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News

Violent Attack Upends Years Of Quiet, Happy Growth In Jersey City's Hasidic Haven

By Ari Feldman

Wednesday morning, as he would on any other morning, Chaim got his *tefillin* and *tallis* and went to synagogue for morning prayers.

But that morning, the synagogue was next to a crime scene – a kosher grocery store at the center of the small Hasidic community in Jersey City, N.J. The neighborhood is a work in progress, recently created by families emigrating from the packed New York City enclaves of Boro Park and Williamsburg.

So Chaim, a member of the community who declined to give his name due to privacy concerns, ducked under two lines of “caution” tape and stepped over the small pile of glass shards from the grocery store’s window, which was obliterated in an hours-long firefight the day before. Inside, men would soon gather for morning prayers despite the carnage next door.

There, about 20 men from Misaskim, the volunteer service that collects Jewish bodies from emergency and crime scenes for burial, were examining the scene. They are required to extract every bit of human remains possible for burial, down to pieces of skin,

flecks of blood and strands of hair. Watching Chaim step inside, they asked one another if they had gotten to pray yet that morning; by 9 a.m., many had already been there for several hours.

“Who has the time?” one of the men joked darkly.

On Tuesday, the outpost of about 100 families was attacked by two gunmen who seem to have targeted The JC Kosher Market at 223 Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, killing two beloved community members in addition to an employee and a police officer. Officials say they don’t know yet what motivated the shooters, but the local NBC affiliate reported that one of them was a former member of the Hebrew Israelites (often referred to as “Black Hebrews”), a religious group that has some anti-Semitic, fringe elements. Also, a law enforcement official told the New York Times that the suspect had written anti-Semitic social media posts. Now the shootout, which left the assailants dead as well, has brought international attention to a new Hasidic community – one that was happily growing even as it navigated the challenges and tensions newcomers always face.

Jersey City's Jewish community is only about five years old. It is something of an anomaly: most Hasidic Jews who leave Brooklyn head for suburban areas like Rockland County, New York, and Lakewood, New Jersey.

Although Jersey City apartments are not as spacious as suburban houses, they tend to be larger and more affordable than their Brooklyn counterparts, so parents could finally become homeowners instead of lifelong renters, and children could have their own bedrooms instead of bunking with their siblings.

In the past several years, Jewish investors have purchased homes and renovated them with Jewish-owned construction companies. Community members work in nearby factories in Bayonne, such as the Kedem kosher foods factory. Others can take a private shuttle that runs to and from Williamsburg for work. Children below the age of studying for their bar mitzvah can attend a local *cheder*, or elementary school, while older children join the shuttle to Brooklyn.

The grocery store itself was a successor to a more makeshift store, according to Yitzchak Leifer, a local rabbi: A man was selling kosher yogurt, milk, bread and other staples out of a large refrigerator in his basement. When Moshe Ferencz, a father of three whose wife Mindy was murdered in the shooting, decided to establish the grocery store, he made sure to ask the refrigerator operator if he wouldn't be stepping on his toes.

"Go ahead, open your grocery," the man said, according to Leifer. "I'm just doing this to help the community.

Now, three years after the grocery store opened, the Jersey City community has what it needs to begin growing in earnest. Five synagogues operate in the neighborhood, residents say. There is a kollel for men who study full- or part-time, and a ritual bath that is open every night, just around the corner from the grocery store.

Joseph Mandel, an accountant who commutes from the suburbs to Jersey City for work, used to stop at one of those synagogues, on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive to help make a *minyán*, the quorum of ten people necessary to say the full liturgy. But for a year and a half, he said, they haven't needed him.

Rabbi Yitzchak and Bracha Leifer were the eighteenth family to move here, and they came for the same reason everyone else did: rent. When a new landlord

bought their building in Brooklyn, they couldn't afford the higher rent he decided to charge.

"There's a prayer in Judaism: that there should be no kings between me and God," Yitzchak said. "So why should there be a landlord? I don't need another king."

Now they own a two-story home about a block from the grocery store. The bottom floor, where they live, has an eat-in kitchen with a refrigerator completely covered with pictures of their children and grandchildren. The dining room table runs alongside a dark wood bookcase overflowing with leather-bound books of prayer and study. Artificial bouquets of flowers and orchids run along the top of the bookcase and kitchen cabinets.

Upstairs is a small synagogue and prayer space. The Leifers count themselves as members of the Satmar community, but they are also part of the Berditchever sub-movement. Their synagogue is called Kedushas Levi, named for the seminal work by Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, a significant figure in early Hasidic Judaism and, Leifer says, his direct ancestor.

In the summer, there is a regular morning minyan at the synagogue, since the early rising sun requires observant Jews to say the morning prayers earlier. During the day, school teachers preparing their lessons use the space for study, since it has the best religious library in the neighborhood. The numeric code to the house's front door is posted in Yiddish next to the handle, for whoever wants to enter. Once a month, there is an evening women's group that gathers for study and discussion. On holidays, when the synagogue is more full, they divide the space with a makeshift *mechitza*, made of folding tables and chairs.

The Leifers said that increasingly, Satmar Jews still living in Williamsburg and Boro Park are realizing that Jersey City offers a higher standard of living, even if it is farther from the nerve center of their community.

"In Brooklyn, there's constant pressure to make rent every month," Yitzchak said. "You can see it on people's faces. Here, people are relaxed, they're happy. And you can see *that* on their faces."

That translates to a calmer and more cooperative Jewish community, Bracha said.

"There are no fights in the community," she said. "We have *achdus*" – unity.

Yet the community has faced pushback from the city. Despite the fact that it is frequently used for prayer, the building next to the grocery store – the one where Chaim prays – has been labeled a community center by Hasidic Jews here – a controversial claim, since zoning laws in the area do not allow for places of worship along Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. Local residents have also complained of being asked to sell their houses for cash by Haredi real estate agents looking to buy and redevelop homes for Hasidic families coming to the neighborhood.

“They literally go door to door and can be very pushy trying to purchase someone’s house,” Steven Fulop, the mayor of Jersey City, who is Jewish, told the New York Times in 2017. “It’s not the best way to endear yourself to the community, and there’s been a lot of pushback.”

The tension between the Latino and African American communities and Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, renewed in recent years due to ongoing physical attacks on Jews in the borough, seem far away here. Four and a half years ago, when they first came, the Leifers were unsure about the new neighborhood. Six months after they came, Bracha said, there was a shooting nearby. But they have embraced the neighborhood, and the neighborhood has embraced them back.

“They wouldn’t harm a fly,” she said of her neighbors. She said she doesn’t fear for the kind of random anti-Semitic assaults that Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn fear. “They help push our carriages.”

There are a few signs of animus towards Jews in the community. On Tuesday afternoon, one man asked a Hasidic Jew if Jews were the ones who had started the assault.

But other residents who spoke to the Forward spoke highly of their neighbors.

“They don’t bother anybody,” said Tina, an African-American resident of the neighborhood in her late 50s. “I have no problems with them, and they have no problems with me.”

Tina said that for three years, her husband Rashawn has helped their Jewish neighbors across the street with a particular ritual: Ahead of Passover, the Hasidic father “sells” his *hametz*, or leavened bread, to Rashawn for a traditionally unpayable amount, allowing the Hasidic family to technically own no leavened bread during the holiday.

“This is a horror,” said Tina. “How dare anybody do anything to them.”

The community is now turning to address the tragedy and begin the mourning process. By Wednesday afternoon, the main gathering point for people in the community, as well as emergency responders and others providing support and services, had shifted to a building a few blocks south from the grocery store recently purchased to be the new community center for the growing community. Kosher supermarkets from around the New York area had dropped off food in bulk: challah rolls, bags of carrots, boxes of potatoes and apples, pastries and juice, hot deli meats and packaged salads.

As two construction workers put up drywall behind them, men prayed the afternoon service and spoke to one another about how to counsel their wives and children.

“If not for the tragic thing yesterday, we wouldn’t have been *davening* [praying] here,” said Ben, 33, who declined to give his last name.

Tonight, parents will be gathering with members of the Hasidic crisis response service Chai Lifeline to learn how to counsel the children who had to cower in their school for hours, listening to gunshots, said a community member who wants to remain anonymous but said he works for the Orthodox emergency response service Hatzolah.

On Wednesday afternoon, Haredi Jews in the area were conferring with one another about what they have heard about when and where the funerals will be, whether in Jersey City or in Brooklyn. While the rest of the Jewish world considers the apparent anti-Semitic motives of the shooters, Rabbi Leifer said that the Jews of Jersey City have different concerns.

For the moment, he said, people are “just checking on each other, seeing how people are doing.”

“It’s too early to talk about why,” he said.

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News

What To Know About Hebrew Israelites, Onetime Faith Of Jersey City Kosher Mart Shooter

By PJ Grisar

One of the suspects identified in Tuesday's mass shooting in Jersey City, N.J. is believed to be a onetime member of a movement called the Black Hebrew Israelites. The movement, composed of people of color – primarily African-Americans – who believe the biblical Israelites to be their forebears, has existed for over a century.

Black Hebrew Israelites are, of course, distinct from the many members of the mainstream Jewish community, both secular and observant, who are black.

Like mainstream Judaism, Hebrew Israelites have a whole host of denominations. Different members have different beliefs and prayer practices – and some of them boast followers who are rap and basketball stars. Here is some of the Forward's coverage on the movement.

Sam Kestenbaum, an authority on the community, explained the history and tenets of Black Hebrew Israelites, tracing the movement's early history in the late 19th Century up to today.

Today, the movement's chief rabbi, Capers Funnye (a cousin of Michelle Obama), hopes to take the faith into the mainstream of Judaism with his involvement in B'nai Brith and the broader Jewish community in Chicago and New York.

While many Jews do not acknowledge Hebrew Israelites as coreligionists – and members of that sect at times do not accept Jews, believing themselves to be the true Israelites – lately, parts of the movement have been trying to intensify their connection with mainstream Jewish sects. As Ari Feldman reported in January, following a fire, B'nai Adath Kol Beth Israel, a

Hebrew Israelite congregation in Brooklyn, asked Jews from conventional denominations for support in rebuilding.

In recent years, Hebrew Israelites have been entering the broader cultural conversation courtesy of celebrity adherents. Rapper Kendrick Lamar appears to have flirted with the faith, making several references to their doctrine on his album "Damn." Around the same time, basketball phenom Amar'e Stoudemire announced his intent to move to Israel on his retirement, citing his Hebrew Israelite faith as the reason.

Most Hebrew Israelites are not violent, but there are sects connected to black nationalist and anti-Semitic ideology, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The SPLC notes that some Black Hebrew Israelites are moved to violence, believing Jews to be "fraudulent." The groups have been known to target whites, asians, abortion providers and the LGBTQ community. This branch of the movement can be distinguished from its more peaceful iterations, popping up on urban street corners and transit areas, often dressed in purple or black robes and preaching over megaphones.



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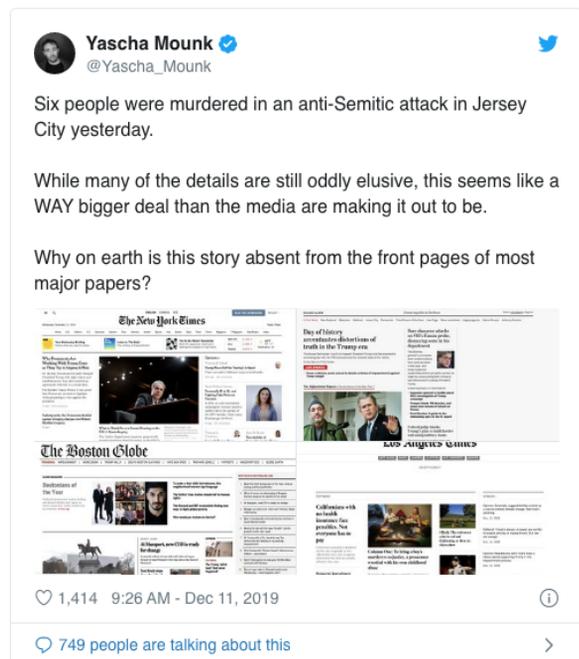
Opinion

The Silence Surrounding Violence Against Us Orthodox Jews Is Deafening

By Eli Steinberg

Yesterday was one of those days Jews are becoming more and more familiar with. It was a day we wish we could forget, but we know we will remember forever. With two murderers deliberately targeting a Jewish store in Jersey City, killing three innocent people, two of them Jews, the confidence we can have in our own safety and security seems more and more tenuous by the day.

It feels like we will be the only people who will remember it, though. This morning, a cursory look at the front pages of America's leading newspapers yielded little to alert you that Jews were killed in broad daylight yesterday, for no other crime than for being visibly Jewish.



For many of us, whom I now call “visibly Orthodox Jews,” this comes as no surprise. In recent years, we

have been subjected to this sort of treatment more and more.

The recorded levels of hate crimes continue steadily rising in New York and across the country. Government bodies in townships and municipalities overtly discriminate against Jews, using zoning laws to keep them from moving in, and when they do, to keep them from being able to practice their religion or worship. And social media keeps on becoming an ever-growing petri dish of sickening proportion, where Jew-hatred is cultivated and allowed to fester unchecked.

And yet these stories – these real and verifiable stories – for the most part go untold.

Anti-Semitism is seemingly only worth covering if it can be framed in political terms, with President Trump and white supremacy on one side and the Jews and everyone else on the other. The capacity for discussing anti-Semitism in any other way, using any other frame, simply doesn't seem to exist.

People may think we are having a national conversation about anti-Semitism, but we really aren't. What we keep on talking about is politics. If we can't fit every story into the preconceived narrative we've built in that arena, we just ignore it and search for a story that we can.

What happens when the stories get more complex? What happens when the victims are people who publicly align themselves with the President? What happens when the people committing the acts of anti-Semitism against them aren't white nationalists, but minorities – like the former Black Hebrew Israelite who committed the Jersey City murders?

Then we ignore it.

Visibly Orthodox Jews increasingly find themselves left out in the cold, abandoned and alone in the face of the anti-Semitism targeting us specifically. Jewish institutions dedicated to fighting anti-Semitism are there with statements and resources, but beyond that, it's hard to get anyone to act as though they really care about us.

Even worse, our fellow Jews sometimes participate in our alienation.

When people can only recognize anti-Semitism when it comes from the other side of the aisle, isn't

ant-Semitism which bothers them; it is their political enemies. It isn't Jew hatred that is at stake but politics, and winning.



And the Jews – the visibly Orthodox Jews – who are the ones bearing the brunt of the violent anti-Semitism, are the ones who suffer, just because we, and the “type” of violence we are enduring, don't fit neatly into the political box so many wish we would.

It's a terrible state to be in, subjected to regular violence and now a massacre, yet to be utterly alone. Won't anyone set aside politics and stand up for what's right, stand up for the most visible, vulnerable among us? Why won't anyone hear our cries as we try to tell the story of how we are being targeted?

Eli Steinberg lives in Lakewood, New Jersey with his wife and five children. They are not responsible for his opinions, which he has been putting into words over the last half-decade, and which have been published across Jewish and general media. You can tweet the hottest of your takes at him @DraftRyan2016.

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

Opinion

The Lesson Of Trump's Executive Order That Wasn't

By Ari Hoffman

Two things happened to Jewish Americans on Tuesday. Only one of them was real.

A Jewish grocery store in Jersey City really was attacked in a murderous rampage. There really was a synagogue and yeshiva in the same building, with real children who sat huddled in terror for hours who were then evacuated lest they be executed.

The second thing that happened was not real. The New York Times reported that the Trump Administration had issued an executive order reclassifying Jewish college students as belonging to a nationality rather than a religion, thus bringing them more firmly under the protection of the relevant statutes that allow for federal aid to be withheld from universities, with the presumable purpose of combating Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions efforts on college campuses.

The only problem is, it wasn't true. As the Jewish Insider reported, there is no mention at all of a redefinition of what it means to be Jewish in the order, and no effort to recategorize Jews as a different protected class. This order actually alters very little; it suggests – rather than mandates – that U.S. government departments adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism when enforcing anti-discrimination statutes, which, far from criminalizing criticism of Israel, specifically states that “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic.”

The remarkable thing about fake news is that it reveals real truths. Before the actual draft of the order emerged, the story – particularly, the report that the Trump Administration would begin to classify Jews as a nationality – unleashed a firestorm on the Jewish left. It was compared to Nazi legislation and Soviet oppression. “The GOP-Nazi Party is legislating a new definition of American Judaism,” read one tweet. “The

In response to the idea that Jews are part of a nation, progressive Jews stumbled over themselves hurrying to declare themselves Americans first. Lengthy Twitter-threads were composed alleging that the protection of Jews from anti-Semitism necessarily involves the targeting of Palestinian students. Beyond simply questioning the executive order, the very idea of Jewish nationhood seemed to be received with visceral disgust.

It was remarkable, if telling. On the very same day that Jews were slain in a storefront pogrom by assailants who were reportedly members of the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement executing a targeted attack, the tastemakers on the Jewish left saw the gravest outrage against American Jews elsewhere: in the expansion of protection for Jewish college students, and in the outrage over the Jewish people being called a nation.

There wasn't *absolute* silence about Jersey City. There were a few mealy-mouthed acknowledgements. But they were completely drowned out by the hysteria around the assault against Jews that simply wasn't.

After years of maintaining that combating anti-Zionist hate was a distraction from the *real* anti-Semitism of synagogue shootings emanating from the extreme right, the Jewish left was too distracted talking about a non-assault against anti-Zionist speech to react to a massacre of Jews, except in the most instrumental way; thus, IfNotNow's first comment on the shooting, which didn't come until this morning, was a Tweet-reminder that "anti-Black racism is never an acceptable response to antisemitic violence."

A fake story about an attempt to protect Jews garnered more outrage than a real one about dead Jews.

The outrage over the executive order and the lackluster response to the shooting in Jersey City might seem related only by a freak of timing; in fact, they are deeply connected.

The former explains the latter. After all, what is left to connect people who are horrified at the notion that they belong to a Jewish nation to the Hassidic victims of the Jersey City massacre, absent a sense of shared nationhood?

The denial of the idea of Jewish nationhood – an idea that is exactly as old as Judaism itself – speaks of a

fear of Jewish assertion. Do not champion our cause too overtly, it begs those in power. Bless those who curse us, it insists. We are a mere religion with one commandment and that is to repair the world and to help those whose misfortunes outnumber our own, it insists. And for God's sake, don't mistake us for *those Jews*. Or, as one liberal rabbi put it on Twitter, "Our Torah is a book of actions, not a rallying point for mumbling in an ancient tongue while wearing the garb of our grandfathers and gathering for a shtickle herring afterwards."

How odd, at a time when the Jewish body is increasingly a perforated one in pews pooling with blood, to perversely declare that we want not more protection, but less. What a strange spectacle to see Jews, whom nobody asked to choose, declaring themselves American *uber alles*.

But being a nation is a difficult thing. It can be hard and awkward. But it is infinitely beautiful, and this particular one, the Jewish one, is worthy of celebration. What a nation we are, after all.

We have too many threats to our bodies and souls to be distracted by ghosts of our own creation.

Ari Hoffman writes about politics, culture, and Jewish ideas.

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Culture

Leonard Cohen's Last Words Summon The Spirit Of The Poet

By Raphael Magarik

Like an urn is full of ash, a posthumous album can often be a light, insubstantial remembrance. The survivors who release it into the wind of public opinion can count themselves lucky if the contents do not rebound onto them embarrassingly. The best case scenario is usually a brief, respectful silence and then insignificance.

Things are different for Leonard Cohen, an artist who had been ruminating on loss and absence for decades, who seemed for decades to be not so much aging but dying prematurely. As early as 1967, "So Long Marianne" was imagining a romantic partner as Mary Magdalene ["You held on to me like I was a crucifix"] and their breakup as Christ's execution. Already that stanza introduced the major themes of Cohen's poetry: the melancholic attachment of two people who meet when they were "almost young" [in a weird Christological coincidence, Cohen was thirty-three the year his first album was released]; the "lilac park" in which they meet mournfully nodding to the flowers of Whitman's great funereal elegy; the final image of the lovers "kneeling in the dark" gently mixing religious and erotic passions.

In later years, Cohen just became more explicit about the heresy of a Jewish boy riffing on the central Christian drama. His final hit, "You Want It Darker," released nineteen days before he died in 2016, sandwiched Jesus's agony between the words of the mourner's *kaddish* and a Holocaust-scale array of *yahrzeit* [memorial] candles ["Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name / Vilified, crucified, in the human frame / A million candles burning for the help that never came"]. Those lines seem to drain the crucifixion of its redemption, but elsewhere Cohen performed the opposite trick. In the bleak 1988 song, "Everybody Knows," a litany of collective cynicism [Every body knows "the good guys lost," "...the fight was fixed," "...the boat is leaking," "...the captain lied" and so on] repeatedly parodies the cross, which the first couplet

already imagines as a hopeless superstition: "Everybody knows that the dice are loaded / Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed." Yet the song ends by enjoining the listener to "Take one last look at this Sacred Heart / Before it blows." The Catholic devotional object reminds us that, after all, total despair is right there in the Gospels too, in a Jewish man screaming that his divine father has abandoned him. In other words, Cohen never fussed much about the differences between sacrifice and torture, sacred hymn and secular parody, or Christian and Jew.

So listening to "Thanks for the Dance," I remembered that Cohen has been riffing on death and resurrection for decades and kept an open mind. After all, the Sermon on the Mount was also published posthumously. Without that background, there is not very much to the new album, which I mean descriptively rather than pejoratively. Its nine tracks total about thirty minutes, and at least one of the pieces, the gnomic "Listen to the Hummingbird," Cohen already read at a 2016 press conference for *You Want It Darker*. Moreover, Cohen's son Adam has arranged the instrumentation [most of which was done after Cohen's death] simply and with restraint: quiet keyboard arpeggios, percussion and guitar generously spaced so that the fading away is more striking than the sounds themselves, his vocals fully purified of melody. Both his early crooning sweetness and the apocalyptic menace of his later, synthesizer years are gone, replaced by a ritualized, controlled recitation. This austerity will disappoint those who listened to Cohen as a musician; it matters less for those who all along were listening to the poet, the prophet, the gently failing messiah.

As poetry, the album does its quiet work. Consider this quatrain from the first and best song, "What Happens to the Heart"

The trick is the last line, which delicately reverses a cliché. The cart before the horse is preposterous [literally "before coming after"], its inversion uncannily normal – no more conventional than a magician pulling a hat out of a rabbit. And then you notice the lines' rhythm, most of the emphases trochaic, that is, on the first foot rather than the second ["always working steady"], with "art" and "cart" giving us satisfying, stressed endings: the familiar twisted to land as a reversal. The quatrain is a little riff on what it is to work steady. Cohen liked to brushed off interviewers with vague theories about Romantic inspiration ["If I knew

where the good songs came from, I'd go there more often"). Here we have a more sober, hardworking poetics of craft and labor.

There are louder lines in that poem, which ends by contemplating the speaker's father's ".303" – the British and Canadian rifle used in World War II – ruefully, "I fought for something final / Not the right to disagree." Pace a moving, beautiful and astoundingly wrongheaded reminiscence of Cohen by the right-wing Canadian Yiddishist Ruth Wisse (who knew Cohen from McGill), Cohen never "treated war in the sloppy manner that appealed directly to those flower-children brigades." He was a peacenik who understood and grappled with the erotics of violence; the precise mirror of neoconservatives like Wisse, who misunderstood their own militarist desires as duties.

There was never much that was sloppy in Cohen's poetry: almost like Bruegel carving the clean lines and fine details of the "Last Judgment," he wrote precisely about the otherworldly, lightening the profound without ever cheapening it. He had a clinical coldness. Despite all the dances he constantly mentions, it is hard to name one to which you could swing your hips: they are always about dancing, the movement always reserved for the words, voice, and spirit. The album's great love-song, "The Night of Santiago" (the pun on "night" sneaking in chivalric romance) begins, "She said she was a maiden / That wasn't what I heard," but the lover shrugs and plays along: "For the sake of conversation / I took her at her word." He repeatedly punctures his own fantasies ["And yes she lied about it all / Her children and her husband"], without ever deflating them. The tawdry truth is a small thing before lines like, "Her thighs they slipped away from me / Like schools of startled fish."

Cohen was a poet before a singer, and his first, college-age book was entitled, "Let Us Compare Mythologies." The two halves of the phrase twist romantic invitation (what do you *really* imagine Cohen and his addressee comparing?) into precocious scholasticism. He offered world-weary, knowing disillusionment that also, somehow, promised mystical union: a faith without credulity, a God who didn't mind being seen naked, or even seen through. "Thanks for the Dance" is hardly a full, substantial work, but its thin, spectral presence nonetheless summons the larger, powerful spirits with which Leonard Cohen spoke for so long.

Culture

Is 'A Christmas Carol' Anti-Semitic?

By Seth Rogovoy

Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" has been variously interpreted over the years as a humanist or secular parable, a pre-Freudian psychological thriller, an old-fashioned ghost story, an anti-capitalist screed, and, yes, a Jewish story wearing the cloak of Victorian England. It has also been mined for its anti-Semitic tropes, as has other work by Dickens – most famously "Oliver Twist" and its portrayal of the character Fagin.

"A Christmas Carol" has also been the subject of countless adaptations in every form imaginable: stage plays, radio programs, recordings, movies, animated cartoons, graphic novels ... even operas. Campbell Scott ("House of Cards") and Tony Award-winners Andrea Martin ("Pippin") and LaChanze ("The Color Purple") are currently starring in a new production on Broadway. A new made-for-TV movie version, by the same English creative team behind the "Peaky Blinders" TV series, debuts on the FX network in the U.S. on December 19 (the date of publication of the original book). Several new film versions are reportedly in the works, including one written by playwright Tom Stoppard and a Walt Disney musical told from the point of view of Jacob Marley.

It's pretty easy to read "A Christmas Carol" as anti-Semitic. The main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, is a moneylender who doesn't celebrate Christmas. Full stop there. But there's more: the name Ebenezer is Hebrew, deriving from the phrase *eben ha-ezer*, meaning "stone of the help." Scrooge's dead friend and former business partner, Jacob Marley, sports a fully Jewish moniker – his first name one of the Jewish forefathers, and his Hebrew family name meaning "It is bitter to me." Scrooge not only doesn't observe Christmas festivities; rather, he hates Christmas. He's a mean and nasty guy, and Dickens even gives him a "pointed nose" to boot.

But many prefer to paint Dickens and "A Christmas Carol" with a kinder, gentler brush. In 2005, American Conservatory Theater artistic director Carey Perloff, who directed a version of the show, told the Jewish

News of Northern California, “It’s not religious. It’s a humanist novel very deeply about community.... It’s about family and food. It’s about Scrooge losing his connection with his family. And it’s also about philanthropy. It’s ingrained with Jewish concerns.”

Similarly, in the Times of Israel, Barbara Aiello called Dickens’s novella “a slim volume that celebrated kindness, charity and human transformation – ideals that parents the world over hope to instill in their children – ideals that have deep roots in Jewish tradition.”

In Boston’s Jewish Journal, Jules Becker argued that Jewish themes abound in “A Christmas Carol.” He credited award-winning Jewish actor Jeremiah Kissel, who portrayed a stage version of Scrooge, for claiming that “the notion of teshuvah is at the core of a play that teaches that ‘the worst among us has a core of goodness.’ Kissel also believes that Tikkun Olam informs the story. ‘I start to frame the story as a parable of hurt. You perform Tikkun Olam by channeling hurt back into the world.’”

Or as Samantha Nelson put it in Escapist Magazine last year, “There’s no Santa, no reindeer, and certainly no reference to the baby Jesus. It’s a weird ghost story with a humanist moral.”

In 2015 in the New Yorker, writer Elif Batuman set out to determine if Scrooge was the first psychotherapy

patient. “All of Scrooge’s thought processes, especially the miserly ones, follow the ‘logic’ of depression,” wrote Batuman. “At first, it seemed strange to me that such a Jewish discourse should be anticipated so plainly by a Christmas story – one written a decade before Freud was born. But when I thought about it more, it started to seem less strange. Freud read and admired Dickens; his first gift to his fiancée, in 1882, was a copy of “David Copperfield.” Why wouldn’t he have read “A Christmas Carol,” which is so much shorter? O.K., he was Jewish, but he was secular. He had a Christmas tree.”

But the last word goes to William Melton, writing in the Riverfront Times, of St. Louis, Missouri, who asked rhetorically, “Are we the only ones who’ve noticed that this widely accepted, celebrated piece of literature is actually wildly anti-Semitic? ... We’re dealing with a cold, greedy Jewish banker sporting a pointed nose. In the end ... the miserly, Jewish banker opens his heart to the Spirit of Christ – and then, and only then, is he transformed into a loving human being. Scrooge done got himself saved.”

Bah, humbug.

Seth Rogovoy is a contributing editor at the Forward. He frequently mines popular culture for its hidden Jewish stories.

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