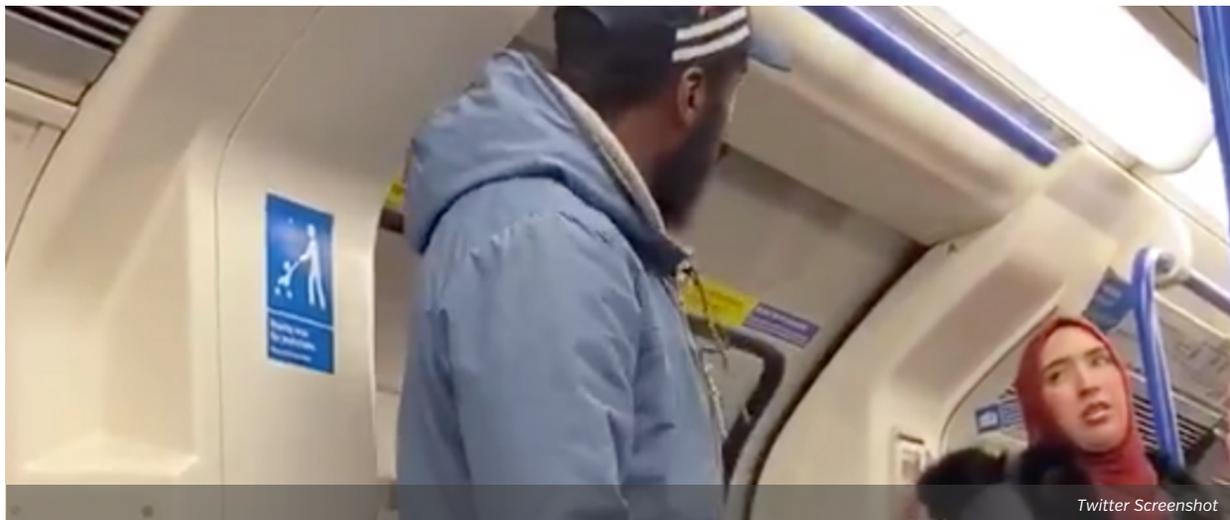


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Twitter Screenshot

### Opinion

## Our Orthodox Family Was Attacked On A Train. A Brave Muslim Woman Intervened.

By Anonymous

*The author of this piece was filmed while he and his children were attacked on a train in London. The Forward normally identifies all of our op-ed writers, but the father expressed a fear of retaliation for speaking out, and has asked to remain anonymous. We have honored his request.*

To many of you, the disturbing viral video of an anti-Semite ranting at a Jewish family on the underground is just that, a video. To our family, this video, which captured just two minutes of a far longer ordeal, is a stark record of the incredibly frightening experience we went through that day. I want to share a first hand account to let the world know what minorities experience on a daily basis and a message of hope.

On the morning of Friday 22nd November, my pregnant wife, our three young children, and I were on the Tube traveling from Hendon Central to Covent Gardens. We were engaged in regular family chatter. At some point, a man boarded the train and approached us. In an aggressive tone, he asked if we were Jews, though it was obvious that he knew we were Jewish since we were wearing our highly noticeable religious skullcaps.

He immediately began to shout at us that Jews started the slave trade and that our family would in turn be his slaves. Along with many other vile threats, he said the Jews were from the synagogue of Satan, and were responsible for planning and perpetrating various tragedies and atrocities, such as 9/11. His comments sounded like they were taken directly from the Protocols of The Elders of Zion.

Unfortunately, as a noticeably Jewish person, it's not uncommon to have anti-Semitic abuse hurled at me. But those encounters usually take place in open spaces, and are done in passing. It is another matter entirely to be locked in the confined space of a train carriage, with nowhere to run or hide.

As you can tell from the video, we were all scared. My only thoughts were how to keep our children calm, shield and protect them, and somehow deescalate the situation.

At this point, a man wearing a baseball cap bravely tried to intervene, becoming himself the subject of the man's threats. Then, a Muslim woman wearing a

headscarf, who we now know as Asma Shuweikh, stepped in. This was an even more courageous act, since the man had already shown a willingness to resort to, at the very least, violent threats. He then directed his ire at Asma for stepping in.

Without her intervention and distraction, he would have continued his abuse towards us, which we are certain would have escalated to physical violence. Asma's actions were nothing short of heroic. Others then offered assistance by switching seats and talking to our children.

The ordeal finally ended for us when we left the train. We are extremely grateful to all who stepped forward in this charged situation.

Experiencing anti-Semitism even these days is unfortunately not as rare as reported sightings of the Loch Ness monster. And sadly, for most of these incidents, there are no cellphones ready to record and post the events to social media to raise awareness.

Anti-Semitism is on the rise, ranging from everyday verbal abuse to ever more frequent physical attacks to the vast varieties of anti-Jewish sentiment all over. But it often flies below the radar, or is willfully ignored.

I want to use the opportunity of the virality of this incident to highlight two things. First, it should serve as a reminder to everyone that anti-Semitism is alive and well. The scene of a Jewish family at the receiving end of abuse like the one you saw of my family is not an

outlier. It is a reality that Jews worldwide live with every day. It is important that we not delude ourselves that the liberal democracies we live in have stamped out this ancient specter of evil that has haunted Europe and the world for thousands of years.

But mainly, while this incident was a grim reminder of bigotry, it also serves as a beacon of hope. The assistance we received was heartwarming. A few people came to our aid, but I want to specifically mention Asma. Asma shattered the mistaken belief that Jews and Muslims must be at odds by standing up to our abuser, putting herself in harm's way to assist us. In so doing, Asma insisted on our shared humanity; no matter what we look like on the outside, on the inside we are all the same.

Asma's actions stand as a direct rebuke to the vision of racial hatred and division presented not only by the man on the train, but by many in our society.

I'm indebted to Asma, both for helping us and for serving as an example to the world about how, despite our differences, through kindness and understanding, we can live together in peace and harmony.

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

Forward

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## News

# Trash Pickup On Shabbat: How NYC Sanitation Created A 'Mountain of Garbage' Outside Boro Park's Yeshivas

By Molly Boigon

On a drizzly autumn night in Boro Park, Brooklyn, scholars with peyos rush home from study, little boys play on bikes and scooters and a door opens to a hallway where two men stand in the curl of their cigarette smoke. All around them on their neighborhood streets, an obstacle blocks their sidewalks, rises above the cars and fills their nostrils with a familiar stench: trash.

"The garbage is all over," said resident Grace DeVillo Genco at the last community board meeting in Boro Park. "What is going to be our recourse to have the streets cleaned?"

Residents and local officials complain about trash heaps on their sidewalks, and say the sanitation department's failure to account for the neighborhood's unique Jewish character has contributed to the problem.

In September, the city's Department of Sanitation reduced trash pickup at 28 schools in District 12 – which includes Boro Park – from daily to twice weekly as part of the rollout of compost collection in New York.

Now each school gets compost collection five days a week, paper recycling four days a week and other recycling three days a week. Garbage is collected only two days a week. But residents and local officials say that's not enough in Boro Park, where there are so many large schools.

"We have buildings with thousands of children in them, schools that serve breakfast, lunch and dinner, who are getting twice-a-week pickup," said District 12

Manager Barry Spitzer at September's community board meeting.

Spitzer cancelled a scheduled interview, did not respond to subsequent calls and emails and walked away from a reporter at a public meeting.

District 12 is one of the top daily garbage producers in Brooklyn, according to the Department of Sanitation.

According to monthly collection data from the city's open data portal, it produced the highest volume of trash in Brooklyn between January and October of 2019.

Part of that high volume comes from the yeshivas in the Boro Park, which make up a quarter of the district's schools. The yeshivas have higher enrollment than most private schools to serve the neighborhood's substantial Haredi population and their large families.

Three of the top twenty largest private schools in New York City are Boro Park yeshivas, all with more than 1,300 pupils. For example, United Talmudical Academy of Boro Park, the fifth largest private school in New York City, serves about 1900 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, according to the most recent data from the state's Department of Education.

Boro Park's schools have bags of garbage growing in front of them like weeds, and when trucks come to pick up the trash, residents and elected officials say sanitation workers leave burst bags in the street and ditch the ones that don't fit in overstuffed trucks.

The sanitation department adjusts when its trucks can't pick up all the trash, said sanitation department spokesperson Dina Montes in an email: "If a DSNY collection truck were to become too full during a collection route, another truck would be sent by the local garage to ensure that the collection route is fully serviced."

There are steps sanitation departments can take to make sure they time pickup correctly and service areas with the right number of trucks, said Bryan Staley, president and CEO of the Environmental Research & Education Foundation. He said they should analyze school and residential garbage before changing collection services.

A "waste characterization study" would help the city ensure the right number of pickups by analyzing how much waste is compost compared with garbage. The

city might have underestimated how much garbage is generated in District 12, said Staley.

The sanitation department's last study of this kind was in 2017, and the department declined to answer a question about whether Boro Park was included. A spokesperson said only that waste samples were taken from all five boroughs.

A language barrier also might be playing a role in the trash pileup. There are nearly 36,000 Boro Park residents who speak Yiddish at home and about 9,400 residents who speak Spanish or Spanish Creole at home, according to the most recent American Communities Survey data.

The sanitation department visited each of the seven yeshivas between two and four times during August and September to help train school leadership and facility managers. But they did not provide school outreach in Yiddish, although the outreach team had a fluent-Spanish speaker, created Spanish collection schedules and offered trainings in Spanish. The sanitation department did create outreach materials in Yiddish when they started collecting compost from homes.

A cultural disconnect could be thwarting the organics collection effort as well. Even in Israel, where more than 1 million people are Haredi, city governments have struggled to implement green initiatives in Orthodox areas. Many religious Jews have come to see environmentalism as something secular and left-wing. Torah study holds the spiritual above the material, and elements of the Haredi lifestyle generate a lot of trash, like disposable dishes and diapers.

Separating the organic waste is also a lot more work for yeshiva staff.

"We used to grab the tablecloths and throw it into the garbage can," said Isaac Friedman, custodian at United Talmudical Academy of Boro Park. "Now, we have to take each and every plate and divide food over here, the plate over here. Imagine you have to do it every day, and if we serve two shifts of lunch, we have to do it between every shift. It's a lot of work."

Friedman has been the custodian at the yeshiva for 15 years, and he said he's never seen anything like the "mountain of garbage" that regenerates twice weekly outside the building.

"You could see a couple hundred bags," he said. "It's disgusting. It stinks."

The fact that one of the two pickup days is Saturday is also a problem, Friedman said. Since Saturday is Shabbat – the Jewish day of rest – none of the school's staff is available to clean the sidewalk after the bags are picked up. Staff used to clean the sidewalk after the daily trash pickup, but now, they can only clean the sidewalk once a week.

Brooklyn Boro President Eric Adams said in an interview that the sanitation department has not adequately communicated with residents about the organics program and needs to "fit the community" and not "do their job in their own sandbox."

"There's been a lot of miscommunication, but I also think it's a big mistake for the city to take this one-size-fits-all approach," said Adams. "I think that failure to really understand the uniqueness of communities is preventing the agency from getting the full benefit of keeping the streets clean."

District Manager Barry Spitzer and City Councilman Kalman Yeger have both spread unsubstantiated claims that the sanitation department is punishing the district. They have said the department reduced trash pickup at the schools after a lack of participation in the residential organics collection program.

When asked about those accusations, a spokesperson for Boro President Eric Adams wrote in a statement, "We have not heard that information."

Like Barry Spitzer, Kalman Yeger did not respond to multiple interview requests.

Despite the challenges in Boro Park, environmentalists hope residents will participate in the organics collection program– and cut the Department of Sanitation some slack.

"I know people are very passionate about how many pickups they get," said Justin Green, executive director and founder of Big Reuse, an environmental nonprofit. "I think composting is a valuable program and the city and the department of sanitation has been a national leader in getting it established."

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## News

# While Police Investigate Stabbing in Hasidic Enclave, Rumors Abound About 'Inside Job'

By Ari Feldman

MONSEY, N.Y. – Last week, the phrase on the lips of many Jews in Rockland County, New York, was “hate crime.”

Just before 6 a.m. on Wednesday, a man jumped out of a car on a quiet residential street in the heart of Monsey, the suburban Hasidic haven, and repeatedly stabbed a father on his way to shul for morning services, gauging his eye. Images of the man's blood on the ground reverberated around the Internet: Though such violent, seemingly anti-Semitic attacks are frequent occurrences in the Orthodox enclaves of Brooklyn, no one could remember such an incident in Monsey, which is not only insular but also more isolated.

By Sunday, the community was whispering about the case with a new watchword: *yad Yisrael ba'emtzah* – the hand of Israel is in the middle.

Translation? The person responsible for this is a Jew.

In this dense, tight-knit hamlet of approximately 22,000, facts and misinformation have intermingled and moved like lightning through WhatsApp chat groups. A new narrative about the stabbing has emerged that closely resembles the plot of an episode of “The Sopranos.” The fact that the police have not issued any updates in the case only fuels the fire. (A dispatcher for the Ramapo Police Department said Monday that the department would not comment beyond what it has already posted to social media.)

The attack, in this entirely crowd-sourced and evidence-free telling, involves a marriage gone wrong, a case of mistaken identity and a car set aflame.

“I don't care, God forbid, if it was one of the crazy rumors,” said Rivkie Feiner, the chief executive of a nonprofit consulting group and a longtime resident of

Monsey. “I want them to catch whoever it was.”

The rumors had begun circulating before the Shabbat candles were lit on Friday; over the weekend, many people in town could talk of little beyond possible motives for the attack and the status of the victim. Orthodox media have reported that he is stable at an area hospital after undergoing several surgeries; the Forward was unable to contact members of the family.

All through Shabbat, the subject of the attack “didn't go off the table,” said David, 47, after finishing a grocery run at Monsey Glatt Kosher on Sunday. “If it's a hate crime,” he added, “it means everyone's a target, and that's frightening.”

David was one of many residents in the area who spoke on the condition that their last names not be published, citing privacy issues. And one of several shoppers who had plenty to say about the attack.

“It was an inside job,” said Hershey, 52, as he put groceries into the trunk of his sedan. “100%.”

Miriam, who is 33 and lives in nearby Airmont, said that when she moved to the area, “they said it was so safe, you don't need to lock your doors. I am starting to rethink that.”

On Tuesday morning, Orthodox media and Twitter accounts lit up with reports that the FBI and local police were conducting raids in Monsey, which they speculated was related to the “inside job.” But early media reports are suggesting that the target of the raid was an alleged bank robber who lives nearby in Spring Valley. The robberies do not appear to have any connection to the stabbing.

The victim of the stabbing, whose name has not been publicly released, was on his way to pray at Tashnad Hall, a building in the heart of “old Monsey.” It is a neighborhood where there are still plenty of midcentury houses mixed in with the multi-family condos that have been sprouting in recent years to accommodate the burgeoning Hasidic community.

Tashnad has a synagogue for prayer and study and a banquet hall for hosting wedding receptions and *vorts*, engagement parties. It has baroque features: a stone reproduction of the tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, a mural depicting yeshivas and synagogues that were destroyed in the eponymous town of Tășnad, Romania, not far from the birthplace of the Satmar Hasidic dynasty.

One of the people hanging out at Tashnad on Sunday, Heshy, 24, said he had read on social media that the attack was ordered by a wealthy man, possibly a jeweler, whose son-in-law refused to grant his daughter a divorce, which women in some Orthodox communities cannot obtain without the husband's permission. The wealthy man had hired a non-Jew to kill the son-in-law, the theory went, but the hitman had mistakenly stabbed the son-in-law's neighbor.

"That's the conspiracy," Heshy said. "I don't know what is true. Time will say."

While Heshy was talking, a middle-aged man came down the stairs of Tashnad's main entrance. The older man spoke no English, and asked Heshy in Yiddish what he was doing. As Heshy explained the situation, he repeated the Hebrew phrase "*Yad Yisrael ba'emtzah*." It can be found in commentaries on the Talmud, and it is a popular phrase among Yiddish-speaking Jews for when a Jew is involved in unsavory business.

The man's eyes widened. "*Yad Yisrael ba'emtzah?*" he asked back, incredulously.

Others coming into Tashnad for the afternoon prayer service had read the same tweets, spread via screenshots on WhatsApp, and heard the same story.

"It looks like it's not a hate crime," said Yosef, 23. When asked if he thought the level of rumor-mongering was unusual, he said, "The whole story is unusual."

When the attack was first reported, it seemed on its face to be part of a growing spate of hate crimes targeting Jews in the New York area. A 30-year-old teacher was stabbed multiple times just down the block from his house of worship. The assailant's car, witnesses said, appeared to have been driving around the neighborhood for some time beforehand – as though, it seemed, on the hunt for an Orthodox victim.

The Anti-Defamation League quickly announced a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the attacker's arrest. That afternoon, Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York announced on Twitter that he was directing the State Police Hate Crimes Task Force to assist in the investigation.

To many Jewish leaders, local residents, and people who have followed controversies about the expansion of the Orthodox communities in Rockland County, it seemed at once shocking and inevitable.

In August, the Republican party here released an ad

called "A Storm Is Coming," which accused county legislator Aron Wieder, who is a Hasidic Jew, of helping plot an Orthodox "takeover" of the area, threatening "our homes, our families, our schools, our communities, our water, our way of life."

James Foley, who was recently elected as a county legislator in the area, made campaign signs reading "Block the bloc," an apparent reference to Hasidic Jews voting as a bloc, and citing the "Ramapo Mafia." [Monsey is a hamlet in the city of Ramapo.] The ad and the campaign have been accompanied by vitriolic anti-Jewish statements on social media as well, residents say.

That, alongside the continuing attacks on visibly Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn, meant that Hasidic Jews here were primed for a hate crime, Feiner said.

"It used to be Europe, and then Brooklyn, and things unfortunately creep into Monsey, to Rockland," she said. "So of course that was the fear. That trajectory is what led to that conclusion."

But local police announced at a press conference the day of the attack that they were not investigating the attack as a hate crime, puzzling – and upsetting – some Orthodox community members, who sounded off in the comments of articles in the Orthodox and Yiddish-language media about the stabbing.

And so the rumors began. One was that someone was impersonating police and members of Chaverim of Rockland, a local volunteer organization of emergency responders, and trying to delete footage of the assailant's vehicle taken by private security cameras.

Then, citing videos supposedly released by Ramapo Police, Hasidic social media accounts identified the vehicle as a Honda Pilot SUV.

On Saturday night, a video of a Honda Pilot in flames on a street in a non-Jewish area of Spring Valley, the town just east of Monsey, was posted to Facebook. It was picked up by a Twitter account that identified it as the Honda Pilot being supposedly sought by police. Later, a picture of a charred black SUV on a flatbed trailer was disseminated via WhatsApp as well, as proof that the vehicle was in police custody.

"Both can't be true," said Yossi Gestetner, the co-founder of the Orthodox Jewish Public Affairs Council, a group that uses public records and demographic information to counter negative narratives about the

Orthodox community. “It can’t be that this is the Honda Pilot that’s being looked at by law enforcement, and then it’s just sitting in a civilian garage.”

On Sunday morning, one of the social media accounts that spread the apparent video of the Honda Pilot jokingly belittled the police investigation, saying investigators were “trying to scratch together some details about the stabbing in Monsey when Whatsapp already has the whole story with names.”

The Ramapo police have pushed back against the rumors.

“I am aware of much of the chatter which has been ongoing on social media and in the community regarding the stabbing and assault in Monsey this past week,” Brad Weidel, the chief of police, said in a statement posted to Facebook Sunday. “I reiterate my original remarks made at the press conference—that RPD has no evidence to support the legal requirements of a hate crime in this case.”

A common misconception about Hasidic Jews is that they broadly eschew technology and the Internet. In fact, WhatsApp is very popular here in Monsey, and according to Gestetner, the theories have moved so quickly through Rockland’s Hasidic Jews because people have dozens of friends, family, fellow congregants and co-workers to share messages with.

“There are many sects and subjects that are very adamant against people using social media,” he said. “But there are many people who are members of sects where it’s not such an important issue. So information comes and goes.”

Until arrests are made and charges made public, the community is nervously waiting for answers.

“It would be amazing that it’s not a hate crime, on the one hand,” Feiner said. But, she added, “Whatever happened, it broke our feeling of safety. That’s how I feel about it, whatever it was.”

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*Jordan Kutzik, deputy Yiddish editor, contributed reporting.*

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## Culture

# Q & A: Is A Conspiracy Theory Responsible For This Year’s Shocking Nobel Prize In Literature?

By Talya Zax

The October announcement of Austrian novelist Peter Handke as the winner of the 2019 Nobel Prize in Literature was greeted, by many, with confusion.

Handke, apologist for Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian president who oversaw the Bosnian genocide? Handke, who spoke at Milosevic’s funeral and told critics of his decision to do so to “go to hell?” Who, in his writing, has frequently questioned the facts of history in regard to the Bosnian War? How could the Swedish Academy have decided that he would be an appropriate recipient of the world’s most prestigious literary prize?

In the month since the announcement of Handke’s win – accompanied by news that the vigorously liberal Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk had taken the belatedly-delivered 2018 prize – two Nobel jurors have spoken out in defense of their decision. The duo, Henrik Petersen and Eric Runesson, made public the sources that they consulted in determining Handke’s fitness as a potential laureate – citing, in doing so, books that defend Handke’s record on the Bosnian War on the basis of a conspiracy theory that significantly downplays Serbian atrocities.

But the alarming and ahistorical arguments presented in the books that Petersen and Runesson consulted might have escaped notice in the U.S. were it not for Peter Maass, a senior editor at The Intercept. Both books are available only in German, and neither has received significant scholarly attention. But Maass, who covered the Bosnian War and later wrote a book about it, had been digging into the spread of disinformation about the war surrounding Handke’s award, so he took a closer look at the jurors’ sources.

What he found is shocking. The conspiracy theory cited by the books insists that international condemnation

of the Serbs was a response not to real atrocities but rather to a misleading publicity campaign, obscuring the indisputable and horrifying facts of the Bosnian genocide. And, like many conspiracy theories, it may dabble in anti-Semitism.

The Forward's Talya Zax spoke with Maass about his continuing reporting; the following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Talya Zax: I know conspiracy theories are difficult to distill, but can you give me a brief summary of what, exactly, the Ruder Finn conspiracy theory is?**

**Peter Maass:** Very often, conspiracy stories either start with or include things that are true, and then they make associations that are not true. So, what is true? In early 1992, the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina hired a PR firm named Ruder Finn. And executives of Ruder Finn met with journalists and people on Capitol Hill, as they were supposed to. When there were the first reports of concentration camps in Bosnia, the company publicized it.

That's where the truth stops. Where the conspiracy theory begins is [with the idea] that the efforts of Ruder Finn [prompted] a shift in public opinion against the Serb side, and a shift in U.S. policy against the Serb side. This publicity firm, according to the conspiracy theory, outwitted the Jewish groups [the Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress] which came out against the concentration camps, and public opinion shifted.

What this conspiracy theory is doing is shifting the reason for international outrage against the Serbs to a deceptive publicity campaign, rather than attributing it to actual facts on the ground. The Serbs had a network of concentration camps at which people, in very large numbers, were being tortured and killed. These facts were supported by the work of journalists over years.

**How did you become aware that this decades-old myth played a role in Handke's selection?**

I had covered the war in Bosnia, and I hadn't heard of this particular conspiracy theory, because it's so obscure. After I read the statements of one of the Nobel jurors, who mentioned that he had relied on a book by Kurt Gritsch, a historian in Innsbruck, I contacted Gritsch, and he responded [with] the rough summary of what he believed. He went on about this publicity company Ruder Finn. There were other code words in the email. One of them was that he referred to the Bosnian army

as the Muslim militia, kind of tipping his hand that he regards the only legal military force in Bosnia at that time as a militia.

I followed up, and he sent me a PDF of his book. I did a Google translation – of course not reliable in a publishing or journalistic sense, but it can give an idea of what's in the book, and then professional translators can translate particular passages. That's how I drilled down to what he wrote, which one particular Nobel juror said he had relied on to come to his conclusions.

**Tell me about your experience reporting on the Bosnian War.**

In 1992 I was a contract writer for the Washington Post based in Budapest. The war in Bosnia started, so I was called on to be one of several correspondents covering the war, which I did through 1992 and 1993. I was fully immersed in Bosnia, in Serbia and Croatia, and also covered in 1993 some of the peace talks that had begun in Geneva. I stopped covering it in 1993. It was an extremely dangerous assignment and becoming more dangerous, and the longer that I took the chances I was taking, the higher was the chance I wouldn't continue to be lucky. I really kind of lost hope. Why take these risks, when they're not going to have the effect I would want – that is, people becoming aware of this ongoing genocide and taking the actions required to bring it to an end?

**What was your reaction to the news of Handke's win?**

I was familiar, generally speaking, with his work and reputation. But the day after the announcement I started refreshing myself, and finding for the first time some of the more objectionable things he had written and said. I read and speak French; there's an article that he wrote for Liberation, the French newspaper, in 2006, which was shocking to read, wherein he equalized [the Bosnian War] on all sides. I walked to my library, which had a copy of his "A Journey to The Rivers," English language, which is very difficult to find. And then I did a close reading of it and found that to just be astonishing. In the immediate aftermath of the announcement, a lot of voices were raised. I just wish that it wasn't ebbing away like this.

**The Ruder Finn conspiracy theory cites the purported effect of three Jewish organizations speaking out against the Bosnian genocide. Do you see any influence of anti-Semitism in the theory?**

My story did not go into the issue of anti-Semitism as an element or motivator or effect of this particular

conspiracy theory. What I knew is that this conspiracy theory does not go beyond the identification of these Jewish groups. It leaves open the question of whether you are also saying that Jews control the media and Jews control U.S. foreign policy.

There are two key things with this conspiracy: Ruder Finn circulated unconfirmed reports of concentration camps that were almost immediately proved true, [then] used these reports to persuade –that’s where the word “outwitted” has been used in one of the founding documents in this conspiracy theory, a book by the French journalist Jacques Merlino – the Jewish organizations into taking a public stand against the concentration camps. The conspiracy theory says that public stand played a huge role in turning public opinion. That gets at this question of: Is this an anti-Semitic move by these conspiracy theorists, to attribute to Jewish organizations powers they actually don’t have? The fact that three Jewish organizations issued a public statement of concern helped draw attention, but that’s not what changed the tide. It was the continual stream of reports about Serb atrocities that affected public opinion. U.S. policy did not change in 1992, or 1993, or 1994. These Jewish organizations that made this statement in August of 1992 didn’t change policy. Policy changed in 1995 after the Srebrenica massacre.

I did have the question in my mind about this being one of the ways that anti-Semitic conspiracy theories work. They do not say, explicitly, the Jews control things. But they make these statements that are understood by people who are intended as the audience.

### **What are the implications of this conspiracy theory infiltrating the Swedish Academy?**

What is the Swedish Academy doing? It is reading up on conspiracy theories and then putting them out into the public domain as fact. It’s jaw-dropping. In the biography of Handke they released on the day his award was announced, there is a line that says something to the effect of he has no political program in his writing. [There are] statements by various academy officials that the literature award is not a political award. It becomes a political award when you give it to somebody who has denied genocide.

I just don’t know where to begin to register the astonishing factor that they relied on a book like this – and this wasn’t the only one. Did the jurors know that this was a conspiracy theory? Did they go to this because they wanted justification and it confirmed what

they wanted to believe? Or were they duped by it? I would like to know to what degree they were duped and to what degree this is something they believed.

### **Are there reforms you would hope the Swedish Academy might make to protect against the influence of disinformation in the future?**

This is something that Aleksandar Hemon and others have pointed out. When you are thinking of giving a Nobel Prize to somebody who has written about a certain part of the world, maybe you should consult with people who are from that part of the world. The Swedish Academy members have said relatively little about what they read and who they consulted, and what they’ve said is horrifying. But the question has been raised: Did you consult with people from Bosnia? If you didn’t, why not? I’m not saying that a literary prize should be a public opinion poll, but if you are looking to understand whether the writings of Peter Handke constitute genocide denial, then perhaps ask the people who know about that genocide best – that is, the victims. There’s no sign yet that the members of the Swedish Academy consulted anybody who was affected first hand by this genocide.

### **Does the Swedish Academy’s giving of the award to Handke, and its defense of that decision, suggest anything about how the world understands the Bosnian War today?**

If he was expressing these thoughts about the Holocaust, nobody would seriously suggest or nominate him for a Nobel Prize. It’s easier to ignore facts when the people who are closest to the facts are ones whose truths have not yet been codified. The truth of the Holocaust – there are still deniers, but it’s been codified. What this controversy shows is that the truths of the Bosnian genocide have not been codified. One of the reasons I’ve gone on about this, four articles now and counting, is that I realized that, oh my god, this thing is not settled history. I thought it was. I knew there were conspiracy theorists. Lots of people, in Serbia and elsewhere, denied what happened. But no, it’s not settled history, and that’s what’s shocking. It’s almost like all the journalists and all the people who were victims need to now do the same work they did back then to get the truth out. That doubt is back.

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## Life

# A Talmudic Debate About Ramekins: Taking On My Parents' Clutter

By Abigail Pogrebin

The artichoke plates were the breaking point.

When my mother saw that we had piled them in a section dubbed "GIVE AWAY," she got very quiet. "Why would I give those up?" she asked, her face taut. "I use them whenever I cook artichokes."

And how often is that? I wondered. Sixteen large artichoke plates take up a lot of space in an overcrowded kitchen cabinet. I had returned to my childhood home to address 50 years of accumulation in my parents' pre-war Upper West Side three-bedroom. But things I viewed as dispensable, Mom and Dad saw as essential, resonant.

My parents both hit milestone birthdays this year – Mom (Letty) turned 80, Dad (Bert) 85, but aging hasn't slowed them: Mom, a pioneering feminist who co-created Ms. Magazine and "Free to Be You and Me," just sold her 12th book, and Dad, a labor lawyer for five decades, still goes to the office.

My mother, in particular, sees their stuff as happy proof of a long, storied life: her political button collection ("Bella Abzug for Mayor," "I PRAYED AT THE WESTERN WALL"), an array of hotel hand lotions [soured soldiers on a shelf], 100 VHS tapes (though they've switched to Netflix), 40 glass vases from all those hostess gifts, and umpteen bottles of syrup and soy sauce, all of which are perilously close to their expiration dates.

I brought backup: my lifelong friend, Jane, who just launched a personal organizing business. called "Jane's Here."

Maybe I was spurred by reaching midlife myself. As I've watched friends' parents falter, I am increasingly aware that this is an exercise better undertaken while Mom and Dad are still able to weigh in on which things matter most.

I chose a Sunday breakfast in my folks' kitchen [ubiquitous lox] to float my idea for a closet-cleanse. Dad didn't mince words: "No."

Knowing he responds best to evidence, I made my case: "Dad, you can't find your desk underneath all your legal briefs. Your office sofa is blocked by a bicycle with flat tires and ski boots from 1975. We are not going to throw things out without you vetting them."

It helped that Mom had for years been urging him to tackle the anarchy.

"If my office is on the docket, then Letty's has to be, too," Dad said, ever the negotiator.

"Deal," Mom agreed.

But after breakfast, she whispered an urgent caveat: "Jane can't insist I give up my leopard cowboy boots."

We calendared two full days, one week apart. Mom wanted to be home to guide us, but Dad would be safely across town at his law firm [no chance of success under his interrogatory eye].

A task that seemed overwhelming at first – sorting decades of collected business cards, paper clips and even his late aunt's will – became efficient, even merry. Mom seemed relieved: she supported throwing out phone bills from 1989 and pens that had lost their ink. She agreed Dad would never wear those bulky red ski boots and should create a proper spot for his banjo, snorkel mask, squash racquet, and the Gregory Hines tap shoes won at an auction.

That night, Mom sent us a photo of Dad reading depositions at his newly-Zen desk. When I called the next morning, he conceded it was "very nice– thank you," but culling his neckties – that was Mom's idea – had been a bridge too far.

Our second session began with a piqued call from Mom while I was making my morning coffee.

"I'm not ready for you!" she exclaimed. "I need to organize before you organize."

I convinced her to let us start on the kitchen by making piles, so that when she returned from a morning talk at the Jewish Community Center, she could make quick decisions about what to throw out, move, or put back.

By the time she walked in, I was in my own state of panic. It had begun to dawn on me, as we excavated every last cumin bottle and whisk, that we were

challenging not just a Jewish mother's system, but her core.

Mom has always had a serious public fan base, whose devotion I didn't fathom until I started giving book talks myself – to Jewish communities from Detroit to Omaha. Literally hundreds of women come up to me like so many distant aunts and cousins– wanting me to know how Mom's writing and speeches affected them.

But this revolutionary is also a traditionalist, a sentimental ballaboosta – passionate in her belief in how a latke should be crisped and how a Kol Nidre table should be set.

As we surveyed the cupboards, Jane whispered: "We have a ramekin situation."

That was an understatement; there were maybe 50 of the tiny baking dishes. Jane and I agreed the best case for cutting back would be to lay out all the ramekins on the living room floor. Surely Mom would see she did not need so many.

We also put out every tray, cutting board, bowl and basket. We had a section for vinegars, vases and gravy boats. The living room looked like a tag sale on steroids.

And then Mom returned.

Her face said it all. Why is my kitchen in my living room? How dare you question my ramekins?

Every pot, she asserted, had a purpose. Creamed corn doesn't go bad. The cactus could be saved, even though it had sat on the kitchen windowsill since the birth of her sixth grandchild 18 years ago.

"I use these ramekins," she asserted.

"Okay, it's just worth asking if you need this many, no?"

"I use them for individual salt water bowls for seder."

"You don't host seders anymore; you passed that onto me."

"Sometimes I make pudding."

The ramekins stayed. I put back every one. And as I made this walk of shame, from the living room to the kitchen and back, so much became clear: Clutter is history. Platters are memory. Ramekins are possibility – I may make that chocolate mousse again.

Particularly for my mother, who's own died she was 15. My grandfather gave away all of his wife's belongings

without Mom even getting to see them one last time. Born in 1939, Mom also grew up with the wrenching photos of families chased from their homes during the Holocaust, clutching candlesticks and leaving their histories behind. She's a saver because her own archives were erased.

Jane did not blanch in the face of Mom's resistance, nodding along while Mom explained how she still used this mandoline or that chafing dish. Bit by bit, we each came half-way: Mom started to see how selectivity begat a new serenity, and I saw how some things should just be saved, even if never used again.

The truth is, I got nostalgic when I saw those artichoke plates. Simultaneously whimsical and hideous, they have green ceramic sunbursts of leaves encircling a shallow well for hollandaise sauce. I remember sitting around the dinner table in grade school with my siblings, interrupting each other as we recounted our melodramas, dipping each fibrous leaf into the creamy gold.

The next morning, I woke up to an apologetic email from Mom.

"It's obvious how hard it was for me to give up things that contain memories, even if the things are chipped or old or unfashionable," she wrote "But now that I've surveyed my refreshed little kingdom, I realize how much lighter I feel."

I wrote back with gratitude for "pushing past your understandable roadblocks, Mama. It was joyful in the end."

Jane chimed in: "Just don't buy any sugar or salt for A WHILE."

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*Abigail Pogrebin is a journalist, author and public speaker. Her book *immersing in holiday observances, "My Jewish Year,"* was a finalist for a 2018 National Jewish Book Award.*

## Opinion

# Two Jews Running For President, Two Models Of Jewish American Life

By Joel Swanson

Michael Bloomberg's official entry into the crowded contest for the Democratic nomination for president means, among other things, that we have two serious contenders who are Jewish, a first in American history: Mayor Bloomberg and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. And though they are practically the same age and share a common history, they are two very different archetypes of Jewish American life, a fascinating study in contrasts.

One can surmise how Sanders feels about Bloomberg; opposition to billionaires is after all a centerpiece of his campaign. And Bloomberg is no big fan of Sanders, either. He has explicitly the Vermont Senator compared to President Trump, calling Sanders a “demagogue.”

But whatever they think of each other's politics, Sanders and Bloomberg aren't simply facing off against each other. They also represent two models of what it means to be an American Jew: studied centrism and assimilation, vs. radicalized minority. American Jewish history has been shaped by the struggle over which of these identities should reign supreme. And now an American race for the presidency may be, too.

Sanders and Bloomberg were born within months of one another during the Second World War. Both men are the children of Polish Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants. Despite Bloomberg's reputation for immense wealth today, neither of them grew up wealthy.

Both had long careers before entering electoral politics, albeit careers in very different fields. And despite the fact that Bloomberg apparently belongs to a synagogue and Sanders does not, both have drifted from the levels of Jewish practice that they were raised with, and have become less observant over the years.

But that's where the similarities end. Bloomberg represents his generation of assimilated postwar American Jewry, while Sanders' politics are the politics

of interwar eastern European Jews and Jewish immigrants of his parents' generation, a politics that combined a strong commitment to universalist socialism with a particularist commitment to Jewish culture and autonomy.

Bernie Sanders's politics reflect the priorities of an Ashkenazi Jewish community that, despite its broad assimilation into whiteness and white privilege in the U.S., still remembers its history as a minority. Michael Bloomberg, on the other hand, is a Jewish politician for a community that has attempted to assimilate fully into whiteness in the United States and lose its minority status.

Bloomberg's own family testifies to this shift in American Jewish identity. At a young age, his family moved from the city of Boston, where he was born, to a Boston suburb, paralleling a broader post-World War II “exodus to the suburbs” among American Jews.

As mayor, Bloomberg consistently pursued racially biased policies; in addition to stop and frisk, he supported an NYPD program to surveil the Muslim community of New York, even vetoing a City Council ordinance to provide greater oversight of the program. His support for stricter gun control legislation is also based on beliefs such as his claim that cities need to focus on keeping guns away from individuals who are “male, minority and between the ages of 15 and 25” – despite the fact that a strong majority of mass shootings are committed by white shooters.

So it's not surprising that Bloomberg consistently performed better among white voters than among racial minorities.

Sanders, too, has had his own oft-remarked difficulties attracting the support of black voters and other voters of color, particularly the older generation of voters of color. But he has remarkable support from Muslim voters – support which was credited for his underdog victory in the 2016 Michigan Democratic presidential primary.

And despite what some may think, it is not in any way surprising that Sanders has the support of Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, the first two Muslim women to serve in Congress, following his staunch defense of these politicians against repeated Islamophobic attacks.

Sanders's support from the first Palestinian American member of Congress, of course, points to another

significant distinction between the Jewish politics of these two politicians. Coming from a Bundist tradition skeptical of Zionism and committed to remaining in diaspora where one lives, Sanders has been the Democratic politician most critical of the state of Israel, though he calls himself a staunch Zionist, and indeed talks about his time on a kibbutz as formative for his socialist worldview. And yet, Sanders has gone further than any other Democratic candidate in condemning Israel's racist policies and calling for a reevaluation of US military aid to Israel. Those who think it odd that a Jewish politician would be among the greatest critics of Israel in mainstream American politics should think more about the rich non-Zionist tradition of Bundism.

Michael Bloomberg, in contrast, has perfectly respectable mainstream centrist American Jewish positions on Israel. He twice flew to Israel to express support for Israel in its attacks on Gaza, and as mayor of New York, he instituted a surveillance program targeting Muslim Americans modeled on Israeli policies in the West Bank. Nothing in Bloomberg's record suggests that he would in any way challenge American political support for Israel.

Bloomberg and Sanders, then, represent two distinct ways of understanding Jewish identity and Jewish politics. Bloomberg represents a generation of American Jews who tried with all their might to assimilate into American whiteness, and who in many respects earned access to the full benefits of white privilege for American Jews.

Sanders, in contrast, represents an earlier Jewish political tradition forged by the experience of being racialized as a minority, and which remembers this experience even while the life experiences and material conditions of American Jews today differ substantially from those of Jews in interwar Poland.

In an age when resurgent far-right anti-Semitism in the US and Europe has led more American Jews to question whether our belonging and assimilation is in fact more provisional than we thought, when rising rates of white nationalist violence against American Jews has led more of us to question whether our whiteness and white privilege could be taken away as easily as it was granted, American Jews have a choice to make, embodied by the two Jewish politicians who are now running for president. This is a key moment for American Jewish politics.

Will we embrace a politics of studied centrism and assimilation, or will we remember our history as a racialized minority and embrace a politics that reflects that history? Just how long is the memory of American Jews?

*Joel Swanson is a Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago, studying modern Jewish intellectual history and the philosophy of religions. He might consider becoming a member of the Jewish Labour Bund, except that he's skeptical of any groups that would have someone like him as a member.*

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