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### Life

## Preparing an Auschwitz survivor for her final resting place

By Diana Bletter

While survivors and world leaders commemorated the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz last week, I attended a very small, very private ceremony.

As a member of a *hevra kadisha*, or burial circle, I helped prepare and dress an Auschwitz survivor, Suzy Rosenberg, for her burial in a small village by the Mediterranean Sea in Israel's Western Galilee.

Suzy was the mother of my next-door neighbor, Yehuda. She died on the anniversary of her husband Mordechai's death, thirty years ago. The day they both died was also their wedding anniversary.

Suzy moved to Shavei Zion in 1948, soon after she arrived after the Holocaust. The village began as a *moshav shitufi*, or agricultural collective, in 1938, on fields purchased from a Turkish landlord. It is situated about twelve miles south of the northern border with Lebanon. There are agricultural fields, avocado groves, horses and chickens. There is a cemetery by the wadi, the creek that flows into the sea.

There has never been a funeral parlor here in Shavei Zion. In America, Jewish funerals can mean big business. But here in Israel, it's mostly voluntary. And since Shavei Zion's founding, the male members of the village helped bury the men; women help bury the women. We receive the dead in a modest little house that sits in the middle of the cemetery.

Burial circle members are never paid. The act of preparing the dead for burial is considered the purest kind of deed – the most benevolent, sacred gesture you can do for another. It is a task without compensation, without acknowledgement because the dead can never thank you. In fact, the literal translation of the Hebrew term for burial society, *hevra kadisha*, is “holy society.” In fact, some participants never reveal themselves because they want to do a good deed without public acknowledgement. You could call it Burial Circle Anonymous. I have been a part of the *hevra kadisha* since 1995, a few years after I moved here from New York. When I came here, most

of the women in the *hevra kadisha* were getting on in years and needed help doing the physical work. Three other women and I did the *tahara*, or purification, for Suzy. It's a small village – a little more than a thousand residents – and we all knew her. We knew how the demons of her time in Auschwitz had trailed her and tormented her.

Before we began, we said a traditional prayer asking for help in performing this task with love with reverence. Then we began the *tahara*, or purification. We sprinkled Suzy with water from head to toes. According to sources in the Kabbalah, the sanctifying water is poured over the body beginning on the right side, the side of mercy, and then on the left side, the side of judgment. It reminded me that mercy must come first.

We then patted her body dry, making sure to keep her covered, granting her complete modesty. We never passed anything over her body: the space above her is still considered her space. As if she was still alive. Still present. Still with us. We combed her hair to make her as beautiful as she could possibly be, one last time.

We then dressed her in shrouds made of simple, almost flax-colored linen. One of the women sprinkled some earth over her eyes to serve as a reminder that we go from dust to dust. Then we covered her face with a head bonnet.

The pants came next, oversized pants that reminded me of children's footie pajamas. We had to bunch up the fabric and slide in her legs. There was a jacket with a sash, without zippers or buttons, to make sure the soul can escape. And there were no pockets. Of course not. What could she take on this ultimate journey? Whatever had been denied her in the past was no longer necessary. After we finished, we recited another traditional prayer, asking Suzy for forgiveness if we had unintentionally hurt her in any way. Then we prayed that she would tread with righteous feet in the Garden of Eden.

The *tahara* ritual has always moved me. I always step out of the burial house feeling more aware of my life, and all of life.

But this time, the ritual had even more significance because it was happening on the very day that Auschwitz was liberated. Today, we granted Suzy her right to a Jewish burial, something denied her family and all those murdered in Auschwitz.

Today, the four of us in the burial circle stood around Suzy for another moment. We bid a loving farewell to one of the last remaining Holocaust survivors in our village.

One woman whispered, "Suzy has finally been liberated from Auschwitz."

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*Diana Bletter is the co-author, with Lori Grinker, of "The Invisible Thread: A Portrait of Jewish American Women" [Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989]. She lives with her family in the Western Galilee.*



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## News

# What does Trump's peace plan mean for Israel, the Palestinians and Jerusalem?

By Aiden Pink

Surrounded by some of their closest allies, from members of Congress to major megadonors, President Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revealed several details of their 180-page plan, which was later released online. Here's what you need to know, in plain English:

## What does Israel get?

Its sovereignty over the Jordan Valley recognized by the United States. This is the most notable part of the plan, emphasized by Netanyahu but glossed over by Trump. Israel already has military control over the valley, which it considers to have crucial security value, but it doesn't currently categorize it as part of Israel proper. Netanyahu told Israeli reporters after the speech that he would call a Cabinet vote on Sunday to annex the Jordan Valley - though it's unclear if the Cabinet has the legal standing to do so because Israel is being run by an interim government in the months before elections.

Recognition as a Jewish state – but only if the Palestinian Authority wants to negotiate. PA President Mahmoud Abbas calls that a non-starter, though.

Unfettered access to its settlements in the West Bank, because that part of the future state of Palestine would have lots of isolated and gerrymandered areas in order to make sure Israeli territory is contiguous.

To keep restricting Palestinians' access to their Arab neighbors. Except for the Gaza-Egypt border crossing, the Palestinian state will be connected to its borders through a series of Israel-controlled special roads.

## What do the Palestinians get?

A contiguous territory in the West Bank ... technically. There will be a lot of isolated and gerrymandered areas.

Not the capital they want, which would be in

Not the capital they want, which would be in Jerusalem. Trump said that under the plan, Jerusalem will remain Israel's undivided capital, but at the same time, Palestinians would get a capital in "eastern Jerusalem." It's possible that by this, Trump means an Arab suburb east of Jerusalem would be called "East Jerusalem." It's a real estate branding technique.

A tunnel to connect the West Bank and Gaza – likely the world's longest. And they'd get some land from Israel in the Negev Desert for towns and industry.

A four-year promise from Israel not to build new settlements in the areas that would be the future Palestinian state.

Unity – against the peace proposal. Haaretz reported that members of Hamas and another terrorist group are traveling to Abbas's planned rally against the proposal. It's the first time those three groups have gathered together in years, Haaretz reported.

## What happens to Jerusalem?

It stays undivided.



Today

Under the Trump Plan

*Russel Neiss/The Forward*

Israel's current borders, compared to how they would look if Trump's peace plan were enacted.

*Aiden Pink is the deputy news editor of the Forward. Contact him at [aidenpink@forward.com](mailto:aidenpink@forward.com) or follow him on Twitter @aidenpink*

## Opinion

# Trump's 'deal of the century' is a death sentence for Palestinian hope

By Thameen Darby

I have lived my whole life under the Israeli occupation. I was born under occupation, went to school and university under occupation, and became a surgeon under the occupation. The occupation is a cruel reality that permeates every corner of our physical and psychological beings.

For so many years, I was genuinely hopeful that it would end soon. I was hopeful that after all this suffering, there would be closure. I hoped that our children, Israeli and Palestinian, would not grow up to be occupiers or occupied, oppressors nor oppressed, but rather free, dignified siblings living in their beautiful Motherland.

Now, I not so hopeful anymore.

I am a father. My son is six years old. He does not comprehend the reality of the occupation yet. He finds the guns, the gear and the strange language of the soldiers amusing.

I look at him and I can't be hopeful as I used to be. I am scared, not only for the prospect of my son also living his entire life under the occupation, but for his very well-being in his native land.

In truth, Trump's facade, the "Deal of the Century," is of little historical significance. It is not the first and will not be the last outline of a peace plan that will have no real outcome. It will not survive the test of time and will not have any impact on the ground.

But the ideology, the ethos and attitudes that created this charade and manifested into that map, this ideology is what scares me and should scare every sensible person who still has hope for peace, freedom, and equality for all of us living on this shared land.

It is one thing to try and fail to make peace. It is another thing to create a permanent status of oppression and subjugation.

We have failed in the past, but at least then there was hope that both nations were growing up in their realization of the presence of the other and empathizing with the narrative of the other. We knew that our lanes

were far apart, but we believed that they were not necessarily parallels but destined to meet at the end of the road in a common point of mutual recognition and embrace.

Today is different. The ethos and ideology of the current Israeli administration is not to safeguard their crucial national interests, but to crush and corner the occupied in every imaginable way. To them, a field in Jericho or a hill in Nablus is worth it all.

We are no longer told we should accept being occupied and oppressed because it is *temporarily* important for our occupier's crucial interests. Now, we are now bluntly told that we *should* be subjugated and humiliated because we are not worth the dignity and the freedom.

We are told we do not belong to our land. We are not considered natives and deserving of what remains to us of our, albeit small, land. We are spoken of and treated as a pile of unnecessary human stock that should be cornered in the smallest space possible and removed altogether if the circumstances allow.

This is the ideology that created Trump's macabre plan, and it is such a sinister ideology that only promises hate and destruction for my son and for that young soldier carrying the large gun. It is an ideology that unwinds history and unlearns the lessons of the historical drama over the past one hundred years.

It's an ideology that is both arrogant and blind to the fact that we are both perennially on, and of, this land. We both exist and will continue to exist.

Those who have adopted this ideology do not understand that our history is shared and our heritage is in so many ways common. They do not see a common future because they fail to see or comprehend their neighbors' presence.

In history's darkest moments, the Jewish soul always found light in the dark. Learning from our brethren, I hope that the public display of the absurd and evil fantasies animating this deal be a wake up call for empathy.

May we reclaim our shared destiny from those who are striving to instill fear and hate. May my son's memories of soldiers with big guns, and the soldiers' memories of stopping a six years old at a checkpoint, be just memories of a bygone chapter in our mutual history.

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*Thameen Darby is a surgeon, a father and a husband. He lives in Nablus, in the Occupied West Bank.*

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

## Opinion

# Give Trump's peace plan a chance

By Ari Hoffman

After much delay, the Trump Administration this week announced that its Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, the “deal of the century,” is finally set for release. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his prime political antagonist, Benny Gantz, have been summoned to Washington, D.C. for the occasion. The plan, spear-headed by President Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner, has already been rejected by the Palestinians.

The news came at an inauspicious time. These have not exactly been halcyon days for dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, or between the United States and the Palestinian authority. Israeli politics is frozen in a kind of nauseating gridlock, and Palestinian leadership is just as corrupt and hateful as ever. The region seems both hopelessly stalemated and dangerously volatile, hardly ideal traveling conditions to set out on the road to peace. And let's not even mention impeachment.

For these reasons, the peace plan is often preemptively pronounced dead on arrival, and not just by the president's foes. Both sides of the political spectrum find it convenient to treat the new initiative as a bad joke. For many on the right, there can be no agreement with the Palestinians worth the paper it is written on; they associate Oslo not with a charming city in Norway but with charred out busses and the wail of sirens and Israeli husbands and wives and children, lost. They see Palestine as a terrorist state in the making and have no desire to see a new Raqqa near Rehovot. The memories of energetic US efforts to pressure Israel into concessions still rile the blood.

Meanwhile, the left, the ostensible peace camp, has been even more vociferous in arguing that the Trump peace plan is an artifact of ridicule, null and void from its very conception. They see an Administration that has forfeited its ability to be a “neutral broker” by spoiling Israel with indulgent unilateralism; the Golan Heights, the Embassy, the settlements. The close relationship between the left's two bêtes noires, Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump, also presents a united front to resist. Like religious Jews waiting for the Messiah, they wait for a Warren or Sanders Administration to undo all that has been broken, to restore the “rule of law” and put Israel back in its proper place. Spare the rod, you know.

Both of these approaches are wrong, for the simple reason that peace is always a surprise, and always a little bit weird. History moves not at all and then all of a sudden, and the prospect of new leadership in both Israel and the United States should be sobering.

The right might never have a better opportunity to dictate the terms of a final status, and there is something very powerful about a positive vision of what you want, rather than a negative vision of what you fear. The point of Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky's concept of the Iron Wall, or argument that peace with the Arabs would only be possible when Jewish strength was inarguable, was not the wall, but the pathways on the other side of it.

Indeed, as the founders of Zionism itself argued in response to the traditional messianic hope, history happens in the interim, not in the best of all possible worlds. And in the interim – also known as “reality” – a couple of important truths need acknowledgment: The Arabs have waged war after war against Israel, and their current predicament is traceable to the outcomes of those wars. The Golan Heights are part of Israel. Jerusalem is Israel's capital. A Gantz government is likelier to look far closer to Netanyahu and Trump's vision than J Street's. The chances of an immediate withdrawal from the West Bank are nil, not because Israelis are desperate to rule another people but because there is no Israeli consensus for it; the left has lost that argument and continues losing it. Long-running Palestinian delusions about central facets of the conflict have not served them well.

Just as there is no guarantee that the right will continue to reign here and there, there is no certainty that the history gods, or the God of History, will compensate the left for its recent setbacks. The great lesson of the Middle East is that saints are in short supply, and that the good is far more precious than the perfect; the howl over Trump's executive order protecting Jewish students on campus and the silence over his efforts at criminal justice reform indicate a left that has lost its ability to distinguish.

It is likely that the peace plan fails, but then so have so many of the ones before it. There is no script, and conditions do not seem ideal. But they never are, and peace sometimes looks strange.

To give up on hope is a terrible thing. Don't give in. Give peace chance.

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*Ari Hoffman is a contributing columnist at the Forward.*

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## Life

# The Orthodox Intimacy Coach, Talking About Sex On Instagram

By Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt

Sitting in her living room in Hillside, N.J., talking into an iPhone, Bracha Bard-Wigdor, 32, is schooling Orthodox Jewish women about sex. Instagram is her platform. No filters.

“It is not O.K. for our children to be learning that men are predators, animals, that they have sexual urges they can’t control as boys,” she said, looking straight into the phone’s camera, pushing a lock of hair from her wig behind her ear. “What do you think that girl is going to live her life living like? She is going to start thinking that her body is up for grabs, that anyone can touch her.”

She is a birth doula and intimacy coach, and she has 13,000 followers and counting. The evening was a typical one – blunt talk about miscarriages, C-sections, sexual positions and abuse. In a community where sex is reserved for after marriage, and where sex education is still largely nonexistent – this sort of Instagram therapy has caught on like fire. From the kitchens and bedrooms of Crown Heights and Boro Park, N.Y., Lakewood, N.J., and Kiryas Joel, N.Y., women are watching her.

That night in July, Bard-Wigdor posted an Instagram story about sexual miseducation in the Orthodox community, and hundreds of responses poured in. Here are a few:

*“I went through the Bais Yaakov system, and was brought up with this idea of men. I’m currently married and having a very rough time with the physical aspect.”*

*“I approached a prominent famous rabbi...about helping me get through a sexual assault. He asked me what I was wearing...here I am, 16 years old, broken and hurt, and essentially being told that it was my fault.”*

*“There was the idea in my Christian community that the wife must always be ready and willing in order to*

*keep her husband happy. Because if he cheated that meant that he wasn’t getting what he needed at home.”*

Later that night, after putting her kids to sleep, Bard-Wigdor returned to her pulpit, now wearing a headscarf instead of a wig, visibly overwhelmed by the onslaught of messages: “This is still being taught in schools right now,” she said. “You don’t know what your kids are being taught.”



For the religious woman who is conditioned to constantly censor herself, superwoman the *balabusta* who runs a small business and whips up Shabbos meals for a small army and volunteers in all of her spare time – Bard-Wigdor, with her straight-talk about

the wonders and trials of the female body, is a welcome revolutionary.

*The interview was edited for clarity.*

## How did you get into sex education?

It was always in my personality that people would open up to me. Even as a teenager, growing up in Crown Heights, girls would come and talk to me about their eating disorders and abuse histories.

I got married at 20, and young marrieds would come and talk to me about their private, intimate lives. I remember thinking: “I’m only married for six months, and you’re asking me questions about orgasms? Shouldn’t I be asking you? You’re married for many years.”

It made me realize that there’s a huge sex education gap. Most of our parents didn’t discuss sex. Growing up, we don’t talk to boys. As teen girls, we would ask teachers about marriage and the mikvah, and would get shut down. Even in school, they’d created a class for “young girls acting out,” who were rebellious and testing the waters with the opposite gender, and they only taught them negative things about sex. That not only didn’t help – that’s miseducation.

In seminary, our ‘Jewish home’ class only covered mikvah, and only twice, in a whole year. And at every point, you think: Now they’ll teach us. I got engaged, I got to kallah [pre-marital] classes, and I didn’t learn anything about sex. Nothing. I got married, we moved

to Israel, and I took a course for kallah teachers – I learned the texts there, and I'm grateful for the Judaic sources – but still not much about intimacy. No practical sex advice.

So I created my own curriculum. I researched studies, read books on anatomy and psychology and pleasure.

Soon after I got married, a woman I knew who was married for over 10 years confided in me that she had never enjoyed sex. It broke me. I told her, "There are sex therapists, you know?" and she said, "What is that? Do they have sex with you?"

So 10 years ago, when we came back from Israel, my sister got engaged. I studied with her the laws of family purity, but also my sexual-education curriculum. And she told her friend, and her friend, and it spread by word of mouth. In the beginning, it was just in Brooklyn, in Crown Heights and Flatbush. Then it reached Williamsburg and Lakewood. I started teaching via video chat, too – learning with women in New Jersey, California, and even Hawaii. I teach Jewish law alongside sex ed – anatomy, what to expect on the wedding night, consummation, communication, sex dysfunction, hygiene, spicing it up, and so on.

I never planned to be a teacher. But I have three younger sisters, and I told myself that I wouldn't let it happen to them, to go into marriage unprepared. They, and my friends who confided in me, were my motivation.

**But now, a whole universe of information is available online. How is it that so many young *frum* people are still unprepared for marriage?**

I don't believe anyone should learn about sex only on the internet – secular or religious. The information there is more often than not extremely damaging and harmful. It's easy to stumble upon negative sexuality, part of that one-night stand culture – that's not what anyone who wants a healthy intimate relationship should look into.

There is a lack of Jewish sexual education. If Torah is absent from our intimate life, we're missing a powerful component. We believe that sexuality is fun, pleasurable, and a spiritual experience. Connecting with your spouse, knowing there is Godly light in your home. Some Orthodox people think it's just a mitzvah – not something to enjoy.

But enjoyment is very important: God wants us to not just eat, but to enjoy foods, so He gave us taste buds. Sex without spirituality is just sex: It's O.K, it's not amazing. And same too, sex that is just completed for a "spiritual" purpose, isn't what sex is either. It's supposed to be fun, pleasurable for both partners, and

interactive.

**So when did you take this to Instagram?**

It actually started as a Facebook group that I created for new *frum* moms. I started getting a lot of family purity questions, about sexuality and halacha, and then on dysfunction, sexual addiction, and abuse. I got a lot of flak for it, because people felt it was too open.

Then, when Instagram gained traction in the *frum* community, I switched over. At this point, my 15-second Insta story yields 6,000 views and sometimes over 100 messages. People can message me privately, and I can share their comments anonymously, if they let me.

**So your stories become a sort of safe yet public conversation, moderated by you?**

Yes. And I find that it works. I am connecting with women in the comfort and safety of their own homes. A few years later, and literally, women just keep walking up to me – in the grocery, at weddings, in restaurants.

At a conference for Orthodox Jewish women recently, one woman pulled me aside, and told me that she had been married for four years but never enjoyed sex. But now she did, after following my Instagram stories. "I literally am thanking you for saving my marriage," she told me. And she isn't even a client! She simply gained knowledge and empowerment from the information that I share.

**One thing that I love is you not only post information about sexual health, but you also share responses from followers.**

**Sometimes it's "Wow, yes, this happened to me," and sometimes it's, "What are you talking about? These things don't happen here." I find the vitriol you receive sometimes really shocking – some people's heads are so deeply buried in the sand.**

I share the hater's flak too, because it's transparency and accountability. I don't tolerate online bullying, and I want my followers to know that these sorts of attitudes, and denial, still exist.

**Why do you think people have such extreme reactions?**

The answer is very hurtful, but it's the truth: They live in a bubble – they don't know that their sisters and aunts may be struggling in their private lives. And my content hurts their bubble.

Some women tell me, "My life is O.K. – my intimacy is just fine. Why do you need to publish this?" So you'd rather sacrifice people not getting educated – just so an Orthodox woman doesn't talk about it publicly?

Some others are upset because they're like, "You're telling me it can be different?" It's a mentality like, "If I suffered, you have to suffer also."

One bridal teacher told me, "For 30 years, I taught thousands of brides, without teaching sex." But that's wrong. And it's easier for them to blame me than accept responsibility. But if they did their job, I don't believe I would have mine now.

### **Tell me about some of the positive responses from your followers.**

The overwhelming majority of the messages are positive. So many are grateful. Many feel less alone. I get thousands of messages that all say, "Me, too," "Me, too." "Same here." People see that others are struggling, alongside them. There is solidarity and hope for change in that.

### **So, how do we fix this? What are the solutions?**

I can't convince many of our pre-marital class educators to teach more. They don't all want to know better. I have privately reached out to some, but I wasn't met with much love. Some told me that I have no business teaching, that I am too young, not married for 30 years. Some teachers I'm friends with, and we exchange resources – I wish it was more often!

Firstly, when you're a mom –talk to your daughter. Dads, talk to your sons. There are parents who don't know what to say to their kids, but they can and need to get educated. They themselves ought to speak to a sex coach or therapist. Don't pass on your discomforts to your kids. Some of my clients come to me not for themselves, but for help with talking to their kids.

Secondly, schools must introduce intimacy. Our teens are, whether you like it or not, all online. They know and are exposed to a lot more than you think.

Thirdly, pre-wedding teachers must take responsibility. I know grooms' teachers who will say to their grooms: "Do you know someone who can teach you about the wedding night?" They put the responsibility to get educated from the teacher on the student – that's negligence. The "cool yeshiva guy", what is he going to say? That he doesn't know what to do with a girl? He'll pretend that he knows what he's doing. And it can create a lot of anxiety before the wedding.

I had this one student – I checked in with her after the wedding, as I always do. A month later, she reached out to me; she was still struggling to consummate her marriage. I referred her right away to a pelvic floor therapist. She told me: "When you were teaching me about sexual dysfunctions, I thought, why do I need to

learn this? It won't happen to me. I cannot imagine now not knowing." Our young people need to know about dysfunctions, infertility, miscarriage, and more before marriage. Not after.

Parents, teachers, principals, rabbis, rebbetzins, therapists, coaches, kallah teachers – we need all community members to pitch in on this.

### **You once posted an Instagram story asking *frum* women about their wedding nights. I was pretty shocked by your gall in asking people about this – and also by the responses.**

Yes. I did a poll, asking women how many had had their marriage consummated "in a forceful way." I got a lot of flak for asking. People wrote to me: "We get it's important, but why are you bringing this up here?"

Because if I'm noting a trend, I need to get to the bottom of it. I thought, maybe because I'm only hearing problems, maybe my version is skewed? Or I am right, and I need proof of it. So I decided to see what the women have to say. I asked my followers: "Were you prepared? Did you feel violated?"

Around half said they did not feel prepared, and roughly half of those respondents said they felt violated. Some people need therapy for years afterwards, because they feel that in their first sexual encounter they had no control. This is devastating, and it's avoidable.

I think our generation of Orthodox Jews is standing up and saying no to the status quo. And we are not being hateful. We don't have a problem with the community, or with Torah, God forbid. But we do have to face the ugly in our community, in order to heal and live healthy lives.

You start teaching when they're babies. Use the right anatomical terms. It's important to teach your daughter about puberty and period; to teach your son about erection and masturbation, at every age, appropriately. They've done a study, that kids who use the right body terms are less likely to be abused. Teach them: It's private, it's sacred, and no one is allowed to see or touch it.

I don't believe that these things are only "frum people problems" – not abuse, not sexual dysfunction, not lack of pleasure. The whole world struggles with this: 30% of American women never had an orgasm. In public schools, sex ed is all about condoms, STD's, abortion, consent, birth control - they're not teaching about pleasure or relationship communication.

### **You talk quite a bit about abuse.**

Well, studies show that one in every four females, and

one in six males, is sexually assaulted in their lifetime. That means, this is too common to not talk about.

I share messages with purpose. And I try to offer a voice to my followers who feel they can't speak up, who feel that so much of the blame was placed upon them, and that they wanted to say something but didn't have the words, or that they couldn't tell their parents. It's time to change that narrative for the next generation.

**So recently, a writer for an Orthodox women's magazine reached out to you to profile your work as a doula. But then, they killed the story. What happened, exactly?**

The story was about my doula work – but my being an intimacy coach, even in my other time, was too much for them. I was disappointed. A lot of my followers were angry – the knowledge that 99% of that magazine's readers are *frum* women - exactly my audience, even more targeted than Instagram –these are the women who need to hear these things most. For me, this was a mirror – these are the stigmas that we're up against. It hurt, but I moved on.

**Maybe social media is a more powerful platform for Orthodox women to have free discourse on things that are sensitive? You can reach people directly. No censors, no filters.**

Yes. When you're on your social, you own your voice on it. You can be unapologetic and honest.

The establishment still wants to save face, unfortunately, and that's why they won't talk about these issues. Yet.

I can sleep at night because I know I'm helping people. I'm helping marriages. Couples. Families. I teach the things I should have learned, but didn't. So I'm still here. I hope, with time, others will join me.

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Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt is the life editor at the Forward. Find her on Twitter and Instagram.

## Culture

# Remembering Jason Polan, the Jewish, Taco Bell-loving artist who captured New York

By Anya Ulinich

Possibly the most quintessentially New York artist of this century was a Jewish millennial from Michigan.

Jason Polan, who died of cancer on January 27 at the age of 37, didn't just make the city's people his subjects, and its streets his studio. The city was also the spirit animating his work.

Polan's best-known project was an attempt to draw every person in New York. It began in 2008, and in 2015, resulted in a 408-page book called "Every Person in New York." Refiguring the New York City crowd in book form, it has no page numbers, possibly because Polan's subjects refuse to be nailed down to coordinates – they're mostly anonymous, and always on the move.



Time and change were inherent to Polan's approach: He drew each person for exactly as long as they remained in front of him. Some portraits are detailed, some consist of a just a few jagged lines and others are missing body parts. Some have brief

captions, others don't. There are drawings of groups that look almost abstract, with overlapping squiggly lines and circles and disembodied heads. Polan, who had over 80,000 Instagram followers, shared a kind of a matter-of-fact "anti-style" with another young New York artist and Instagram star, Liana Finck. Their drawings prioritize expression and getting an idea across as economically as possible. Polan's sketches are about gesture and movement – but also each subject's quirky, individual character.

I moved to New York in 2000, a few years before Polan did, and I remember the moment when I first became sharply aware of the rhythm and pace of the city, the marvel of its communal choreography. I was getting out of the train with my toddler in a stroller, when the stroller's front wheels got stuck in the gap between the train and the platform. When my kid was just about to be squished by the closing doors, two men, strangers to each other, materialized on either side of the stroller and lifted it out of the gap. Before I had a chance to thank them, they made it onto the train, and were gone. I imagine these men and me and my daughter and all the people on the platform experiencing our separate yet interdependent New York minutes in Jason Polan's drawings.

"I draw people every day, and usually, nobody will notice me," Polan told WNYC in 2010. But he loved to collaborate. On his blog, he invited people to make two-minute-long appointments on specific street corners, where he might or might appear to draw them; if he did, he would later post the drawings. "I like the idea of it being a surprise," he said.

But his most ingenious public initiative was the Taco Bell Drawing Club, a weekly gathering of sketch artists at a Union Square Taco Bell. The Club, he reasoned, could potentially have as many branches as there are Taco Bell franchises. Its ethos was and is unpretentiousness. Most New Yorkers have at some point taken advantage of the inadvertent democracy of corporate food establishments – doing their homework at McDonalds, charging their phones at Dunkin Donuts, writing their novels and cover letters at Starbucks. It took a Midwestern transplant with a big heart and an awesome sense of humor to formalize this experience instead of trying to ignore it. As an artist, and especially as a newcomer to the city, it takes courage and freedom of imagination to inhabit the current version of New York, rather than reaching for its nostalgic past. It's likely that if Andy Warhol lived today, in our city of insane rents, his Factory would have taken up residence somewhere like a Taco Bell, too. "If you draw at a Taco Bell, you're a member," Polan told the *New Yorker*. Everyone was welcome, and you could draw whatever you wanted. Members mostly drew other customers, but also, their burritos.

Polan grew up in Franklin, Michigan, and graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in anthropology and art before coming to New York in

2004. His other projects ranged from drawing every object on exhibit at the MOMA to collaborating with Marvel and Uniqlo on t-shirt design. "I was smitten instantly by his wild drawing mind," the art critic Jerry Saltz wrote on Twitter. Polan's art was generous, joyful and inventive.

"As long as I'm living and I can draw, I'll be thinking about this project," Polan told WNYC about "Every Person in New York." Perhaps tongue-in-cheek, he spoke about completing the project as though it were in fact possible to capture everyone in the city, person-by-person, sketch-by-sketch. But New York is like a river, always changing. People leave, and others arrive, and neighborhoods change only slightly slower than the populations of subway platforms between arriving trains. But maybe the process is the whole point. Attempting to include everyone feels stubbornly optimistic, but also necessary in divisive times. "When the project is completed we will all have a get together," Polan wrote on his blog.



TIMOTHY A. CLARY/Getty Images

Jason Polan drawing in Grand Central Station in February, 2011.

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*Anya Ulinich is the Forward's Contributing Art Critic.*