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When Christmas Was a Time of Fear for Jews

By Itzik Gottesman

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We all know about the American Jewish tradition of dining out in Chinese restaurants on Christmas Eve. It's a sign that American Jews have always enjoyed themselves that night, alongside their fellow Americans, albeit not quite in the same way.

When Jewish immigrants came to America, they quickly adopted Christmas as an American holiday, distinct from its Christian context. In the 1920s, even the religiously traditional New York Yiddish newspaper, the "Morgn-Zhurnal," would print pages full of Christmas greetings from local businesses in Yiddish, wishing readers "a freylekhn Christmas", a happy Christmas.

More recent immigrants, among them – Yiddish writers, condemned this practice. Literary critic Shmuel Charney explained that when Jews in his hometown of Dukora, Belarus, would hear the church bells before Christmas, they understood it as a veiled warning: "Go home, be quiet! You mustn't be on the street now for any reason." Many Jewish Christmas traditions in the Old Country were a way of expressing fear. But what exactly were they afraid of?

Older Jewish religious texts instructed all Jews to stay home on Christmas Eve because Christians might attack, or even kill them. Historically speaking, however, far more acts of violence were committed against Jews during Easter when Christians mark the day Jesus died than during Christmas when he was born.

Pogroms would also break out forty days after Easter, the day when Christians believe that Jesus ascended to heaven. Springtime generally saw more attacks against Jews than December as the weather was warmer and the ground wasn't covered in snow.

Over the centuries, these dangers generated a substantial folklore. Jews believed that on Christmas Eve, the Christian deity flew around and controlled the night. If any Jew were to open a Jewish holy text that night, that spirit could appear at any time and defile the holy book. This tradition continues among Hasidic groups today who actually don't study Torah on Christmas. Some even interpret the Yiddish word for Christmas, "nit!" as an abbreviation for "no studying" [nit lernen]. Jews believed that doing anything related to Torah study on Christmas might be misinterpreted as honoring Jesus.

For generations, Jews spent Christmas Eve doing all sorts of things that couldn't be misinterpreted as honoring Jesus. Some baked garlic bread due to its strong odor. Many played cards or dreidel. Lubavitcher Hasidim have a tradition of playing chess on Christmas Eve that continues to this day.

Jews also had fears and traditions surrounding the winter solstice, which falls a few days before Christmas. Scientifically speaking, the winter solstice is merely the longest day of the year but Jews believed that on this night when the seasons changed, the earth was left unprotected. An old tradition connected to the winter solstice was to cover all pots that held well water so that the water would not be contaminated. While some people, like my father, knew the tradition's true origin, by modern times the two traditions had gotten so blurred together that Jews were covering up their pots on Christmas Eve so that the Christian deity wouldn't poison their well water while flying overhead.

The image of a "flying Jesus" comes from Sefer Toledos Yeshu, a parody on the life of Jesus that Jews apparently read on Christmas Eve for hundreds of years. At one point in the story, Jesus acquires the ability to fly through the air thanks to a tetragram of God's name that he stole from the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and sewed into his leg. On the basis of this story, Jesus became a demon of sorts for the Jewish masses, who Jews believed flew around and caused great troubles for Jews.

This is, of course, a very different take on Christmas than what most American Jews have today. True, Jews no longer fear Christmas Eve, but many admit that this day still makes them feel like the odd man out.

Culture

The Meteoric Rise Of The A Capella Hanukkah Video – How A Holiday Force Awakened

By Stav Ziv

Star Wars fans have been eagerly awaiting "The Rise of Skywalker," the final film in a nine-part saga scheduled to be released on December 20. Another set of fans – perhaps smaller in number but nothing to scoff at – have been anticipating an entirely different kind of production that pops up around this time every year: the Jewish a cappella Hanukkah video. This year, the two fan bases – stans of "Star Wars" and Jewish fellows singing sans accompaniment – might have some substantial overlap.

Six13, one of the main players in a young but vibrant tradition of celebrating Jewish holidays with a cappella music videos, has dedicated its annual Hanukkah offering to the beloved Star Wars franchise with an affectionate parody. Like the movie series it pays homage to, the video begins with static blue text against a starry background, but in this case, it reads "A long time ago, in a land not so far away..." Soon the signature crawl of yellow text receding away from the viewer tells the story of "The Rise of the Maccabee" and six voices sing a dramatic rendition of traditional Hanukkah blessings arranged to the tune of Star Wars' iconic opening theme. The video ends with one singer using a lightsaber to set all the candles on a large menorah aflame.

For the members of Six13, along with their counterparts in groups like the Maccabeats and Y-Studs A Cappella, the question every year when Hanukkah approaches isn't whether they'll put out a video but what that video will be and how they can possibly top past successes. "It's almost like a *minhag*, a tradition," says Eitan Rubin, president of the Y-Studs. "This is part of the holiday."

Just a decade back, none of this would have been

obvious at all. Ten years ago Hanukkah came and went without much to-do on YouTube. But then, a viral hit changed things, making a cappella almost as much a part of Hanukkah as latkes and dreidels.

First, There Was “Candlelight”



On a Friday afternoon in November 2010, Uri Westrich posted a video he'd made with the Maccabeats – some of whom were his contemporaries at Yeshiva University. The guys soon turned off their phones and computers in observance of Shabbat. “Candlelight,” a Hanukkah parody of Taio Cruz’s smash hit “Dynamite,” was “intended as a holiday card for our friends and family,” says Julian Horowitz, a founding member and now music director of the Maccabeats.

But by the time the singers powered their devices back up, the video had already racked up a couple thousand views. A week later the count had risen to about a million, and the numbers just kept climbing. Suddenly, this student-founded a cappella group was famous – and getting inundated with booking requests for gigs and interviews and TV appearances, including on CNN and CBS.

“I don’t think I slept at all,” says Horowitz, who handled the slew of incoming inquiries. In hindsight, “of course, it launched who we are today,” he says. “It brought us into the modern era of the Maccabeats.” The group, which is no longer formally affiliated with YU, still tours regularly, flying in and out of cities all over the country.

“Candlelight” wasn’t the only Jewish a cappella video released for Hanukkah that year. Just a couple of days later, NCSY [formerly the National Conference of Synagogue Youth] posted “I Light It,” featuring Six13 singing a medley of parodies [including a take on “I Like It” by Enrique Iglesias ft. Pitbull].

Both “Candlelight” and “I Light It” came out at a time

when a cappella was having a mainstream moment. “The Sing-Off” and “Glee” had both premiered in 2009 and helped create hype around the genre beyond college campuses. [The movie “Pitch Perfect” would come soon after, in 2012.] “Suddenly it wasn’t a fringe thing,” says Mike Boxer, founder and director of Six13.

While it’s hard to say exactly what makes something go viral, the success of “Candlelight” in particular probably had something to do with the immense popularity of Cruz’s song, says Mordy Weinstein, founder of the Y-Studs and now both a member of Six13 and its booking manager. “It was the only song that mattered at the time. It had been huge for months and it was still everywhere,” he says. Mike Tompkins’ “Dynamite” cover video, which was released in September 2010 and inspired the Maccabeats version, was also incredibly popular. And though Hanukkah is not necessarily a major holiday in Judaism, its proximity to Christmas makes the season ripe for anything holiday-related.

Whatever the reasons behind the Maccabeats’ virality, “they didn’t just elevate themselves, they elevated the genre,” Boxer says. “We definitely saw an uptick in interest around when that happened,” he says. “They didn’t just make the Maccabeats popular. They made what the Maccabeats *do* popular. And that’s us. So we definitely benefited from that... From that point on, it was like everybody was off to the races to replicate that.”

The Video Is The Message



Why do a cappella groups keep making videos for Hanukkah year after year [and often for Passover, too, and occasionally for other holidays such as Rosh Hashanah]? There are two kinds of answers. The first is practical.

The videos have become one of the main, if not *the*, driving forces for the rest of the groups’ activities. In

other words, the the videos' popularity makes everything else possible – including the gigs large and small across the country and around the world, as well as several White House performances. [The Maccabeats, Six13 and the Y-Studs have each been invited at least once.] In a way, the videos are analogous to a ballet company's "Nutcracker" production, bringing in new and bigger audiences, some of whom will come away with a taste for more. For ballet companies, "Nutcracker" income helps bring in revenue to fund other performances; for Jewish a cappella groups, holiday videos help create the demand for more performances.

"Whenever we post a video, directly correlated to how popular that video is, is how many gig inquiries we get," says Weinstein. "That's the aim: Put out videos and use it as a marketing tool and do more shows and get more visibility and grow the popularity of the group that way and put out more videos. It's a cycle."

Boxer has kept track of inbound inquiries over the last several years. "There's always a spike in inquiries right around and right after we release a video," he says. In December 2014, when Six13's Hanukkah rendition of Taylor Swift's hit song "Shake It Off" went viral [to date, it's accumulated more than 2.8 million views], the surge of emails and calls was particularly high. The numbers do plateau again after each spike, but Boxer finds that the new baseline is usually higher than it was before.

"That is your primary shot at major marketing exposure for the year," Boxer says. "When we do this, we do so much better. So what's the return per dollar? I don't know. But this is what keeps us relevant."

Because even if your group doesn't put out a video, another one will. After "Candlelight," it became clear that "if you wanted to be taken seriously, you couldn't not put out a video," Weinstein says. "Otherwise you'd be left in the dust and everybody would hire the groups that put out videos."

The Mission

What began as a fun holiday greeting to send to friends and family soon became the way multiple Jewish a cappella groups sustained themselves beyond the university context. "We get a lot of work out of it," Weinstein says – so yes, the huge reach of online videos is a boon for the groups' bookings. "But at the end of the day, we're not in music because we want to make money." And therein lies the more compelling

purpose: The singers feel like the videos have given them a stage to reach Jews and non-Jews alike with positive, educational and entertaining images of Judaism.

After the haze of December 2010 lifted and the Maccabeats singers got some sleep, they started thinking about their next videos. "I don't think there was a five year plan, but it was like, 'Hey, we have this opportunity. We have this mission,'" Horowitz says. "'Let's use our platform to teach people about Jewish ideas, to bring joy to people on this holiday, to inspire people to be proud of their faith in a public setting.'"

The Maccabeats, Six13, and the Y-Studs all tell stories about the messages and comments they get online and the feedback they hear when touring all over the world that reinforces the notion that their songs and videos, silly or serious, have a real impact on the people who watch them.

"It never gets old to have somebody writing in and [saying], 'I'm Jewish, but I'm in the middle of Nebraska and we're the only family that's Jewish in my town. I just feel so out of place...but this makes me feel so much cooler,'" says Boxer. It also doesn't get old to receive a request for sheet music for what will be the only Hanukkah song someone's public school choir will sing. Or to hear that folks are using the videos to teach their kids or Hebrew school students about the holidays.

If you pull up "Burn" by the Maccabeats on YouTube, for example, you'll see a comment from an 11 year old who recounts being called "a f***ing Jew" walking home after Yom Kippur not long before encountering the video. "I haven't stopped watching it. Thank you so much for doing this. It helps me feel proud," he writes. Others talk about sharing the videos with their classes or playing them during family gatherings.

If the comments are any indication, however, the videos reach far beyond the Jewish population in the U.S. and abroad. Several start with "I'm not Jewish, but..." or "I'm a Christian..." or "I'm Muslim..." This is by design. "It's really for everybody," says Weinstein. "That's part of the challenge of making these videos. There's got to be a little bit of something for everybody – every age group, every kind of Jew, every kind of person."

And if the musicians can project a positive image of Jews and Judaism – if they can entertain people while

making Jews and Judaism feel relatable and familiar at a time when anti-Semitism is all-too prominent – then all the better. “This is the face of Jewish culture to the outside world,” says Boxer. “With the climate being what it is...it’s more important than it ever has been,” he adds. “Once a year we have one of the biggest platforms in Judaism so there’s a great social responsibility there.”

The Tradition Continues

It has been nearly a decade since “Candlelight” captured imaginations and set the stage for the slew of videos that have followed. The quality of the productions has gone up, new players like the Y-Studs and Kippalive have joined in, and everyone is experimenting.

There have been more fun pop song parodies (including “All About That Neis,” the Maccabeats version of Meghan Trainor’s “All About That Bass,” and “Uptown Passover,” Six13’s adaptation of “Uptown Funk” by Mark Ronson ft. Bruno Mars). There have been Broadway takes (including Hamilton medleys from both the Maccabeats and Six13 as well as a Les Misérables video from the former). There have been movie-related videos (including the Y-Studs’ La La Land-inspired video, “La La Passover,” and Six13’s “Bohemian Hanukkah,” released a few weeks after the Queen biopic hit theaters). There have been takes on traditional holiday prayers and songs (like the Maccabeats’ “Dayenu” in various musical styles and the Y-Studs upcoming take on the shehecheyanu blessing). There have been original songs (like the Maccabeats’ “Shine”). And there have been concepts and themes (like the Y-Studs anthem against anti-Semitism, a cover of Andra Day’s song “Rise Up,” and the Maccabeats’ “Candles on the Sill,” a version of Ed Sheeran’s “Castle on the Hill” that also served as a 10-year retrospective for the group).

“It actually created this tremendous pressure, which continues till today,” to figure out what’s next, says Horowitz. The creative strain of trying to top previous videos exists alongside an existential question. “How much longer is this going to go on? Was this a flash in the pan, a one-time – or at this point an eight- or nine-time thing? Or is this just the world that we live in now? I tend to think that it’s not going to last forever, because nothing ever does, right?” says Horowitz. “But maybe I’m wrong. Maybe this’ll be what we do until we retire. I don’t know.”

The Y-Studs are newer to the game; they released their first holiday video—“Seder,” based on Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” – for Passover in 2016. But they, too, grapple with the constant push to reinvent themselves. “The question we were asking this year and this holiday as we do every year and every holiday is, ‘Why?’ What exactly is going to be unique about this?” says Y-Studs musical director Gedalia Penner.

But they do it, because it has become its own tradition. “We’ve come to the realization that when something takes hold enough, it’s no longer just a novelty,” Boxer says. “People expect it. At the risk of sounding extremely egotistical, we’ve kind of redefined what is Hanukkah.”

Six13’s was the first video to go live this time around, but others aren’t far behind. The Y-Studs have one in the works and on Monday the Maccabeats were back with yet another Hanukkah video, as Horowitz had promised they would be back in November. “All that stuff I spoke about earlier about when will this end? This is not the year.”

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The Schmooze

“Elena of Avalor” Gets Hanukkah Right (Almost)

By Irene Connelly



Rebekah teaches her new friends about Hanukkah Disney Junior

This holiday season, Disney Junior delivered what once seemed impossible – a Hanukkah episode with no Christmas trees.

Despite the prevalence of Jews in Hollywood, when Hanukkah makes an appearance on TV, it’s usually as a sidenote or a joke. This year, made-for-TV giant Hallmark dipped a brave toe in the waters of multiculturalism by premiering its first Hanukkah movies. But the final products turned out to be two Christmas movies with Jewish characters (and some low-key anti-Semitic dog whistles) thrown in.

All this has left the Jewish viewing public crying out to God for some shmaltzy holiday content of our very own. And, through his chosen servant “Elena of Avalor,” He has answered our prayers.

The Disney Junior show focuses on a young Latina princess, Elena, learning to govern her kingdom with the help of her benevolent abuelos and science-whiz little sis. In the Hanukkah special, “Festival of Lights,” Elena befriends Rebekah, a Jewish princess from a nearby kingdom who is shipwrecked on Avalor’s shores while bringing her bubbe home for the holidays. Elena and her family learn how to cook Hanukkah dishes, build a new menorah to replace a family heirloom lost at sea, and host a dreidel party, while Bubbe gives a kid-friendly primer on the history of the holiday.

The real miracle here is that, for once, Hanukkah doesn’t have to exist in competition with Christmas. Elena and her family participate wholeheartedly in Jewish traditions, rather than incorporating them into their own. Rebekah gets to enjoy her holiday without celebrating Christmas “in exchange.”

This isn’t to say that holiday episodes must only center on culture, or that good interfaith content is impossible. But on many shows, Chrismukah mash-up episodes involve unrealistic depictions of Jews “learning” about Christmas (seriously, show me the American Jew who doesn’t know what a Christmas tree is) that ultimately downplay the cultural dominance of Christian holidays and the importance of visibility for other cultures. “Festival of Lights” shows gentiles and Jews how we can steward a proudly multi-faith society: by entering sincerely into the traditions of others, without needing to constantly refer them to our own.

No American holiday content would be complete without missteps, and “Festival of Lights” slips up in its elision of Askenazi and Sephardic culture. When it announced the special, Disney said that Rebekah would be a “Latina Jewish princess.” Rebekah indeed hints at her Sephardic heritage by sharing bimuelos, or Hanukkah honey donuts first baked by Spanish converso Jews, with her new friends. But she also teaches them Yiddish slang like “nosh,” calls her grandmother, “bubbe” instead of the Ladino “nona” or “avuela,” and plays dreidel for gelt, a custom that originated among Polish Jews. Next time Rebekah returns to Avalor, we hope she’ll bring a less Asheknormative vision of Jewish culture, one that lets the richness of Ladino language and Sephardic culture shine through.

Baby steps, Disney.

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Life

Sheitels, Jewels, Stories: Orthodox Holocaust Survivor Women Speak Their Lives

By Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt

In a sunlit space in Brooklyn's Industry City – warehouse-style windows, exposed ceilings, Lucite fixtures – forty Orthodox women who survived the Holocaust gathered December 16 for a very chic Hanukkah party.

The event was organized by Orthodox jewelry designer and granddaughter of Holocaust survivors Freida Rothman, in collaboration with Nachas Health and Family Network, a Boro Park-based nonprofit devoted to social events and support services for the Holocaust survivor community in Brooklyn.

The scene: Seated throughout the room, a sea of fur coats, short sheitels and cocktail jewelry. Heard: a mixture of Hungarian-accented Yiddish. Standing in the back, a coterie of young Orthodox women – in stylish clothing, long wigs, bright makeup, designer bags – all clamoring to grab a good shot for their Insta stories.

This was purely a social event – no speakers, just conversations. The survivors enjoyed a catered luncheon, followed by a musical performance by Shulem Lemmer. A Hasidic superstar, Lemmer who just released an album with Decca Gold, a sub-label of Universal. He sang excerpts from his latest soundtrack for a Holocaust film, mixed with Yiddish songs like Oyfn Pripitchik, and Hanukkah songs. The women nodded along to the music.

But perhaps what was most interesting were the stories being told at the tables, and on the sidelines. Many of these women lead humble lives in Boro Park and Crown Heights. Their photographs will never make it into communal publications. They'll occasionally speak at a local school, rarely stepping out beyond; they are matriarchs, busy with their extended families,

shuttling between weddings of grandchildren and shivas for old friends.

This week, they took some time to tell us about their lives. To the frequent reader of Holocaust history, their stories may feel familiar – yet each one is unique, and horrifying anew.

Anna Obstfeld



Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt

Anna, born in Krakow, Poland in 1930, remembers when the Germans held a selection one Shabbos in the ghetto. Her mother had already died of illness [“she couldn't handle seeing all the children dying, what they were doing to us”], and her father had disappeared before

the war, to Siberia, when the Germans came searching for him.

“We had to line up. Every row, they took out the children, sent them to the left to kill them. But Hashem gave me an idea. I put a large coat on, and I stood up on my tiptoes – they saw that the height of the row was even, and they said go right.”

Obstfeld was separated from her brother. Alone, she found herself navigating concentration camps and then a death march. “We were marched for four weeks, with bombs over our heads. One morning, the Russian soldiers came. They told us we were free. So we walked back to Poland. When I came home, our maid was living in our house. She said: ‘No one is alive from your family.’ So I stayed with her; she sent me to school. But then my brother showed up, and we moved to Germany, where there was a Yiddishe school, where I could learn how to daven [pray].”

Her father survived the war, and eventually came home to Krakow, where the maid told him that his children had moved to Germany. “So he went to Germany,” Anna says, “And he met me on the street. He said to me: ‘My name is Spira, I'm looking here for two children.’”

“He did not recognize me. So I said: ‘My name is also Spira,’ and I showed him the birthmark on my head.”

Dolly Rabinowitz



Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt

Dolly Rabinowitz was born in Berehove [then Czechoslovakia, now Ukraine] to a middle-class Orthodox family. “My father was a balabus [businessman], he had rebbes coming to visit him. The Munkatcher rebbe, the Minchas Elazar, was the sandek for my brother, my brother who did not

survive the war.”

The Rabinowitz family was taken, alongside the other Jews of the neighboring villages, to a local brick factory, where they were held for days, and then brought to a railroad station. “They pushed us in, eighty to one hundred to a cattle car,” she says. “A baby was born in that wagon, and a man died in that wagon.”

Dolly later survived Auschwitz and the death march with her older sister Suzi, who carried her for miles – knowing that if she didn’t, her little sister would be killed.

Today, Dolly takes care of Suzi, who is 102.

Judith Teichman



Freida Rothman

“I was a chevraman [social person] always,” says Judith Teichman, 89, originally from Debrecen, Hungary. “When my mother would be terrified that the Germans would kill us, I would say, ‘No, Mommy, God is here.’”

Teichman’s father died of hunger at the start of the war, leaving her

mother alone with six children – the youngest was three.

“We were taken to Bergen-Belsen, it was noyradik [horrible], we didn’t have what to eat. So I went up to

the SS man, I was mamesh tzittering [literally

trembling] to talk, and said, ‘I want to clean your apartment, and you’ll give me food for it.’ And he looked at me like I’m mishigge [crazy] – I was ten years old at the time. But my mother told him, ‘Oh, she was just born small.’ And he said yes, and I got food and I shared with everyone.”

Teichman and her mother and five siblings survived, miraculously. “It was pure nissim [miracles],” she says. “What else can I tell you, mameleh? I heard yesterday, they were telling me what’s going on in the world, it’s terrible, I know, mameleh, what shall I tell you? We need nissim. The Aibishter [Highest One] must have mercy on the yiddishe kinder [Jewish children.] We are born Jewish and we are going to die Jewish.”

Lillian Feintuch



Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt

A soft-spoken woman in shoulder length blonde sheitel, Lillian Feintuch was born in Balmazújváros, near Debrecen, Hungary. “I was five and a half, but I grew up to be fifteen overnight,” she says.

“We were taken to Auschwitz, but we did not make it there. The train

stopped, and we stood for two days. The tracks were bombed, otherwise I wouldn’t be here today telling you this story,” she says, gesturing to the Manhattan skyline outside.

Feintuch, along with her mother and brother, was taken to the Strashof concentration camp; the family was later ordered on a death march. When the Germans looked away, they escaped from the road and hid in a stable. “One day, I walked away from the stable. I had blonde long hair then – and I see a Nazi running at me. I thought it was the end. But then he stopped and started to cry and said, ‘From afar, I thought you were my daughter.’ [I was pretty then, not like now, I’m old now.] And he said, ‘Take off your Jewish star,’ and he pointed to the mountains and said ‘Go up there, you’ll be liberated soon.’ And that’s what we did. That Nazi saved our lives.”

Itu Lustig



Freida Rothman

Itu Lustig was born in the village of Stramtura, Romania in 1928; she was the eldest of seven in a rabbinic family.

Until the day they took us out of my town, in 1944, I did not know

anti-Semitism exists,” she says. “When they took us out, we saw the goyim from town all lined up in front of the church, and anyone who had a musical instrument was jolliest music – they showed us how happy they were to get rid of us. When we saw them playing, that’s when we realized.”

In May 1944, Lustig and her family arrived in Auschwitz. “My mother, grandmother and five siblings were taken to the crematorium that same day,” she says. “It was the twenty-sixth of Iyar. That’s when I keep the yartzheit [anniversary of their deaths.] My father and brother were taken away. My father died in the camp, in January 1945. My brother survived, he lives in Israel now.”

“They brought us in front of the barrack that first day - we got numbers. I have a number on my arm. ‘A7443,’

they tattooed it. When you add up the numbers - seven and four and four and three, it’s 18 - they wrote on my hand ‘chai’. I questioned myself very often there, I am cold and hungry and alone, why do I fight to stay alive? But I was fighting. I wanted to stay alive. I don’t know why. I guess that’s what Hashem wanted.”

“Before the hatred was more hidden, but now it is open,” she says. “Like you see what they did in Pittsburgh, in California, what they did now in Jersey City - it’s mamesh a mazel [really lucky] that they didn’t go next door to the fifty boys in that yeshiva. Baruch Hashem, they didn’t go in there, because Hashem watched over those boys. But now it’s open, the hatred. I don’t know what’s going to happen. I hope Hashem will hold his right hand over us. We have to hope for the best, without hope it’s useless.”

Lustig says that she shares her story at local schools – the way she speaks, you can tell that she has retold it many times. “I don’t want it ever to be that people will say it didn’t happen. It’s true. It happened. And that’s all.”

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



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Life

Why the Kosher Grocery Store Is Just As Jewish and Holy As Shul

By Tali Adler

This article originally appeared in the Yiddish Forverts.

Ever since the Jersey City attack, I've been trying to figure out how to express why and how a kosher grocery store feels just as Jewish and safe and holy as *shul* does. In some ways, even more so.

The thing you have to understand about being a kid who is raised eating only foods under kosher supervision is that one of the phrases you learn to use in grocery stores, from the time you learn to talk, is: "Mommy, Daddy, is it kosher?" There's always that moment when you ask for a treat where you wait while your parents examine the package, looking for a tiny symbol that will make it okay. And more often than not, when it's a candy you haven't seen before, the answer is no. You get used to that quickly, but it never stops being disappointing.

It's never like that in a kosher grocery store. There, suddenly, you're like every other kid. There are still no's, of course—but it's never because this, like so much of the public world around you, wasn't designed for you. When you're in a kosher grocery store, you're suddenly blessedly normal.

And the thing is, that never goes away. The kosher grocery store remains that place throughout your life: the place where your life, its needs and its rhythms, are the norm.

It's the place where, instead of finding lots of chocolate bunnies right before Easter, there's a plethora of candy before Purim.

It's the place that stays open late on Thursday night because that's when you're up cooking late for Shabbos.

It's the place where you go early before work on Friday morning and see dozens of people winding through the aisles, evaluating ingredients, checking lists, throwing an extra package of white candles into a cart because you're running low and because here, in the kosher grocery store, that's as much of an essential as dish soap.

And some weeks, when you remember, it's the place where you can feel, in the chaos of erev Shabbat, that these people—so often women—are doing holy work as they buy what they need to feed their families for Shabbat, creating memories of special "Shabbos foods" that their children are going to grow up associating with holiness and Judaism and Shabbos, just as much as the melodies they hear in shul.

Baruch ata HaShem, hazan et hakol. Blessed are You, God, Who nourishes us all.

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