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### Life

## Should We Shut Down The Shuls? It's Time For Our Rabbis To Speak Up.

By Shlomo Zuckier

*Who is wise? One who sees what is yet to unfold.  
[Tamid 32a]*

Pandemics have an exponential growth rate, which means that early indications don't seem too bad, and then everything spirals out of control, all at once. Given this reality, you need insightful, forward-thinking people to infer what the future might look like, drawing upon scientific models and parallel scenarios, and make decisions on that basis.

A lot is at stake in catching the pandemic early and responding properly, in order to slow the spread of the disease. If you only start responding when the danger is obvious, it might already be too late.

Given this reality, it is time for *poskim*, rabbinic decisor of Jewish law with broad shoulders, to intervene on behalf of the public health of our communities.

In some countries, like in Israel, we're seeing strong government reactions. But what if the government's

reactions are seen in some way as inadequate, whether due to political biases, different weighting of priorities or otherwise?

Then it's up to other leaders, religious, institutional and thought leaders, to try to convince people of the correct measures they must take. We've seen a great number of universities move to online instruction rather than in-person. More and more, we're seeing information-based recommendations for people to minimize their public activities, with the goal of slowing the spread of the disease so it doesn't overwhelm our health care system. Judaism gives great weight to the value of human life. The Torah's principle of "And one shall live by [these laws] and not die by them" asserts that Judaism is a religion of life, and when one's life is at risk, or even might potentially be at risk, one should violate Jewish law [for any commandment other than murder, idolatry, and sexually immoral behavior]. This is equally true for the lives of elderly and sick, even those who might be seen

as having a “lower quality of life” or fewer years remaining on their actuarial charts.

The story is told that one year, in the face of a cholera epidemic, the great Rabbi Yisrael Salanter announced to his congregation that people should break their fast on Yom Kippur, and may have even made a public Kiddush himself Yom Kippur morning.

Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik, the famed Talmudist, ruled that the minor fasts (all fasts other than Yom Kippur and Tisha Ba'av) no longer apply given health risks – he explained that he wasn't being lenient about those fast days, but rather was stringent about protecting human life. These great authorities saw fit to publicize their position because, for many communities, halakhic authorities are the ones with the wisdom, responsibility, and authority to make decisions that will be followed.

At this point, the World Health Organization has declared the coronavirus a pandemic. Although the numbers are still low in the United States, the rates of cases is going up in exponential fashion, and soon will pose a real challenge to public health. Descriptions of what is happening in parts of Italy are harrowing, as is the prospect that we will be in a similar situation in a manner of weeks.

Which is why it's essential that rabbinic decisors step in, before it's too late.

This is not an easy case where a sick person needs to skip a fast day or violate Shabbat to survive – we are talking about a more complicated set of concerns, protecting vulnerable people who won't be sick yet, but will be if prudent actions are not taken. That might include limiting the size of minyan quorums, prohibiting people of a certain age or health bracket from attending synagogue, encouraging people to avoid crowds – not just as a matter of prudence, but as a matter of Jewish law.

In an extreme scenario, it might mean canceling Shul altogether as long as the virus is spreading so widely, a measure [just taken] collectively by the Rabbinical Council of Bergen County, representing numerous Orthodox synagogues.

Now, one might wonder – why not simply rely on the government? Wait for the CDC to give its guidance and follow it? There are a few reasons why that may be insufficient.

First, health and policy decision-makers, in deciding whether to impose far-reaching shutdowns, need to weigh factors such as the impact on the economy, on the one hand, and the value of the lives of the elderly, on the other. (Unfortunately, some also weigh reelection prospects or other political considerations.)

Halakhic decisors have an overlapping but distinct set of factors to weigh for making their determinations: If Shul attendance is curtailed unnecessarily, especially as people are going to work or doing all their other business as usual, there may be an impact on people's religious observance, both short and long term. And, many posit, a time of crisis is precisely the time when it's most important to pray.

On the other hand, there is the paramount value of protecting human life. Additionally, decisors also might weigh the same factors differently than the government, maybe giving more weight to the lives of the elderly than a number-cruncher.

Furthermore, the scenario that presents itself is different for the Orthodox Jewish community – observant Jews tend to congregate much more – between prayer services, Shabbat meals, not to mention Purim and Passover. There is often a lot of interaction between young, healthy people and the elderly within Orthodox family structures, and the risks to the vulnerable older population are therefore all the greater.

Finally, even if the government or CDC does weigh in, many Orthodox Jews might be more likely to listen to *poskim* than a politician. The reality is such that many halakhic communities look to their rabbis to determine how seriously to treat this situation, to determine whether this is a hoax or a serious public health crisis.

True Torah leaders apply their broad-based judgement, taking into account multiple factors and weighing the proper ruling. They must see into the future, and commit themselves to make the right decision, even if they take a risk or put themselves on the line, with the goal of doing the right thing and saving lives.

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## Opinion

# There's No Consensus On What Constitutes Antisemitism. So We At The ADL Created One.

By Jonathan A. Greenblatt

It's undeniable: Antisemitism is on the rise. We know the numbers; we have the data. It's been weaponized for partisan gain, it's been normalized in politics, and it has gone viral.

Talk of conspiracy theories, foreign intervention, dual loyalty, and delegitimization of Israel continue to gain ground in the public conversation, moving from alt right discussion groups and backroom political meetings into the mainstream.

When a city councilman claims that the Jews are controlling the weather; when a member of Congress suggests that other Jewish members have dual loyalties; when students are ostracized on college campuses for supporting the Jewish state, we see the re-emergence of tropes that have historically been used to isolate, intimidate and scapegoat Jews across the expanse of history.

For more than 100 years, the Anti-Defamation League has been at the forefront of calling out these stereotypes whenever they appear, regardless of their source. But it has become increasingly clear that the lack of shared definitions and standards around the world's oldest hatred has sowed confusion.

In today's "always-on" media environment, everyone with a smartphone and a Twitter account instantly can be exposed to antisemitism. And yet there's no clear consensus on what constitutes antisemitism, or clear understanding of why certain tropes are so offensive.

That is why we have created a new resource, "Antisemitism Uncovered: A Guide to Old Myths in a New Era," that we are launching today and sharing with every member of Congress and national political candidate in the run-up to the 2020 elections.

Sadly, the past few years have been the most challenging in recent memory. Harassment is on the

rise, vandalism continues to spread and from Pittsburgh to Poway to Jersey City to Monsey, to Halle, and violent antisemitic incidents have become all-too common.

One way to mitigate this hate is to effectively identify it for what it is. "Antisemitism Uncovered" was designed to do just that. It takes on seven of the most prominent antisemitic tropes that plague our society: power, dual loyalty, greed, decide, the blood libel, Holocaust denialism, and anti-Zionism or delegitimization of Israel.

The guide provides numerous current and historical examples of how each one of these myths has been weaponized to demonize the Jewish people. It is the product of years of experience of our internal ADL experts. It has been peer-reviewed by some of the leading experts in the field of historical and contemporary antisemitism to ensure that its definitions are clear, concise and accurate.

From the insidious notion that Jews collectively murdered Jesus some 2,000 years ago, to the idea that billionaire businessman and philanthropist Mike Bloomberg is a "puppet master" for Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, to the comparison made by a television pundit that supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign are akin to "brownshirts" from Hitler's Nazi party, antisemitism abides by no logical parameters, defies neat political lines and stubbornly persists from ancient times to the present day.

The results can be deadly. We saw the hateful myth of Jewish "power" radicalize Pittsburgh synagogue shooter Robert Bowers, who believed it was the Jews that were behind the influx of migrants along our southern border in an attempt to "replace" white Americans.

And just in the past few weeks, our team has documented an increase in chatter among some extremists on the far-fringes of the internet that Jews somehow are responsible for creating and spreading the novel coronavirus. It is a baseless accusation but one with historical resonance: it echoes the medieval trope that Jews "poisoned the well" during the 14th century Bubonic Plague in Europe.

It's all-important that we debunk these myths and educate people from all walks of life about what is and what is not antisemitism. By doing so, we hope to stem

the greater normalization of antisemitism and prevent extremists and those with violence in their hearts from seeing a green light to act on such hatred.

We will circulate “Antisemitism Uncovered” broadly but specifically will engage the people who disproportionately shape public opinion, especially in this heated political season.

This might include the legislative staff of a member of Congress, the editorial board of a broadcast network, the standards team at a social media company, or the speechwriting staff of a presidential candidate. It also might include members of a local city council or the administrative staff at a major university where such tropes have been circulated.

It is our hope that “Antisemitism Uncovered” will help Americans and political leaders of all stripes to better understand what constitutes anti-Jewish hate. By calling it out but illustrating its historical precedents, I believe we can reduce the likelihood of antisemitism appearing in the first place.

In the end, this is ADL’s mission. In order to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and secure justice and fair treatment to all, we need all available tools at our disposal. “Antisemitism Uncovered” is an important new component of our broad, overarching strategy to combat the world’s oldest hatred.

It begins with education but it will not end until we have defeated this scourge once and for all.

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*Jonathan A. Greenblatt is CEO of the Anti-Defamation League.*

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

## News

# Online Anti-Semitism Thrives Around Coronavirus, Even On Mainstream Platforms

By Irene Connelly

The first Jewish coronavirus case was announced on March 3, but as early as January, Jews have been blamed online for spreading the virus, said Alex Friedfeld, an investigative researcher at the Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism.

Jonathan Sarna, a professor of Jewish-American History at Brandeis University, said this latest public health-related conspiracy theory reflects a broader historical trend.

“You have a prior notion that Jews are to blame, you find a Jew who indeed spread it to a lot of people, and that reinforces all of your preconceived notions,” he said, referring to the New Rochelle lawyer who may have exposed hundreds of congregants at his synagogue to coronavirus.

During the Black Death, the medieval plague outbreak that decimated Europe, Jews were accused of spreading the disease. Many who survived its ravages died in massacres and pogroms.

As early reports of coronavirus circulated, people posting on texting platforms such as Telegram hypothesized that the disease was a Jewish plot, Friedfeld said. Posters also claimed that Jews were using coronavirus to manipulate the stock market to their advantage, that the coronavirus was a “partnership between Zionists and the deep state” to target President Trump during the election season and that Jewish companies patented a coronavirus vaccine years ago and intended to profit from selling it.

Recent weeks have seen the resurgence of a common anti-Semitic meme known as the “happy merchant,” in which a man with stereotypically Jewish features reveals his intent to profit off the coronavirus crisis.

Even while blaming Jews for coronavirus, extremists expressed hope that Jews would fall victim to the disease. Posters cheered on the arrival of coronavirus

in Israel, and on Telegram one meme suggested that those infected go to the supermarket to “cough on the kosher items.”

Friedfeld became more concerned when he saw anti-Semitic sentiment “float” onto mainstream platforms like Twitter and Instagram. “Seemingly ordinary people were picking up on this kind of messaging,” he noted.

Much of the response on Twitter is tied to the outbreak in New Rochelle or the cases discovered at AIPAC’s annual conference.

One user quoted AIPAC’s statement about coronavirus at its conference with the caption “Corona Virus to every last hidden corner of the U.S.A. courtesy of the jews [sic].”

Meanwhile, Tru News, a fundamentalist Christian outlet which referred to the Trump impeachment as a “Jew coup,” tweeted over a dozen articles about AIPAC conference attendees who may have infected others with the virus [the outlet also retweeted a Forward article about coronavirus exposure at a shiva call in Maryland, referring to the event as a “Jewish retirement party”].

Discrimination against Asian-Americans has spiked since the onset of the virus, which originated in China, a phenomenon which reminds Sarna of persecution Jews have historically experienced in times of crisis.

Sarna has received calls after a wide range of crises and scandals, from the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the arrest of Bernie Madoff, from people fearing anti-Semitic responses. But, he said, while online extremism is concerning, “on the long list of things to be worried about, it’s not high on my list.”

“The truth is, if you go through American history, what’s fascinating is the pogroms that didn’t happen” when Jews expected them, he said.

## News

# Scenes From ‘Ground Zero’: Inside New Rochelle’s Coronavirus Containment Zone

By Ari Feldman

Patrick Vecchio was delivering kosher Chinese food to Jews quarantined in their homes in New Rochelle Tuesday afternoon when he heard the news: He was smack in the middle of the “containment zone” – a one-mile radius around an Orthodox synagogue in this New York suburb. Schools, places of worship and other large gathering areas in the zone will be shut down for two weeks starting Thursday to limit the spread of coronavirus.

Vecchio wouldn’t turn around; the food, from Eden Wok, was ordered by anonymous donors in celebration of the holiday Purim, and the deliveries were expected. He had 30 to go.

“This is ground zero,” he said.

The containment zone around Young Israel of New Rochelle is the nation’s most significant step thus far in limiting the spread of coronavirus. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said at a news conference on Tuesday that he would deploy National Guard units to the area Thursday to clean schools and deliver food to quarantined families, adding that testing kits will soon be made available in the area. Some 108 out of the 173 known Covid-19 in the state cases have been diagnosed in the suburb.

“New Rochelle, at this point, is probably the largest cluster of these cases in the United States,” Cuomo said.

New Rochelle is located in Westchester County, where around 17% of the population is Jewish, according to a 2011 study by UJA-Federation of New York. The spread of coronavirus began after Lawrence Garbuz, a lawyer, attended a bat mitzvah and a funeral in February at Young Israel, an Orthodox synagogue, potentially exposing hundreds of congregants to the virus. Jewish schools in Westchester with ties to the synagogue closed immediately as well, making this tight-knit

Orthodox community the first to deal with the arrival of coronavirus in New York.

News of the containment zone landed unequally for residents and visitors here. People already under quarantine greeted the new restrictions with resignation, while those new to living with mandatory orders from the state Department of Health wondered just how much their lives would change, and how quickly.

A woman from Teaneck, N.J., was visiting New Rochelle on Tuesday with the daughter to deliver traditional Purim baskets of treats and baked goods called mishloach manot, when she heard about the containment. That the raucous holiday, in which Jews celebrate the foiling of a genocidal plot against them in ancient Persia, fell amid the coronavirus crisis is an obvious irony – it's celebrated by dressing up in costume and wearing masks, just not medical ones.

"Normally, I wouldn't even be the tiniest bit concerned," said the woman, who spoke on the condition that she be identified only by her first name, Nikki, out of concern that she might be stigmatized for being in the containment area. "But we have four more stops. I hope they let me out."

Gail Krasner, Nikki's quarantined friend, was a little more pragmatic – and grateful for the goodie bag.

"We've been in our house for a week," Krasner said. "Nobody's gonna freak us out at this point."

As a family, they've already grappled with cabin fever. Her children, who attend SAR High School, have been taking classes online. They spend time in their yard, and try to structure their days as much as possible to mitigate coronavirus-induced anxiety.

"All the other people, they're worried it's gonna come to them," Krasner said. "We're like, 'It's here.'"

The day did offer quarantined Jewish residents some of the humor associated with Purim. A gaggle of teenage yeshiva students made the rounds in the neighborhood around Young Israel, helping households fulfill the obligation of listening to the reading of the Book of Esther, the canonical text read aloud on the holiday.

Yaakov Yarmush, 16, did the honors at the first house, as the fastest reader in the group of the scroll's 10 chapters.

How fast? "Under 20 minutes probably," he said.

The teens, unfazed by news of the containment zone, stood about 30 feet from the entrance to a home on Trenor Drive, a posh suburban street near Young Israel, and read to a family of three sitting on their front steps. When Yarmush read the name of the Purim story villain,

Haman, the boys and the family booed together, per tradition. Every fourth car or so slowed down to get a glimpse of the impromptu reading.

Lance Carr, clad in his Aladdin genie outfit (animated, not Will Smith) praised the boys for bringing Purim joy to dozens of families that couldn't leave their homes to celebrate the holiday in synagogue.

"These boys have saved Purim," he said.

At the business drag nearby the synagogue, news of the containment zone was spreading.

Outside Beth El Synagogue Center, a Conservative synagogue and school, there was no evidence of the usual after-school carpool rush. The Center had closed voluntarily after news of the infections at Young Israel. But two synagogue employees at the building, still trying to make sense of the unexpected containment news, said they didn't yet know what it would mean for them.

Across North Avenue, changes were already in the works. Just after 3 p.m., employees of the Wells Fargo branch walked out of the back door. A sign in the window in English and Spanish directed customers to other nearby locations. The branch manager, locking the door behind him, said he could not comment.

"I thought they were gonna wait 'til tomorrow morning, so people can live their lives," said one woman who just missed the closing. "Thank God they made ATM."

"José, can we come in or no?" she called to the branch manager. He apologized: The bank was closed.

For small businesses in New Rochelle, the impact of the new containment zone is unclear, especially after a week and a half of decreased traffic due to self-quarantines. Restaurants, both kosher and not, are suffering, said Vecchio, the Chinese delivery man.

At the kosher Prime Time Cafe, where he works in addition to doing deliveries, they decided to keep the dining room open for sit-down meals.

"But no one's coming in!" Vecchio said. "They're staying away."

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## Opinion

# My Bernie Sanders Problem

By Batya Ungar-Sargon

In some ways, the Democratic presidential primary campaign has felt like a cruel joke, a perfect amalgamation of positive and negative forces that almost cancel each other out.

We got the most diverse field in the history of the United States – and ended up with two old white men. We started with the most progressive agenda, sprinkled across this wide spectrum of candidates – but ended up with the two most progressive camps with the most vitriol between them. We had – finally! – a laser-like focus on the working poor – but from a campaign that couldn't convince black voters that it was relevant to them. Welcome to 2020: two zeros, twice over.

No campaign created the hopes and disappointments, the moral heights and valleys, the agony and the ecstasy of this fraught political season, quite like that of Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont. It was Sanders' 2016 run that set the standard for 2020, a standard that elevated the entire field. Yet the candidate himself ultimately failed to meet it.

Though he failed to win the 2016 nomination, Sanders emerged from that campaign having successfully put health-care, minimum wage and education at the center of the Democratic Party debate. His signature proposal – Medicare for All – was an instant talking point for 2020; of the at times two dozen Democrats vying for the nomination, all expressed the idea that it was high time the government guaranteed health insurance to all Americans.

For those of us who long to live in a more just world, it was not just a delight but a relief. And the reason it had such traction with the American people, 70% of whom now support Medicare for All, is entirely due to Sanders' 2016 campaign, a huge achievement after a rather moribund Congressional career.

The Vermont Senator's ardent supporters, millions of whom cast ballots for him in recent weeks, were people at the margins of society, America's working class, long neglected by the Democratic Party. And Sanders'

proposals were trained on their needs for healthcare and a minimum wage hike, and for a better life for their children. Sanders insisted that these people were the responsibility of the party from which he'd been an outsider his entire career, an argument with staggering moral force that should not be underestimated.

But his campaign also had a dark side. For a movement so single-mindedly devoted to ending the unnecessary structural cruelties visited upon the poor every day of their lives, it countenanced a heavy dose of cruelty.

Most of this bad behavior emanated from Sanders' online supporters who have a reputation for harassment, bullying, insulting, doxxing, and even sending snail mail to the home addresses of those who express disagreement with their candidate. Sanders disavowed the online bullying and blamed anonymous trolls. But the toxicity bled upwards, to surrogates, advisors, and campaign managers. The message in any case was undercut by the fact that Sanders, his senior adviser, and his national press secretary all appeared on the toxic Chapo Trap House podcast, whose hosts are infamous for their homophobic and misogynistic jokes and online bullying.

It's of course true that online invective, even from campaign surrogates and organizers, doesn't compare to the cruelty of the Trump administration's actions on the border. But Sanders is running for Trump's job; certainly, we can ask where he stands on the behavior of his appointed staff, who are already struggling to contain cruel behavior. That Sanders could never control this, or didn't want to, was emblematic of the tragedy at the heart of his important campaign: one step forward, one step back.

The push and pull between hope and disappointment happened also on a more personal front, where the excitement of potentially having the first Jewish President of the United States was tempered by a host of campaign surrogates who could have been selected for the express purpose of offending the Jewish community.

In a period of explosive, violent anti-Semitism, Sanders aligned himself time after time with people who had crossed the Jewish community's red lines with remarks widely viewed as anti-Semitic. There was Linda Sarsour, who said that Israel is "based on supremacy." There was Rep. Ilhan Omar, who suggested she's being asked to have dual loyalties to Israel. There was Rev. Jesse

There was Rev. Jesse Jackson, who had to apologize for referring to New York City as “Hymietown.” There was Imam Sayed Hassan Al-Qazwini, who spoke at a Sanders rally and who has in the past suggested that Israel was connected to ISIS [the Sanders campaign later denounced the remarks].

But if the idea behind these surrogates was building a big tent, Jews were once again offended when Sanders refused to attend the biggest gathering of Jews in America – the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s policy conference – calling it a “platform for bigotry.” One wonders what kind of campaign has room for someone who thinks Israel is behind ISIS and for a podcast that called Pete Buttigieg “a bloodless asexual” but not for AIPAC?

It was hugely disappointing coming from the most successful Jewish candidate, and the one with the most progressive agenda in U.S. history, stymying the kind of full-throated support one longed to give him.

The problematic surrogates were, apparently, an attempt to address one of Sanders’ 2016 weaknesses and make his campaign “less white” [he “had no idea” that there are hundreds of thousands of African Americans incarcerated because they couldn’t afford bail]. The reversal on identity politics came along with a reversal on immigration, which coincided with an impressive and successful outreach effort to the Latino community.

But this important success was, like the others, offset by a major failure; Sanders failed to gain any traction with black voters, who in South Carolina, and then again on Super Tuesday and in this week’s contests voted so decisively for former Vice President Joe Biden that Sanders’ campaign will probably not recover. Between 2016 and 2020, Sanders was only able to increase performance among black voters by two percentage points. 96% of black voters over 60 – those who had experienced Jim Crow firsthand – voted for Biden.

Black voters are the Democratic Party’s base, and it’s fitting that where those who suffer most from disenfranchisement and inequality go, thither we should follow.

And yet, with Sanders’ campaign effectively over, I can’t help but feel a deep sadness at the idea of returning to the Obama-era liberal centrism that Biden

has promised. What will happen to the millions of people Sanders spoke for, the uninsured, those working for a minimum wage that hasn’t gone up in a decade?

We simply can’t abandon these people. Nor can we abandon the ideas they rallied behind. Those who are relieved at a Biden nomination must consider the two imperatives before them: repaying black voters with attention to their needs and embracing Sanders’ platform – not just to win over his supporters, but because it is the right platform for our nation.

Sanders’ campaign was built on the idea that he could use a wellspring of support among young people to change the Democratic Party, Republican majority in the Senate be damned. It didn’t turn out that way. Young people didn’t go to the polls in droves. So in order to enact this new agenda, we will have to go back to the old ways: civility, persuasion, debate, convincing, respect. We’ll need more of that aimed at Trump’s supporters in November. But now is the moment to turn left and try persuading Sanders’.

In a press conference on Wednesday announcing that despite Tuesday’s poor showing, he is not dropping out of the race, Sanders posed a list of questions he plans to ask Joe Biden at Sunday’s debate. The questions were about childhood poverty, healthcare, mass incarceration, money in politics and income inequality. He should pose them. And Biden should answer them. They are good questions, and they’re part of the national conversation thanks to Bernie Sanders.

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*Batya Ungar-Sargon is the opinion editor of the Forward.*

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

## The Schmooze

# Behind The Scenes With The Rabbi In HBO's 'Plot Against America'

By Irene Connelly

Ethan Herschenfeld is so accustomed to playing Jewish tough guys that when he recorded his first comedy album, he named it “Thug Thug Jew”.

Now he's cutting a much menschier figure in the Jewish cinematic event of the spring: a new adaptation of Philip Roth's “The Plot Against America,” a speculative novel about what might have happened had the xenophobic and anti-Semitic right-wing aviator Charles Lindbergh become President on the eve of World War II. Herschenfeld's character, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, was a real-life figure in the Reform movement who fled Nazi Germany and later became a civil rights activist in America.

The Forward's Irene Katz Connelly spoke with Herschenfeld about period television, beard conundrums, and bringing Yiddish to the silver screen. The following interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

**Long before you even auditioned for “The Plot Against America,” you had a chance encounter with Philip Roth. Tell me about that.**

I ran into him at the Barnes and Noble on 82nd and Broadway. I was trying to tell him that I wrote a college essay about him, but I was a little tongue-tied because of course he's a literary hero. He was so relaxed. He told me, “It's O.K., just talk to me.” My grandfather lived in Elizabeth [near Roth's birthplace, Newark] so there's some overlap – at least in the cemeteries where our families are buried.

**What was it like being on the set for the show?**

It was an incredible experience. My scenes are with Zoe Kazan and John Turturro and Winona Ryder, three



Doron Gild

incredible actors. I got to work one-on-one with Turturro, because he plays a southern rabbi and I play a German expat one, and we had to rehearse and do multiple takes saying a prayer together.

**And what role does your character play in the drama?**

So I play Rabbi Prinz, who is a historical figure and a counterbalancing force to Rabbi Bengelsdorf [John Turturro's character]. The big dramatic moment I really enjoyed is during our scene when I address Bengelsdorf, in a subtle but firm way, about the choices he's making as a religious leader in a time when fascism is taking over. Bengelsdorf is a character who – gosh, I hate to say it, but a character like Stephen Miller or Jared Kushner, people who are cozying up to a racist and a fascist while cloaking themselves in a tallis or the Israeli flag. And Prinz is very opposed to that.

**Of course, “The Plot Against America” was published in 2004, but many people have pointed out the parallels between Roth's imagined America and today's Trump era. Do you think this adaptation is taking those similarities into account?**

Roth actually asked this question, just before he passed away – and he said he wasn't interested in prognosticating. But obviously it's extremely timely right now, the connections are undeniable and I'd say explicit and warranted. This is one of those moments where a piece of art could wake someone up – although we're also living in a time when people are so dead set in their opinions it hard to imagine them changing because of a film. Especially because the use of Hitler as an analogy is so overdone. You go to any country where there is political strife and people are calling each other Nazis.

**How did you prepare for the role?**

This was the first time I was playing a real character in the modern age, and I could see what he said and how he sounded. He actually spoke on the National Mall right before Martin Luther King – you can see on YouTube. He said that the real danger isn't the maniacs committing violence but the people on the



sidelines. Of course, he said it much more eloquently than that. But it's an extremely powerful message.



Speaking of historical accuracy, another funny thing happened. Rabbi

Prinz, because he was Reform, was clean-shaven. But while I was shooting *The Plot Against America*, I was also working on a Hulu show called "Castle Rock", where I played a French settler who was supposed to have a big beard. We were negotiating about whether or not I could shave, but eventually I ended up keeping the beard, so for Rabbi Prinz there's one small inauthentic detail.

**They couldn't just give you a fake beard?**

I tried on a great beard in the hair and makeup trailer, but J.J. Abrams, who is in charge at Castle Rock, wanted nothing to do with fake beards. My agent and I were calling it "Beard-gate."

**In the Plot Against America, you have some lines in Yiddish. But this isn't the first time that's happened to you, is it?**

No, it's not. I've played a Jewish gangster on "Boardwalk Empire," where there was a lot of Yiddish being bandied about, and I was an acid-dropping Hasidic teen in a 2010 film called "It's Kind of a Funny Story." I got to say something like, "I think Yussele took too much," but in Yiddish. My grandfather helped me with my lines for that one – he grew up in Brownsville, which was essentially a shtetl at the time. He didn't know there were any people in the world who were not Jewish until he was eight or nine.

Now I'm actually going to Los Angeles to shoot a show called "Angelyne," where I'll play a Yiddish-speaking refugee. A friend who's a Yiddish professor is coaching me, and he pointed out that I have to change my vowels to sound more authentic. My grandfather came from Kiev, but the dialect for this show is closer to Satmar Yiddish.

**That's pretty dedicated, given that so few viewers will be able to tell the difference.**

Maybe just three or four people, but I think it's fun to be accurate with things like that.

**In your acting career, you've had a lot of Jewish roles. Is that something you seek out?**

Definitely not. It just happens to me. Actually, the title of my new stand-up album is *Thug Thug Jew*, because I often end up playing tough Jews, those are the roles people give me. But I will be voicing [Turkish president] Erdogan on Stephen Colbert's "Our Cartoon President" – so there's a thug who's not Jewish.

It's not something I seek out, but I don't try to escape it either. I don't know if I'm a "proud" Jew, because I take issue with the notion that you can be proud of something you have nothing to do with. But it's an integral part of my identity.

*Irene Connelly writes about culture and lifestyle. You can contact her at [connelly@forward.com](mailto:connelly@forward.com).*

**Forward**

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## Culture

# How My Father's Photos Changed A Changing World

By Annie Rothstein Segan



Courtesy Of Annie Rothstein Segan

My father, Arthur Rothstein, was a social documentary photographer. In the Jewish tradition of tikkun olam, he used his camera to bring attention to problems in society, taking social action in the pursuit of social justice, doing what he could to help repair the world.

His parents had been forced from their homes in Europe by government sanctioned pogroms. They found tolerance and hope in America. Their son went to work for a U.S. Federal Government agency that assisted the dispossessed.

Arthur grew up in a kosher, Yiddish-speaking home in the Bronx. He credited a middle school in the Bronx with his practical know-how and abundant self-confidence. The school's principal, Angelo Patri, an immigrant from Italy, was an educational innovator, an advocate of learning by doing and a student of John Dewey. In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, all the kids in the school learned how to print and bind books, how to do mechanical drawing, basic carpentry and plumbing.



Courtesy Of Annie Rothstein Segan

He only learned to drive when he got hired in Washington DC. He may have started out as a provincial New Yorker, but he became completely self-sufficient and spent the next five years on the road for the federal government. His assignments could last for

several months. In his car, aside from camera equipment, he had a sleeping bag, because he often slept on the back seat. Motels were few and far between. He traveled on country roads, and used an ax to chop up trees that got in his way. He had a shovel to dig his way out of the snow and mud and he had a Coleman stove and a percolator.

By 1940 my father was 24 and he had been on the road for five years! He had been to 46 states and had often worked seven days a week. He was homesick.

Dad took a job at LOOK magazine, back in his hometown of New York City, but he wasn't there for long. Soon after Pearl Harbor, he went back to



Courtesy Of Annie Rothstein Segan

the Photo Unit, which had moved from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to the Office of War Information. Now the Photo Unit was charged with creating encouraging picture stories that helped Americans believe that we could actually win the war.

For a city boy he had a surprising amount of knowledge," Roy Stryker, head of the Photo Unit, told the Archives of American Art. "He was just a boy who was exuberant, who was seeing a new world. I can't tell you how pleased we were with him."

In December of 1952, the annual "Vacation Issue" of LOOK included a lengthy story about a cross country family automobile trip, depicting a trend that would soon become increasingly popular due to the nationwide Interstate Highway system, the proliferation of motel chains and an expanding network of state and national parks. The story was titled "The West by Family Car" with the subhed, "Look photographer Arthur Rothstein took his family on a 10,000-mile auto vacation through the Southwest, California and the Pacific Northwest. Here is his story." With dad and my mother Grace in the front seat, my older brother Robbie and me in the back seat, we drove all the way from New York City to the Pacific Ocean and back, stopping frequently for photo-shoots and roadside picnics.

The eight-page article included more than two dozen photos of our family visiting popular tourist locales along Route 66 and then from southern California up through the natural beauty of the west coast. Visits

were arranged with movie stars and other celebrities, and we even spent a day with Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and Roy's famous horse Trigger! We visited Yosemite Valley, saw the towering Redwood trees and the magnificent vistas of the Pacific Coast Highway.

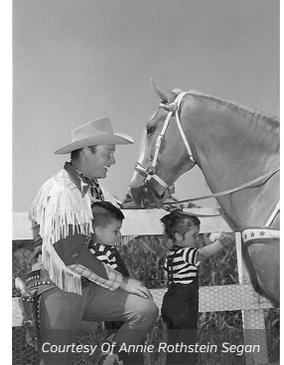


During our trip we also enjoyed the benefits of "product placement," traveling in a new Chevrolet Styleline Deluxe convertible donated by General Motors and wearing Levi's blue jeans. My brother Rob and I wore Keds and held Kodak cameras.

Along the way we visited monuments to America's ingenuity and culture. These included the enormous Grand Coulee Dam constructed on the Columbia River under President Roosevelt's New Deal, and a memorial museum dedicated to Will Rogers in Claremore, Oklahoma.

The trip and the photo story offered a preview of future vacations by countless baby-boom families, but

it was also a sentimental journey for my father. He had crossed the country alone by car several times during the 1930s on photo assignments for the US Farm Security Administration. In the era before television his images had introduced America to Americans during the Depression in his



unvarnished portrayals of struggling farmers and the dispossessed. His Look photo essay of 1952 was an open invitation to millions of young families enjoying post-war prosperity; our family was demonstrating how they could each take their own adventure to see and experience America for themselves.

*"A Lens on FDR's New Deal: Photographs by Arthur Rothstein" is on display from 10:00 am-4:00 pm Monday through Saturday, through May, 2020 at Roosevelt House, 47 East 65th Street in Manhattan.*



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# A Prayer of Hope During this Pandemic

By Rabbi Naomi Levy

We are frightened, God,  
Worried for our loved ones,  
Worried for our world.  
Helpless and confused,  
We turn to You  
Seeking comfort, faith and hope.

Teach us God, to turn our panic into patience,  
And our fear into acts of kindness and support.  
Our strong must watch out for our weak,  
Our young must take care of our old.  
Help each one of us to do our part to halt the spread of this virus

Send strength and courage to the doctors and nurses  
In the frontlines of this battle,  
Fortify them with the full force of their healing powers.  
Send wisdom and insight to the scientists  
Working day and night across the world to discover healing treatments.  
Bless their efforts, God.  
Fill our leaders with the wisdom and the courage  
To choose wisely and act quickly.  
Help us, God, to see that we are one world,  
One people  
Who will rise above this pandemic together.

Send us health God,  
Watch over us,  
Grace us with Your love,  
Bless us with Your healing light.  
Hear us God,  
Heal us God,  
Amen.