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News

Two Obscure, Obsessive Jewish Groups Created And Saved This 1,000-Year-Old Bible

By Helen Chernikoff

The 1,000-year-old Hebrew Bible that went on public view for the first time last week would not exist at all, or have survived this long, without the obsessive efforts of two obscure Jewish groups: the Masoretes and the Karaites.

The Masoretes were a mysterious group of scholar-scribes, who starting in the Sixth Century worked to create a complete, accurate text of the Five Books of Moses. The Karaites, who emerged a bit later, are a Jewish religious movement that derives its laws and customs solely from those five books, rejecting the legal authority of the rabbis who shaped the tradition after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.

“These two groups were focused on the text,” said Herschel Hepler, a curator at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. “Their efforts turned the text into a huge, heavy sacred object, and as a result, the text got preserved.”

The Bible that just went on display is one of a dozen roughly complete Hebrew manuscripts that are this old

and contain the full Torah, and only one of two in the Americas. The other, located at the University of Michigan, is so fragile only scholars have access to it.

This Bible, formerly called “MS 3” and now known as the Washington Pentateuch, was originally written around the year 1000, probably in the town of Tiberias in what is now modern Israel. About 20 pages written in 1141 were added later, although experts aren’t sure when. It was in the Middle East until around the 1400s and 1500s, when it was bound in a style that’s typical of that region. Somewhere between the binding and 1835, it was moved to Ukraine and then about fifty years later to Russia. After that, it passed through the hands of various collectors until it ended up in the private collection of an Israeli who lives in London.

The Green family, evangelical Christians who own the Hobby Lobby chain of craft stores and founded the Museum of the Bible, purchased the manuscript from that collector. The sale price has not been made public, Hepler said.

It is thanks to the Washington Pentateuch and the 11

other manuscripts like it that scholars, religious Jews and Christians or anyone else who is interested has a consistent text to read, Hepler said. Modern translations are based on these texts, which are both the oldest and the most refined, because of the involvement of the Masoretes.

The Masoretes are the people that created the Washington Pentateuch, Hepler said, as well as the Aleppo Codex and the Leningrad Codex. They are also the group who decided how the Torah should be ritually chanted, by fixing the text's vowels and musical notation. Originally, they separated the manuscript and the notation into two documents. But by the 800s or 900s they were combining all of that information onto one page – a big breakthrough.

“It was a huge innovation in any kind of manuscript production, not just Jewish, to have this much information on a single page and for it to still make sense,” Hepler said.

Codices like the Washington Pentateuch and similar texts are books that were written and bound by hand – very different from both the scrolls Jews worldwide chant from in synagogues and the machine-printed versions that students use in schools. Ritual scrolls contain only letters – no vowels, and no notes. The Washington Pentateuch has both of those; it is also highly designed and bound in leather, with metal decorations.

The Masoretes were likely comprised of different leading families, Hepler said, such as Ben Asher and Ben Naftali, who made their living as scribes. They would have created a book like the Washington Pentateuch under the auspices of wealthy patrons, and they also would have supported themselves by doing related work, such as correcting other manuscripts.

The post-Temple era, in which Judaism was shaped by successive schools of rabbis whose commentaries were collected in the Talmud, was well underway by the time the Masoretes were active. But some contemporary scholars theorize that the Masoretes might have been early Karaites – so focused were they on the Five Books of Moses.

“Their focus on the Biblical text was a counterpoint to the focus on the Oral Law” of the rabbis, Hepler said. “They were focused on the Biblical text in a very extreme, very complicated way.”

The Karaites also played an important role in the preservation of the book that became the Washington Pentateuch; a Karaite community in Yevpatoriya, Ukraine, was the first owner of the book outside the Middle East that scholars know of, although they don't know when the community obtained it.

Scholars differ on when the Karaite movement crystallized, dating it between the Seventh and Ninth centuries, according to the book “Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding,” by Fred Astren (University of South Carolina Press, 2004.) Today, the largest community lives in the Israeli city of Ashdod; there is also a community in the United States.

Their religious connection to the Torah inclined them to cherish ancient manuscripts; Cairene Karaites owned the Cairo Codex, which contains the prophetic writings. The Karaites of Russia were likewise avid collectors, which is how they came to possess the manuscript now known as the Washington Pentateuch, in addition to the Leningrad Codex, whose Hebrew forms the basis of most modern translations of the Bible, Hepler said.

“They love Biblical texts,” he added. “Even today, what they collected are our jewels.”

Helen Chernikoff is the Forward's News Editor. She came to the Forward from The Jewish Week, where she served as the first web director and created both a blog dedicated to disability issues and a food and wine website. Before that, she covered the housing, lodging and logistics industries for Reuters, where she could sit at her desk and watch her stories move the stock market. Helen has a Master's of Public Administration from Columbia University and a BA in History and French from Amherst College. She is also a rabbinical school dropout. Contact her at chernikoff@forward.com and follow her on Twitter at [@thesimplechild](https://twitter.com/thesimplechild).

News

Jews Were Victims Of More Than Half Of All Religious Hate Crimes: FBI

By Aiden Pink

Jewish Americans were once again the religious group most targeted by religiously-motivated bias crimes, the Federal Bureau of Investigation disclosed Tuesday.

In its annual Hate Crime Statistics Act report, the FBI found a slight decrease in the number of hate crimes overall, as well as a similarly small decline in crimes motivated by religious bias. The report listed 7,120 overall incidents, of which 1,617 were motivated by religion. And 57% of those religious hate crimes - 920 overall - were motivated by offenders' anti-Jewish bias, the FBI said. A record number of anti-Jewish crimes were violent in nature - 105 in total, up from 73 in 2017.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, Jews have been the most common victims of religiously-motivated hate crimes every year since the FBI began such reports in 1991. Fifteen percent of religiously-motivated hate crimes were victims of anti-Muslim bias and four percent were attributable to anti-Sikh bias.

"It is unacceptable that Jews and Jewish institutions continue to be at the center of religion-based hate crime attacks," ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt said in a statement. "We need to take concrete action to address and combat this significant problem." He urged Congress to pass a bill that would improve hate crime training, prevention and data collection.

The most common hate crimes overall were those attributable to anti-black bias - more than 2,400 in total, 47% of racial incidents and 34% of all incidents.

The report also found that hate crime murders reached a record level of 24 in 2018 - attributable to the 11 people killed in the Tree of Life synagogue

shooting in Pittsburgh. Hate crimes against Hispanics and LGBTQ individuals, especially transgender people, also went up last year.

Experts believe that the FBI statistics undercount the actual frequency of hate and bias incidents because their data is based on self-reporting from states and municipalities across the country, each of which have their own definitions of "hate crime" (and some don't have anti-hate crime laws at all). Indeed, Alabama and Wyoming reported zero hate crimes for 2018.

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News

Feel Like Anti-Semitic Hate Crimes Are On The Rise In New York? You're Not Wrong

By Molly Boigon

Twitter and other social media forums are abuzz with worry and anger about two anti-Semitic incidents in New York City: the smashing of windows at a girl's yeshiva, and the scrawling of swastikas and a message – “Kill all Jews” – on a Manhattan subway station wall.

These two incidents, which happened between Friday night and Monday morning, are adding to the widespread sense that anti-Semitic hate crimes are on the rise. New York's Jews are justified in feeling this way, say local and national experts.

“The Jewish community is more fearful than ever,” said Evan Bernstein, the New York and New Jersey regional director at the Anti-Defamation League.

The New York Police Department has received 200 anti-Semitic hate crime complaints so far this year, which is up almost a third from the same period in 2018. Almost half of all hate crimes reported were directed at Jews, according to the NYPD.

Online, the community continues to lament a few especially horrific attacks, including a rabbi being assaulted with a large paving stone, a man beaten with a belt and a delivery driver being pelted with rocks.

ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt and Brooklyn Borough President Eric L. Adams will host a press conference Tuesday to announce a new initiative aimed at reducing anti-Semitic violence and hate crimes.

“I wanted to sit down and look at this and just come up with a proactive way of addressing this problem,” Adams said. “I'm really concerned about the increase in hate crimes across the city in general, but specifically, those that we are witnessing dealing with the Jewish community.”

Violent assaults have mostly taken place in the Crown

Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn, and many have been perpetrated by young black men, according to video surveillance footage. Bernstein said those incidents might be the result of a “turf battle” that has been spawned by the expansion of the Orthodox community, and landlord disputes that have bred “negative feelings.”

“A lot of it always seems to come down to gentrification,” he said.

Brooklyn residents of all faiths are being pushed out of long-term, affordable housing and as the numbers of identifiably Orthodox residents continue to grow due to high birth rates, everyone feels the squeeze – despite the “wonderful working connections” between communities of color and white Orthodox residents, said Bernstein.

Brooklyn saw 13 violent anti-Semitic assaults in 2018, and more than 70 other anti-Semitic incidents, according to the NYPD.

New York City is a part of a larger trend of an increase in violent anti-Semitic hate crimes, said Brian Levin, the director of the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism at California State University in San Bernardino.

“The thing to look at is really the crimes of violence,” he said. “Our numbers are showing an increase in violence directed against Jews and we're seeing a diverse group of people committing this violence.”

As the attacks continue in New York City, some residents wonder why perpetrators escape despite surveillance video by the local neighborhood watch in Orthodox neighborhoods, the Shomrim.

Yet the NYPD's arrest record for anti-Semitic hate crimes from last year is largely proportional to the number of those incidents. Of all of the hate crime arrests the NYPD made in 2018, nearly half were for anti-Semitic hate crimes, according to data from the department.

Rabbi Eli Cohen, the executive director of the Crown Heights Community Council, said the neighborhood has had a “good response” from the police.

“The police are doing their job,” he said.

Virginia Jeffries contributed reporting.

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Opinion

Bernie Sanders' Oped Settles It: You Can Be Both Progressive And Zionist

By Abe Silberstein

On Monday, the left-wing Jewish Currents news organization posted an op-ed by Senator Bernie Sanders on fighting anti-Semitism in America today. It speaks mainly to his progressive supporters in the Jewish community and articulates his progressive Zionist position on the Israeli occupation. It is a call for American Jews to recognize that the threat of anti-Semitism in America comes mainly from the political right, as well as a subtle plea to his fellow American Jewish leftists not to embrace the false pieties of anti-Zionism.

Under the headline “How to Fight Anti-Semitism,” which is also the title of Bari Weiss’s recent book on the same subject, Senator Sanders lays out his vision for fighting the evident increase in anti-Semitism in the United States. In brief, he sees anti-Semitism as not only a threat to Jews but “to democratic governance itself.”

“The anti-Semites who marched in Charlottesville don’t just hate Jews. They hate the idea of multiracial democracy,” Sanders writes.

Sanders deserves credit for not inventing a right-left balance where there is none. There is, of course, anti-Semitism on the left – as Sanders acknowledges – but an especially vicious and violent anti-Semitism from the right has found a place of unparalleled power in the United States.

Overlooking this naked imbalance out of a misplaced desire for non-partisanship is potentially deadly. The underlying conspiracy theory that motivated the Tree of Life synagogue shooter, Sanders reminds us, was first propagated by President Donald Trump and his lickspittles on the Fox News Channel.

On anti-Semitism, Sanders’s message to progressive Jews comes across as defiant: do not back down in the face of attempts to turn anti-Semitism in America into

a plague on both houses. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar may not be especially careful with her Tweets, he seems to be saying, but she is no Trump. Sanders may not have written the headline, but the contrast with Weiss’s book, which leftists pilloried for what they saw as a false balance, is informative in this context.

This reintroduction of perspective is twinned with a compelling argument about solidarity with other minorities. It cannot be otherwise, Sanders writes, as anti-Semites “accuse Jews of coordinating a massive attack on white people worldwide, using people of color and other marginalized groups to do their dirty work.”

In the process of conveying his view of anti-Semitism to his left-wing audience, Sanders directly addresses the elephant in the room – Israel – and does so at length. Some may criticize this focus as inappropriate, but only if they confuse Sanders’s essay for an attempt at a general condemnation of anti-Semitism.

Rather, Sanders is staking out a position in a raging intra-left debate on the subject. His piece resembles more the political treatises that once appeared in the hallowed pages of *Partisan Review* and *Dissent* during their heyday than anything a contemporary American politician would typically say.

Sanders accuses Trump and his supporters of “using false allegations of anti-Semitism” against Democrats, so he is not merely engaging in a debate on how to best fight anti-Semitism, but in a broader discussion on the left about what is and is not anti-Semitism. And Israel, whether one likes it or not, is at the very center of this controversy.

The position Sanders stakes out here is indubitably moderate. Early on in the essay, he professes his admiration for the progressive values of the kibbutz movement and calls on progressives to recognize Israel as an “enormous achievement,” all but declaring himself sympathetic to the basic aims of Zionism. Later on, after stating the obvious that criticizing Israel is not inherently anti-Semitic, he says “some criticism of Israel can cross the line into anti-Semitism, especially when it denies the right of self-determination to Jews, or when it plays into conspiracy theories about outsized Jewish power.”

Sanders’s evident progressive Zionism will be overlooked by his most vociferous critics such as the Republican Jewish Coalition, which has already begun

maligning him on the airwaves and on social media. But it shouldn't be ignored by his supporters, for whom his message was intended, especially those attracted to anti-Zionism and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement. Even those on the left who disagree with Sanders's Zionism should now recognize that one can be sincere in their commitment to ending Israel's rule over Palestinians while not rejecting the legitimacy of a truly democratic and Jewish state.

As Senator Sanders put it, "My pride and admiration for Israel lives alongside my support for Palestinian freedom and independence. I reject the notion that there is any contradiction there."

Abe Silberstein is a freelance commentator on Israeli politics and U.S.-Israel relations. His work has previously been published in the New York Times, Haaretz, +972 Magazine and the Forward.

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

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News

The Jews Of The Impeachment Showdown: A Visual Guide

By Ari Feldman



The holidays are coming, a chill settled across much of America this week, and impeachment is going public. It's time to ask the question we've all been wondering about, now that several reliable news organizations have corroborated that President Donald Trump planned to give Ukraine hundreds of millions of dollars of military aid if, and only if, Ukraine's leader publicly announced investigations into one of Trump's political rivals.

Namely, which of these impeachment characters is Jewish?

Now, we don't present the following flow chart as evidence that there is some deep, dark Jewish secret at the center of the impeachment inquiry. So far, impeachment has (thankfully) little, if anything, to do with Israel, and the Jews at its center aren't there because of their ties to major Jewish organizations.

Still, as in many political scandals of America's recent history, now that Jews have successfully accessed the once-WASPy upper echelons of the federal government, we can say with certainty: "Where there's smoke, there's lox."

DEMOCRATS 



ADAM SCHIFF
LEADING THE IMPEACHMENT INQUIRY
Chair of intelligence committee, which is hearing impeachment testimony. Trump calls him "Shifty Schiff," which some view as an anti-Semitic dog whistle.



ELIOT ENGEL
CHAIR OF HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
The descendant of Ukrainian Jews. Refused to shake Trump's hand over the president's slowness to respond to threats against Jews.



JERRY NADLER
CHAIR OF HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
A member of the Jewish fraternity Alpha Epsilon Pi and a Talmud whiz. Cut in line for kosher pastrami sandwiches at the 2016 DNC.

THE FRESHMEN




ELISSA SLOTKIN **ELAINE LURIA**

Two first-term Congresswomen with national security credentials, from districts that flipped to blue in 2018, who announced support for the impeachment inquiry in an op-ed in late September. Luria once hosted a Passover seder on a Navy Destroyer.

THE LAWYERS



JOHN EISENBERG
Top lawyer for the National Security Council. Repeatedly concluded that Trump did not do anything criminal in his call with Zelensky.



JAY SEKULOW
Trump's personal lawyer. Raised in a Jewish home, now a Messianic Jew. Where the Mueller Report was a "war," Sekulow said, the impeachment inquiry is just a "skirmish."

TRUMP ADMIN 



JARED KUSHNER
THE SON-IN-LAW
Self-appointed defensive coordinator for fighting impeachment, per reports. Orthodox, but can drive on Shabbat, his rabbi says.



GORDON SONDLAND
Hotelier, ambassador to the European Union, son of German-Jewish refugees. Said that Trump personally directed him to explain the quid pro quo Trump was seeking to Ukrainian officials.



CHARLES KUPPERMAN
Former Deputy National Security Adviser. Has filed a lawsuit effectively asking a federal judge if he is legally allowed to testify for House impeachment investigators.



LT. COL. ALEXANDER VINDMAN
A Jewish refugee from Ukraine and Purple Heart recipient. As head of European Affairs for the National Security Council, he listened in on the call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and testified that Trump asked Zelensky for a quid pro quo.

SCIF: SENSITIVE COMPARTMENTED INFORMATION FACILITY

THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENS



The basement room in the Capitol where impeachment testimony has been given so far.

FROM UKRAINE WITH LOVE



LEV PARNAS



IGOR FRUMAN

GIULIANI'S MEN IN UKRAINE

Associates of Rudy Giuliani, a personal lawyer for Trump, who were arrested for allegedly violating campaign finance laws. Positioned themselves as shadow players in Giuliani's quest to get Ukraine to do Trump a favor.



VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY

The President of Ukraine. Pressured by Trump to investigate the Bidens. Jewish, but not seen as a Jew by Ukrainians. Former comedic actor. Last role was playing a political neophyte who becomes president of Ukraine.

RABBI MOSHE AZMAN

Considers himself Chief Rabbi of Ukraine. Created a refugee camp called "Anatevka" for people fleeing the Ukrainian-Russian war that was part of a plan by Parnas and Fruman to get Giuliani a meeting with Zelensky.



"ANATEVKA"



Not Jewish, But...

Rudy Giuliani

Personal lawyer for Trump. Attempted to use connections with Parnas, Fruman and Azman to get meetings with Ukrainian government officials. Has been known to dance in Jerusalem. Azman made him honorary mayor of "Anatevka."



Charles Gucciardo

The Long Island Lawyer. Befriended Parnas and Fruman on a trip to Israel led by Joe Frager (below). Covered a \$500,000 payment to Giuliani in exchange for stock in Parnas' company, Fraud Guarantee (which does not appear to be active).



HONORARY MENTION



JOE FRAGER

THE GASTROENTEROLOGIST

New York pro-Israel activist. Was once an agent for Qatar. Invited Parnas and Fruman on a trip he organized to Israel, also attended by Charles Gucciardo, Anthony Scaramucci and some prominent Republican Jews.

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Ari Feldman is a staff writer at the Forward. He covers Jewish religious organizations, synagogue life, anti-Semitism and the Orthodox world. If you have any tips, you can email him at feldman@forward.com. Follow him on Twitter @aefeldman.

Culture

The Most Incredible Stories You Never Heard About Harry Houdini

By PJ Grisar

Harry Houdini is the immortal alter ego of the late Hungarian-Jewish immigrant Ehrich Weiss, the son of a rabbi and an incomparable mama's boy. Many of the marvels of Houdini's life, due in part to his own self-mythologizing, are, likewise, so much hocus pocus.

"Nobody created myths like him," Joe Posnanski, the author of the enchanting new book, "The Life and Afterlife of Harry Houdini," told the Forward. "And he did it so well and with such force that, for one, it took years and years, in many cases decades, to unwind some of those myths. And the second thing is he inspired so many other people to create myths about him."

But for all the puffed-up mythos surrounding Houdini, there are plenty of historical facts that are really, genuinely fantastic. Here are a few.

1. Houdini led a group of rabbis' sons involved in show biz

While researching his book, Posnanski found that Houdini, Irving Berlin and Al Jolson organized a group called the Rabbis' Sons Theatrical Benevolent Association to aid the Red Cross and the Young Men's Hebrew Association during World War I.

"Our purpose is to get all the sons of rabbis who are in the show business together in this organization," Houdini told The New York Times. "It is surprising how many sons of Jewish clergymen there are on the stage. The Secretary or any other officers will be glad to furnish information on sons of rabbis who want to join." The secretary was Berlin. Houdini was, naturally, the president.

2. Sarah Bernhardt asked him to regrow her amputated leg

Houdini first met the legendary actress Sarah Bernhardt in 1917, after a New York-based company of actors presented the actress with a bronze statue made in her image. The catch: They expected her to pay for it.

Sensing an opportunity for good press, Houdini bought the statue for her, and later met her. On their first meeting he performed some magic, including his elevated strait jacket escape, which Bernhardt watched from his car. After his tricks, Bernhardt, whose leg was amputated in 1905 due to trauma from a knee injury, is reported to have said, "Houdini won't you use your power to restore my limb?"

Houdini, at a loss, said it was impossible, and admitted his magic wasn't real.

"With Houdini, every time you see something you have to find five other sources to make sure it really happened," Posnanski said. "But the Sarah Bernhardt thing really happened."

3. He was friends with Arthur Conan Doyle - until Doyle's wife tried spiritualism out on him

While Arthur Conan Doyle's signature creation, Sherlock Holmes, was not much for the occult, the author was a true believer. Once, while on vacation in Atlantic City with the Houdinis, Doyle and his wife, Lady Doyle, led a seance. Houdini's beloved mother, Cecilia, had recently died, and while the escapist was skeptical and even repelled by spiritualism, he obliged his friends by having them try to reach her. Of course, he may have also agreed in the hopes of getting a message through.

"I think his devotion to his mother is as defining a characteristic as we can actually nail – as far as we can point out that it was actually true," Posnanski said. "He really died a little bit when she died."

Lady Doyle scrawled 15 hurried pages of automatic writing – the supernatural practice of unconsciously scribbling for a supernatural source – supposedly channeling the late Cecilia Weiss. Houdini, reading the letter, written in English, knew that his German-speaking mother could not have done it and, as a Jew, would certainly not have written the sign of the cross on the pages. The great magician was humiliated by the ruse. The warmth of the friendship between the Doyles and Houdinis cooled that night, and, not long after, Houdini made it his mission to unmask mediums as frauds, believing that their deceit of the bereaved, in his words, "bordered on crime."

4. He couldn't say no to a PR stunt challenge, no matter how ridiculous

Magic may have made Houdini rich, but he still faced

lean years. In the 1890s, down on his luck, Houdini toyed with opening a magic school and, as part of the endeavor, published a pamphlet called “Magic Made Easy,” which revealed some of his tricks and promised the secret to others for a nominal price. Luckily, no one took him up on the offer and he was forced to improvise, thus inviting the challenges that would make him famous.

To make an early name for himself, Houdini would enter police stations around the world, ask to be handcuffed and, so that no one would suspect him of hiding a key, strip naked before he freed himself. For some reason, police were largely OK with this.

After speaking with magic experts, Posnanski said, “I believe that he was not a great magician and I believe that much of his success was due to being a brilliant promoter and a brilliant showman.”

Later, Houdini would welcome challenges to grow his profile and make some money – many of these challenges came from peculiar places. The Hogan Envelope Company challenged Houdini to slip his way out of a giant envelope; chewing gum conglomerate the American Chicle Company bet that the master of escape couldn’t break out of a packing case used to ship their Black Jack gum to troops in France; English suffragettes asked Houdini to extricate himself from bandages and bed linens that tied him to a mattress. He went through with these stunts, escaping from privation by, well, escaping.

5. He wrote a lot

“He wrote constantly,” said Posnanski.

While known later known to commission ghostwriters, among them H.P. Lovecraft, the magician was also not above doing his own ghostwriting, planting stories in the news about his early exploits.

“Most of the newspaper articles, especially in the early years, he wrote,” Posnanski said. “Then he had this sort of literary bent, where he wanted to write these stories, and these stories were not getting particularly well-received, so he started hiring incredible writers to write them for him.”

Houdini wrote fiction, like “Bahl Yahn the Strong Man,” a children’s story about a superhuman individual who carried around his paralyzed mother. He also wrote seven books on magic, including “The Unmasking of Robert-Houdini,” in which he exposed his magical

namesake.

Houdini even had a monthly column in The Daily Mirror, which he once used to send dispatches about anti-Semitism in the Czar Nicholas II’s empire during his time in Russia. He wrote at length about the government shutting down Moscow’s one synagogue and the czar denying an audience to a Jewish delegation looking to reopen it.

“At the present time,” Houdini wrote after departing from his tour of the country, “the Russian censor is very busy making heavy ink blots on a great many of the newspapers that are sent into Russia, as they have too true an account of what happened in Glischnick, where so many Jews were slaughtered. There is an awful state of affairs in some of the cities, but it has been like this for years.”

6. He gave a film legend his name

While working in the California Medicine Show in 1897, Houdini befriended the vaudevillian couple Joe and Myra Keaton, known for their life-and-limb-risking slapstick routine. The pair had a son, Joseph, who, at the age of a year-and-a-half, already showed promise emulating his parents’ schtick. The toddler fell down a flight of stairs one day, and, rather than crying or lying still in shock, picked himself off the ground and kept walking. “That was a real buster!” Houdini is reported to have said. The nickname stuck, as did the imperviousness to physical danger, and Buster Keaton was born.

7. Nearly all of his escapes happened behind a curtain

While not the greatest sleight-of-hand magician, Houdini was an ace at escaping from tanks of water, trunks, handcuffs and straitjackets. But through most of his career, his most high-profile stage escapes all occurred out-of-sight.

“He’s doing these handcuff escapes, he’s doing the Water Torture Cell, he’s doing the milk can, his most famous escapes in a box, behind a curtain, so no one can see him do it,” Posnanski said. “That is so astonishing, cause he would often take 10 minutes, 15 minutes, sometimes, with the bigger escapes, an hour or more, and the audience would sit there and look at a curtain and listen to a band play.”

Audiences did not object – quite the contrary, they seemed to love it.

“It speaks specifically to his time and also what had to be amazing showmanship,” Posnanski said. “He had an extraordinary sense of timing, he knew exactly when to come out just when they were about to lose interest.”

8. Houdini’s real death was a lot less dramatic than fabled

“To this day, people are latching on to something we know isn’t true, but putting it to film because it’s so compelling,” Posnanski said.

In dramatizations, Houdini, who died in 1926, sometimes perishes as the result of one of his acts. When Tony Curtis played him in “Houdini” (1953), for instance, he drowned performing his “Chinese Water Torture Cell” trick. When Adrien Brody did his turn as Houdini in a 2014 History Channel miniseries, he died after a fan punched him in the abdomen in his dressing room in Detroit. Neither is true.

While shortly before his death, Houdini was punched by a man during an engagement at the Princess Theater in Montreal, the hits probably didn’t kill him. It’s arguable that the blows may have exacerbated underlying appendicitis, but it was that condition that ultimately ended his life when he stubbornly insisted on performing through it. An emergency surgery, conducted in Detroit, was performed too late.

“He died on Halloween right in the afternoon so that all the newspapers would write it on Halloween,” Posnanski said. “There are those who believe he killed

himself to die on Halloween – I don’t know if I believe that, but it’s certainly a big part of his legacy.”

9. He hated spiritualists, but still had a code to communicate with his wife from beyond the grave

While Houdini abhorred spiritualists – see above, regarding Arthur Conan Doyle – he nonetheless prepared for the contingency that he could reach his wife, Bess, from the great beyond. The two contrived a complex code of phrases and numbers, paired to letters that spelled out “Believe.” Bess held seances for a decade after Houdini’s death, finally giving up in the 10th year after he passed. But devotees of the man who could escape anything continue to hold seances each Halloween. One day, hopefuls believe, he may even escape death – but his legend already has.

“This is a poor Jewish immigrant, father can’t get a job as a rabbi, and he invents this character through sheer ambition and hunger and fight,” Posnanski said. “He creates this character who becomes one of the most famous people of his time, but also becomes one of the most famous people of all time. I have tremendous admiration for that. He wasn’t always likeable, he wasn’t always on the level – he told a lot of lies, but, he had this goal and this ambition and it’s outsized and it’s larger than life. And I love that story.”

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