a “dirty Jew” by all but one of my classmates; the one who was an ally has remained a friend to this day. But she was the exception. By almost everyone else, I was made to feel like a piece of dirt.

Anti-Semitism spread across Compiègne until it occupied the city completely. What started as hate crimes that were disregarded grew to be the active policing of the Jewish people.

I remember when Jews had to start wearing the yellow star, and when we had to sit in the back of the movie theaters, until we couldn't go to the movies at all. I remember going to my favorite park, but only being able to use one part of it, and sit on particular benches. I hope we never get to that point again, but that all started with anti-Semitic attacks that grew more frequent throughout my childhood.

In 1942, my parents were arrested, separating my family. After that, most of my classmates stopped talking to me. But that was only the beginning. After my parents' arrest, my brother and I were lucky to be saved. We were housed by a Christian couple and their two sons. We survived the war because of the great bravery of this family, who I am still in contact with today.

Watching the rise of anti-Semitism back then was terribly complicated. I was just a child and everything was highly visceral. I was quite aware of what was going on – it would have been hard not to be – but my understanding was that of a child's. I felt the intense emotions: the fear, the distress, the sorrow. And yet, in the day to day, I wasn't attuned to the greater obstacles to come. I didn't have the capacity to understand where things were going.

Today I do. In the last month, I feel like I've gone back in time to those days and I feel threatened. A week – and sometimes a day – doesn't go by without news of a verbal attack, a sacred space vandalized, or an act of violence that wounded and/or took lives. Each time I hear news of this nature, my heart grows unbearably heavy. It is painful to witness something this familiar. Above all, I find myself repeatedly saying: This cannot be happening again.

But it is happening. Slowly, America is morphing into a country unrecognizable from what it was when I came here. Back then, I was 17 and drawn to many of this country's principles, principles that promised freedom, equality, and safety from religious persecution – all the protections that the Nazis stole from me in France.

Watching this today, I'm far beyond my childhood capacity. I understand where this could go and what could happen to America.

Take it from someone who lived through the Holocaust: The rise of bigotry is gradual and steady. Its perpetrators try to make it undetectable to those outside of the targeted group, until it's passed the point of no return. This was how Nazis took power. What begins as racist remarks grows to hate crimes and then into something even darker.

The promise of a new decade is that of change. Despite the rise in anti-Semitism that we're witnessing, I believe that good changes can come.

We cannot allow this to happen again.

I am encouraged that our elected officials, religious and community leaders, and regular citizens have spoken out against these hate crimes. And I was pleased to see that more than 25,000 New Yorkers

responded at the recent march organized by UJA-Federation of NY, the Jewish Community Relations Council and many other organizations.

But that is only the first step. We must unify our words with actions. We all need to be on guard, resist, and fight. We all need to be brave.

I already lost too much by being Jewish, so I am doing my part by sharing my story with younger generations so that they can carry it when I am no longer here. I participated in last weekend's march against anti-Semitism on Long Island, and I wanted to write this piece. I am seeking comfort in Jewish traditions, having recently celebrated Hanukkah with family and friends at a community event organized by Selfhelp Community Services. Above all, I am speaking up wherever and whenever I can.

I owe my life to those outside the Jewish community who risked so much to keep me, and so many others, safe. I am calling on my non-Jewish friends and neighbors to continue to stand up for the Jewish community – and all persecuted communities – in the face of hate. Join me and act so that “Never Again” can truly mean never again.

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*Rachel Epstein lives in Roslyn, Long Island with her husband of 69 years, Izzy. She has two children, four grandchildren, and one great grandchild. She is a client in Selfhelp Community Services' Holocaust Survivor Program.*

**The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.**

## The Schmooze

# Where's Waldo? A striped t-shirt becomes an American Jewish sensation

By Irene Connelly



The Siyum HaShas – a nationwide celebration that ends each cycle of Talmud study – occurs only once every seven and a half years. So when Brooklyn accountant Yonatan Gray had a belated idea for how to celebrate it, he had to wait a long time to put it in action.

At the 2012 Siyum, which took place at New Jersey's

Met Life stadium, Gray looked out at the sea of black-clad attendees and thought about how funny it might be to dress up as the perennially missing children's book character “Where's Waldo”. During this year's Siyum, he did exactly that, donning a red and white striped shirt and cap long enough to snap some photos against the crowd. Not wanting to disrespect the proceedings, Gray took off the costume after a few minutes. But before he even left the stadium, he was inundated with messages from friends who had seen the photo on Twitter alongside captions like, “Waldo does Daf Yomi. So can you.” He had already gone viral.

“My phone was pretty much blowing up,” he said.

On Twitter, pictures appeared of sweatshirts emblazoned with his image and the hashtag #Siyum2020. Gray posted a snapshot of a Siyum attendee in England copying his look. He even appeared as a meme in the Flatbush Jewish Journal, an Orthodox publication.

The taste of instant fame inspired Gray to reprise the costume on a slightly different occasion: the “No Hate No Fear” rally that took place just a few days after the Siyum in protest against the epidemic of anti-Semitic

incidents that has swept through New York this fall. His colorful t-shirt wasn't as noticeable among wide array signs and slogans, but by now he was sufficiently famous that strangers approached him for pictures.

In his way home that same day, Gray made the news for a third time – but not the way he would've liked. As he was riding on the subway, a woman noticed his yarmulke and began verbally harassing him, shouting anti-Semitic slurs until he eventually left the train.

"Not the reason I wanted to be on TV," Gray captured a video of the incident on Twitter. The NYPD has since filed the incident as a hate crime.

The costume's multi-day odyssey across New York [and across Twitter] captured the spirit of this particularly tumultuous moment in American Jewish life, a time when the Jewish community gathers to celebrate beloved texts and protest fiercely against resurgent anti-Semitism in the span of a few days, all while traveling in public with caution.

And perhaps the timing explains Waldo's appeal. "I think people always need that moment of humor," Gray said.

On social media and in person, strangers have contacted Gray, offering congratulations, condolences, and even overnight accommodations – one admirer told Gray to feel welcome at his house if he ever passes through Vancouver. But Waldo's most lasting impact may be on Gray's dating life: Gray said [and the Schmooze has independently confirmed] that since his adventures as Waldo began, his dating "resume" has made the rounds of several WhatsApp group chats in the frum community. Recently, a friend told him it was circulating as far afield as Israel.

One thing's for sure: If any successful set-up happens in the next few months, it'll be a great story to tell the kids.

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## Culture

# The Kafkaesque story of how Kafka's "Trial" got cancelled

By PJ Grisar

**Editor's Note: This story has been updated to include the Adam Mickiewicz Institute's response to NYU Skirball's statement that "The Trial" was cancelled due to its decision to withdraw funds.**

A stage adaptation of Franz Kafka's "The Trial," which was set to debut in New York at the NYU Skirball Center March 7, has been cancelled. Skirball's director, Jay Wegman, says the production was scrapped after a Polish cultural institution reneged on a promise for funding and gave no reason as to why. That institution says they never made the offer. These mixed messages and crossed wires are a clear case of life imitating art.

In Kafka's novel, Josef K. is accused, tried, and executed for a crime that is never specified. According to Wegman and the production's celebrated director and adapter, Krystian Lupa, their crime appears to be a critique of the Polish government. Like the judge and jury presiding over Josef K.'s trial, the trouble appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

"There was no hint of any problem," Wegman said of the planned production in a phone interview.

According to Wegman, the Skirball Center had been in talks for about a year with the Adam Mickiewicz Institute (IAM), an arm of the Polish Cultural Ministry with the goal of bringing Polish culture abroad. The institute did not respond to requests for comment by press time.

IAM's director, Krzysztof Olendzki, had visited the venue and everything seemed set to bring the production over from Poland. In September, there was a change of leadership – Olendzki's contract wasn't renewed – and Barbara Schabowska, a journalist who had no prior experience in cultural diplomacy, replaced him. Her deputy visited Wegman in November.

In a January 14 statement, IAM responded to Skirball's

announcement of cancellation the day before. The institute claimed that the first time they heard of the production was in November, when Skirball first announced its 2020 season.

Wegman said he was flown to Krakow as IAM's guest to the Divine Comedy Festival, a large festival of Polish drama held every December.

"We were supposed to finalize everything there," Wegman said. "And the director didn't show up."

Wegman suspected something had changed, but had yet to see anything in writing. Wegman says he never even spoke to Schabowska directly – only through intermediaries. After no response, Wegman's contact at IAM drafted a letter, which he says gave no real explanation as to why funds were pulled.

"No mention of censorship or anything," Wegman said.

According to a translation of IAM's statement by the Calvert Journal, an English language publication focused on Eastern Europe, the institute "did not withdraw the grant for Lupa, because it never awarded it," and "at no point did anyone from the Skirball approach IAM with an official ask for financial support." Wegman told the journal that no contract was ever signed, but that funding was verbally promised.

From its early development in 2016 – a year after the nationalist Law and Justice party took power and began dismissing curators and scuttling artwork – Lupa's production has proved to be timely in its subject matter, focusing on a brutal and arcane bureaucracy fed by falsehoods.

The adaptation was originally slated for production by the Teatr Polski in Wroclaw, a national theater. Early in the process, Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliniski appointed Cezary Morawski as artistic director, and rehearsals came to a standstill. Lupa, believing Morawski's appointment was political, withdrew the work in protest. He later received funding from non-government sponsored theaters and debuted the five-hour production in November 2017 at the Stary Teatr in Krakow.

"The Trial" went on to run to acclaim in Paris and Athens, backed in part by IAM. But, Wegman says, the institute has recently been cutting off productions that were planned under Schabowska's predecessor.

"We're not the only people this is happening to,"

Wegman said. "There was a festival in Lithuania and three months before they were supposed to do a Polish production, Barbara [Schabowska], pulled that contract. No one is speaking out in Poland, because they're afraid of repercussions."

Wegman hoped he could move the funds earmarked for "The Trial" over to Skirball's upcoming Wooster Group production – a company that IAM had sponsored in the past – but was unable to. He believes Schabowska, whose husband is a journalist for a Law and Justice-friendly news outlet, might have lost her job if she backed "The Trial," a work that is a not-so-veiled commentary on the state of contemporary Poland.

Schabowska wouldn't be the first Polish cultural director to lose her post under the current government – she wouldn't even be the first at IAM. Gliniski terminated one of her predecessors, Paweł Potoroczyn, in 2016, following his censure for not featuring enough artists "inspired by Christian values." A labor court later ruled Potoroczyn's firing unlawful. Olendzki, his successor, was replaced – somewhat unexpectedly – by Schabowska. While the official reason was simply that his contract wasn't renewed, Wegman believes that Olendzki was fired for being a more moderate member of the Law and Justice party.

The list of affected cultural figures who have lost their positions under the current regime is extensive, and even includes Morawski, the now ex-artistic director of Teatr Polski whose appointment prompted Lupa to postpone "The Trial." In many of these cases, refusal to renew a contract is the mechanism by which directors are ousted.

"Everybody has lost here except the Law and Justice party," Wegman said. "If that happens at this lower cultural level, imagine what's happening where everybody is making the higher up decisions. At the end of the day, this isn't the end of the world, but it's certainly indicative of what's going on in Poland."

Wegman says the Skirball Center took a financial hit, having already started the costly visa process for the 46 visiting Polish artists. But that doesn't mean New York audiences won't be able to hear the story's message, one that mirrors the predicament which got the full-scale production scrapped.

"We needed to remain vocal about this," Wegman said. "We could have just said this was cancelled, but why?"

Especially because Lupa created this production in response to what's happening around the world right now. Because 'The Trial' – the whole narrative of 'The Trial' – responds to a nightmarish situation where no one knows what's going on, people in charge are telling lies. For that reason I wanted to bring it too, especially as we move into our election cycle."

On March 8, the Skirball center along with The Public Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, PEN America and CUNY's Segal Center will present a free marathon reading of the novel. Among the readers will be Salman Rushdie, a member of NYU faculty and a writer who knows a bit about censorship himself. Lupa will hold a panel discussion before the reading.

In a statement, the director didn't mince words, placing the blame for the cancellation directly on the man in charge of Poland's cultural institutions.

"The declaration of Minister Glinski, Poland's Minister of Culture and National Heritage, is clear," Lupa wrote. "Artists who do not sympathize with the current leadership's cultural policy, who criticize its values, decisions and actions will be treated as enemies of Poland and will not be supported by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in any form."

Nowy Teatre, the company set to perform "The Trial" told The Calvert Times in a statement, "Since Nowy Teatr didn't take part in any negotiations or correspondence between the Adam Mickiewicz Institute and Skirball concerning a possible grant to support the presentation of The Trial, it is difficult for us to have a clear view of the situation."

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## Culture

# Why Ladino will rise again

By Aviya Kushner

A sold-out crowd packed the house at the Center for Jewish History – and even filled an overflow room viewing the proceedings on screen – at the third annual Ladino Day in New York, home to the largest Sephardic community in America. Tight security and what speakers described as a “daunting time” for “Jews and Hispanics, refugees and immigrants” did not stop language lovers of all ages who came to celebrate *Dia Internacional del Ladino*, often abbreviated as DIDL.

Ladino is one of the most important diasporic languages in Jewish history. Also known as Judeo-Spanish, or Judezmo, Ladino is a Romance language – a variety of Spanish that includes both words and phrases from Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, Greek, French, and Italian. It originally developed in medieval Christian Spain; after the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, it moved along with Jewish exiles, and then developed independently of Iberian Spanish. For five hundred years, Ladino thrived, and was the mother tongue of generations of Sephardic Jews.

Though Ladino has been labeled an “endangered” language by UNESCO, because of its dwindling number of native speakers, Sunday's afternoon-long program of musical performance, poetry, scenes from a play, talks by scholars, and a panel featuring millennials with a deep interest in Ladino was vibrant and multi-faceted. Most important, it seemed to offer some hope for the future, with over 300 people listening raptly.

“The numbers are sharply declining but the resurgence of interest in Ladino is thrilling,” Jane Mushabac, professor emerita of English at CUNY and the writer of Sephardic fiction under the pen name Shalach Manot, told the crowd at the event, which she co-created with Professor Bryan Kirschen of SUNY-Binghamton, an assistant professor of Romance Languages and Linguistics whose research focuses on Judeo-Spanish. “You have come to the *right* place.”

Still, the murder of 90 percent of Ladino speakers who

came under Nazi occupation was not far from the minds of many of the assembled.

“I have a theory” on how to revive Ladino, the singer and activist Sarah Aroeste told the crowd. Her theory is that children are the answer, and so she has devoted herself to composing Ladino songs for children, and she taught one of her songs to the crowd, which numbered over three hundred people.

Aroeste’s stirring singing, as her grandparents’ honeymoon video played in the background, was the emotional high point of the event. Her Macedonian grandparents honeymooned there and in Greece in the mid-1930s; though they survived, everyone else pictured in the film was murdered.

As she sang, the pianist Shai Bachar wept as he played, and when she finished, it was to calls of Bravo!

Another highlight was a fascinating panel of Generation Y and Generation Z Ladino speakers, moderated by Kirschen, who asked each panelist to name a favorite Ladino word, phrase, and song.

Emma Youcha described how their 92-year-old grandfather “grew up with Ladino spoken around him, and I heard it being spoken about.” At Tufts, Youcha, described in the program as both Sephardic and Ashkenazi, enrolled in a Ladino class; they offered this favorite word to the crowd: *fortuna*, which is Youcha’s grandmother’s nickname, and means “luck” and “fortune” but can also be “storm.”

As for a favorite phrase, Youcha went with *los korasones son espejoslos*, or, “hearts are like mirrors.”

Youcha described how learning Ladino, and then leading a five-session Boston Workers Circle course in Sephardic culture and Ladino “made me confront how little the most well-meaning of Ashkenazi institutions know about Sephardic history, and how profound that erasure is.”

This was echoed by panelist and current Brandeis student Robert Carlson, who said “there is an interest and need to learn about Jews in the Islamic world.”

Carlson offered the following favorite Ladino words and phrases: *karpuz*, or watermelon; and *kien bien se kere, en poko lugar kave* – or “those who love each other can even fit into a small room.”

In terms of news, there was some, with the announcement of a new digitization project that would

encompass about one-fourth of the 2600 pieces of Ladino literature in the world, including a newly discovered World War I diary in Ladino by a Sephardi soldier.

“There are approximately 2300 Ladino titles in the world. Approximately 26 percent are in YIVO or the American Sephardi Federation,” Jason Guberman, the executive director of the American Sephardi Federation, said. He asked the crowd for help in finding books, articles and memoirs.

The program began with moving performances of Ladino songs by Danny Elias, accompanied by Maurice Sedacca on guitar and oud, Marco Brehm on double bass, and Casey Bond on percussion; Elias explained that he learned these songs from his father, who learned them from his mother, who was largely illiterate but knew hundreds of songs. The first song Elias sang, about Avraham Avinu or Abraham our father, was clearly familiar to nearly everyone there, as hundreds of people sang aloud. The Ladino love songs got everyone singing, too, and my immediate neighbors swaying.

The Ladino play, “Forsyth Street,” featured a young woman who comes from Turkey to join her fiancé in New York; but when she arrives, he has no job. She offers to find a job to help finance the completion of his studies, and while working at a dress shop, she meets her fiancé’s love interest; apparently they share a taste in clothes and men.

This line struck me as I was listening, spoken by the character Safira: *Esto bushkando un fostan kolorado. Uno ke aga muncha shematá* or “I’m looking for a red dress. One that makes a lot of noise.”

The Ladino word meaning “noise” has nothing to do with the Yiddish *shmatte*, but it had a dramatic flair.

The program also spotlighted scholars of Sephardic history. Dr. Dina Danon, assistant professor of Judaic Studies and history at SUNY-Binghamton, and author of the forthcoming “The Jews of Ottoman Izmir: A Modern History,” spoke about the Jewish community of Izmir, Turkey, the focus of her research.

“Within the Jewish historical narrative, the Jews of Izmir have suffered the same neglect as the entire eastern Sephardi diaspora during modern times,” Danon said, “with ideologically driven approaches either dismissing it as a footnote to the supposed “glory” of medieval

*Sepharad*, or subsuming it in larger narratives charting an inexorable decline of a static “East.”

Danon discussed the active Hebrew and Ladino presses that made Izmir a center for Jewish publishing and offered a look into the fascinating role of charity in the community.

She detailed how poverty and class were the main issues in Izmir; the presence of Jewish beggars, for instance, who spent Purim day publicly begging from dawn to night, became a communal problem. But charity work was also a social opportunity.

“Engaging in charity allowed the Jews of Izmir increased interaction with their non-Jewish neighbors,” Danon said.

Danon described a charity event – an 1883 ball celebrating the inauguration of a new building belonging to the Alliance Israélite Universelle. In attendance were many local Ottoman officials and consuls, and a special room had been prepared for the harem of the Governor General of the province, who came to the party because his sons were students at the Alliance school. [Yes, a Jewish fundraiser with room for a harem! The crowd was charmed.]

Danon said that in Izmir, moving into the middle class did not mean abandoning Judaism.

“Absent in the Islamic world was the demand that Jews abandon their religious or cultural distinctiveness,” she said. “Making a *monsieur* out of one’s son was fully compatible with one’s Jewishness.”

As Danon spoke, someone behind me kept saying “she’s right” and “that’s right” and “mmm-hmmm.” I turned around, hoping to get some silence so I could hear more clearly, but the older man behind me merely smiled and winked.

When Danon finished, he said – “that was really good. She really knows her stuff.”

The crowd included “Ladino celebrities” like scholars everyone seemed to know, and the children of well-known Ladino authors. Gloria Ascher, who taught a Ladino class at Tufts for many years, entertained the crowd with her stories of her experience teaching, which often included singing. She also pointed out that the impressive enrollment in her courses over seventeen years showed that there is interest in

Ladino – among Sephardic Jews, Latino students, and others from all backgrounds and ages, including students Ascher’s age who wanted to learn.

On this third straight sold-out Ladino Day, everyone left with the experience of singing Ladino – and the feeling that the language may be reviving, after all. Liora Kelman, who co-authored the Ladino and Hebrew cookbook *Gizar Kon Gozo* [“Cooking With Pleasure”] with her mother Matilda Koen-Sarano, who is one of the most well-known Ladino writers, was visibly moved, and offered this response to the event in Hebrew: “It warms the heart to live the language of our heritage.”

*Aviya Kushner is The Forward’s language columnist and the author of The Grammar of God [Spiegel & Grau] and the forthcoming “Wolf Lamb Bomb” [Orison Books]. Follow her on Twitter @AviyaKushner*

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## Culture

# She was the first Jewish actor to win an Oscar

By PJ Grisar

Each year, the Oscars are a who's who of Jews. We are routinely represented in winners, losers, hosts and weird kissers (cough, cough Adrien Brody.) Too often, the awards go to boychiks. This year, with no women nominees for director (either Jewish or gentile), we wondered who was was the first Jewish woman to take home that deceptively-heavy statuette?



Canadian-American actress who converted to Judaism in 1927 to marry MGM mogul Irving Thalberg, holds the distinction of being not only the first Jewish woman to win an Oscar, but the first performer overall. (Writers Benjamin Glazer, Ben Hecht, Joseph W. Farnham, né Frohman, and director Lewis Milestone, né Lieb Milstein, were the first Jewish winners in the first Oscars ceremony.)

At the third Academy Awards in 1930, Shearer won Best Actress for the role of Jerry Martin in Robert Z.

Leonard's "The Divorcee," loosely based on the book "Ex-Wife" (1929) by romance writer Ursula Parrott. The film, about a woman who cheats on her husband with his best friend after she learns he cheated on her, preceded the pruderies of the Hays Code, which would have surely rejected the film based on its drinking, sexual content or overall premise.

"The Divorcee" is interesting not just for its willingness to explore – if ultimately issue moral judgments about – Jerry's promiscuity, but for what the casting had to say about Thalberg's view of his wife.

According to Jane Ellen Wayne's book "The Golden Girls of MGM: Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Lana Turner, Judy Garland, Ava Gardner, Grace Kelly, and Others" (2004), Thalberg wanted Joan Crawford for the picture, believing his wife was not glamorous enough for the part.

To prove that she could have the sex appeal needed, Shearer posed in a silver lamé nightgown for photographer George Hurrell. Her husband was convinced by the transformation.

"Thalberg was astonished when he saw the still of his wife lounging seductively in an armchair," Wayne wrote. Shearer booked the part, and won the Oscar.

"I'm very thankful to my fellow workers for the great honor they bestowed upon me," Shearer said in her acceptance speech. "I should like to uphold the position of my sex, but, for once a woman is at a loss to tell you just what this statue means to me in encouragement, inspiration and gratitude."

While not Jewish, Shearer's male counterpart, George Arliss, won Best Actor for playing the title role in "Disraeli," about the first British Prime Minister of Jewish descent.

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## Life

# For National Bagel Day, Forward staffers share their favorite spots

By Irene Connelly

Bagels: we wait on line for them, we spend entire Sundays enjoying them, we gobble them on the subway in our darkest hours while strangers wrinkle their noses at poppy seeds cascading to the floor. Bagels are central to American Jewish life. Scratch that, they're central to American life. Actually, this year scientists uncovered Bronze Age mini-bagels in Austria, so let's just go ahead and say bagels are central to human existence.

Perhaps because of their near-primal significance, throwing around phrases like “best bagel place” turns out to be a great way to start a fight. On Twitter, advocating unorthodox bagel slicing practices can render you an overnight pariah. If you admit to buying bagels at a chain, someone will immediately inform you that said chain has Nazi connections. And Americans who unironically refer themselves as “citizens of the world” may turn into unabashed xenophobes if told that it's possible to get a decent bagel in Montreal.

This National Bagel Day, we want to usher in a new age of bagel détente. So instead of slamming down hot takes, we're sharing the bagel places that have succored and sustained Forward staff, from our hometowns across the country to our current neighborhoods. We're not telling you what to do, merely giving some friendly hints – much like Timothée Chalamet handing out Tompkins Square Bagels on the red carpet, but without those fabulous eyebrows.

Here's what our staffers have to say.

## Jodi Rudoren, Editor in Chief

**Hot Bagels Abroad, Monclair, N.J.:** “I have barely eaten a full bagel since 2011, but we live back to back

with this little shop, and the boiled-then-baked smell every time I pull in the driveway gives me a bagel fix without the carbs. Also, I'm there around 6:30 a.m. most mornings getting a “plain, a little bit of butter” for my son's lunchbox, and they ask every time if I want a receipt [no].”

## Rachel Fishman Feddersen, CEO & Publisher

**O'Bagel, Montreal, Canada:** “Best one I ever had [sorry to say] was at O'Bagel in the Jean Talon market.”

## Chana Pollack, Archivist

**Monticello Bagel Bakery, Monticello, N.Y.:** “This is my local Upstate New York joint, on East Broadway in the old capital town of the Borscht Belt, complete with drive-through window! Fresh and hot is how I like to have these, straight out of the bag they're packed in—no cheese nor butter shmear necessary. And should you choose to hunker down and ‘eat in’ at this half-century old family owned joint, you will enjoy true archival bagel bakery atmosphere which is to say, a couple of tables, some chairs and an old rumpled up newspaper for company.”

## Deb Greenberg, Development Operations Manager

**Absolute Bagels, Upper West Side:** “They have have the best texture – chewy on the inside, crusty on the outside and just the right size. Also, they carry egg bagels! Almost no one has those anymore.”

## John Kunza, Audience Editor

**Bagel Pub, Crown Heights:** “Yes, they have the “hipster vibe” price markup but the fresh lox classic made with cucumber dill cream cheese on an everything bagel is a godsend on most Sunday mornings [or afternoons if we are being honest].”

## Molly Boigon, Investigative Reporter

**Kehillath Israel, Brookline, Mass.:** “The best bagel in America is served at around noon after Shabbat morning services at Kehillath Israel, a synagogue in Brookline, MA. The bagel itself is standard— soft on the inside, chewy on the outside, ideally eaten with a slab

of cream cheese. But munch on the bagel while sitting around a table and catching up with the friendly group of 20-somethings that gathers there, feel the sun stream in and ignite the light wood paneled floor. Then, slip upstairs to the balcony of the sanctuary, good book in hand, and listen to the chatter downstairs fade into the rest of the day. You'll never have a better bagel."

**Bagel Express III, Kips Bay:** "A great runner-up. Grab a sesame seed bagel toasted with scallion cream cheese, a mango Naked juice and sit by the door to nurse your punishing hangover."

### P.J. Grisar, Culture Fellow

**Bagel Boys, Airmont, N.Y.:** "Each year at the Yom

Kippur break fast, we rely on my aunt and uncle to import our bagels from near their home in Suffern in Rockland County. Having come of age in something of a bagel desert, this is as close to a hometown carb ring as I have. [Pity me.] Still, for me they have that Proust's madeleine quality, transporting me to hunger pang days of Yom Kippurs past. They keep pretty well in the freezer, too, and there are usually some stragglers in the fridge when I make a homecoming."

**H&H Bagels, Upper East Side:** "Jaded New Yorkers like to say this legendary bagelry has declined in quality since the Koch administration. But should they ask me how they're doing, I would answer: just fine. [Then again, I was born during the Dinkins years.] Still a good, dependable, if overly-dense and stuffed-to-excess bagel. The Sunday morning lines prove that there's still something special about this place, where, in the '80s, a worker once sagely refused to put tuna on my father's cinnamon raisin bagel. Here's a pro-tip: You can order pickup on Seamless and breeze by the queued-up yuppie masses. As that H&H employee said to my gobsmacked dad – after he selected a less exotic vehicle for his tuna fish – 'excellent choice.'"

### Kia Davis, Executive Assistant

**Leo's Bagels, Financial District:** "I am not a huge bagel fan but, since I've been here my coworkers have introduced me to some very good bagels from Leo's, not too far from the office. I've been there a few times and I think slowly but surely converting. My favorite bagel to get is an everything bagel toasted with plain cream cheese."

### Talya Zax, Deputy Culture Editor

**[The erstwhile] Nagel's Bagels, Crown Heights:** "For a couple years the pleasure of my life was my Sunday pumpernickel everything with whitefish at Nagel's Bagels on Lincoln road. Yes, the store was always weirdly filled with smoke; yes, the bagels were looked down on by certain Manhattanites. But they were just dense enough, with wonderful strong-but-not-tough crusts, and they were mine. Then Nagel's closed with no warning – one weekend the grate stayed down over the store, and that was it. My neighborhood has low bagel density, so now I am forced to go to Bergen Bagel. It is smoke-free, but it will never have my heart."

### Alyssa Fisher, News Writer & Audience Engagement Associate

**Knickerbocker Bagel, Bushwick:** "I moved to Brooklyn two years ago this month, and that first weekend I eagerly scrolled Yelp for a true New York bagel shop. I found it around the corner from my empty apartment at Knickerbocker Bagel, and I was instantly hooked. I didn't realize how deprived I was living in Florida, with its thin, crunchy bagels that weren't ordered alone, but rather came as a side dish to an egg platter. At Knickerbocker Bagel, I learned what a bagel should be like: warm, with a fluffy center and perfectly browned crust. My first order, a sesame bagel lightly toasted – sorry! – with lox spread, became my staple. Expect a long line, but boy, it's worth it. [I even wrote a little ode to it.]"

**Too Jay's, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.:** "In Florida, bagels alone aren't breakfast. They're thin, crunchy and come in a plastic bin next to your eggs or pancakes [seriously], and you have to schmear it yourself. However, it's what we know and we love it. But going to Too Jay's was always a treat – their bagels beat all the other delis and diners in South Florida."

### Irene Katz Connelly, Audience Engagement Intern

**H&H bagels, Upper East Side:** "When my parents were dating, my father came into New York City from New Jersey every weekend and brought my mother bagels from H&H. I myself have never eaten an H&H bagel, but given how difficult it is these days to induce my father to come to New York ["the parking!"] they must be good."

## Ari Feldman, Staff Writer

**Brooklyn Bagel, East Village:** “My ideal Saturday starts with a trip to Brooklyn Bagel on 8th Street and one of their everything bagels, toasted – at least twice! depending on how hot the bagel was to start with – and positively shmeared with dill pickle cream cheese.”

**Rise Bagel Co, Minneapolis, Minn.:** “I was born and raised in Minnesota, where Jewish appetizing culture is... lacking, compared to New York. [My mother has long fantasized about opening an appetizing shop called “The Hungry Jew.”] Recently, however, bagels have become a subject of culinary interest in the Twin Cities, and on a recent visit home my family and I engaged in a blind taste test of four bagel purveyors. The verdict: Rise, in Minneapolis. Though too small and not crusty enough for my taste, they had a strong yeasty flavor and a fluffy crumb with the right amount of chew.”

## Roberta Caplan, National Director of Gifts and Events

**Tal Bagels, Upper East Side:** “Everything is fresh and they have whole wheat flat bagels!”

## Gabby Brooks, Marketing Intern

**Ize’s Deli & Bagelry, Rockville, Md.:** “Located in a small, always packed shop on the Rockville Pike, Ize’s reminds me of New York when I’m back home. I know it’s truly the breakfast of champions because Maryland’s own Olympic star Katie Ledecky calls it one of her favorite places and the shop even has an omelet named after her.”

**Bagels on the Square, Greenwich Village:** “Bagels on the Square is not the best bagel in the village, or probably even within a few blocks radius from NYU, but it is the best bagel in my heart. There’s something about the ridiculous number of bottled drink offerings and the sad, plastic wrapped muffins that is extremely comforting after submitting a twenty page sociology paper and running on nothing but Argo’s green tea. Get a bagel, sit in Father Demo Square, and watch all the West Village toddlers in strollers that cost more than your rent go by.”

## Forverts

If you’re up to it, why not make your own bagels following the recipe below (with English subtitles).  
YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/7f34cgNBz-Q>

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