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Chaim Lebovits

News

Orthodox Jews Are Donating Plasma By The Thousands To Fight Covid-19

By Ari Feldman

Well before the rest of the world was talking about blood plasma and its use in fighting coronavirus, Dr. Shmuel Shoham knew all about it – and where he could probably get a lot of it.

By early March, Shoham, an expert on infectious diseases in transplant patients at Johns Hopkins University, had already realized that convalescent plasma – antibodies spun out of the blood of people who had Covid-19 – could be a key therapy in fighting the disease.

So he called a friend who is an Orthodox Jew – Chaim Lebovits, a shoe wholesaler from Monsey, N.Y. – to ask him if he could encourage others in his community to donate their plasma. Orthodox Jews, Shoham reasoned, hit early and hard by the virus, probably had an abundance of people with just the right antibodies – people who got sick and recovered, or people who had the virus and never even knew it.

“I had no idea that he would drop everything and completely immerse himself in this,” Shoham said. Lebovits “is giving his community members a chance to do something, now that they have this power in their body to make a difference.”

What began as a one-man volunteer effort to connect post-Covid Jews with New York-area hospitals has now become a broad coalition, including major hospitals, Orthodox groups and a range of Orthodox Jews from visibly religious Hasidic communities to the so-called Modern Orthodox who participate more fully in secular life. It’s made Orthodox Jews a major force in donating plasma, which doctors hope to have a major benefit in the fight against the coronavirus.

The effort has also given Orthodox Jews – of whom there are about 700,000 in the New York area – a chance to recast the narrative of coronavirus around their community. Though every major institution of Orthodox life has shut down, there have been holdouts in the Hasidic community, such as schools and ritual baths that remain open, or funerals that have drawn hundreds of mourners. These outliers, as Orthodox Jews call them, have led to negative media attention and claims on social media that Orthodox Jews are spreading the virus and ignoring social distancing rules more than other groups.

Yonoson Rosenblum, in the Orthodox monthly *Mishpacha*, wrote in an article published Tuesday that

the plasma donation effort stood to create a world in which “all the negative news coverage of chareidi” – or ultra-religious – “Jews was suddenly replaced by images of chareidi Covid-19 survivors lining up in multitudes to give potentially life-saving convalescent blood plasma to those still battling the virus.”

Lebovits does not have medical training, but for years has acted as an informal advisor to friends and fellow Hasidic Jews who want help connecting to and speaking with medical professionals about their treatment. That’s how Lebovits met Shoham, as well as Dr. Jeffrey Bander, a Mount Sinai cardiologist who helped Lebovits begin directing Orthodox donors to the hospital’s plasma donation program.

Lebovits began working on getting Jews to donate plasma at the beginning of March. But when his wholesale operation had to close, since it is a nonessential business, he threw himself into creating a network of rabbis, religious organizations, virus researchers, health professionals and hospital administrators to educate the Orthodox about the benefits of plasma donation, test them, take their blood to spin out the antibody-rich plasma and pass it onto hospitals.

So far, Lebovits said, more than 3,000 people – mostly men – have donated plasma at blood banks around the region, and 6,000 more were being tested on Wednesday to see if they have the right antibodies. Lebovits said that he hopes to organize more than 45,000 people from the Orthodox community around New York City to donate plasma. Dr. David Reich, president and chief operating officer of the Mount Sinai hospital system, said that more than half of the donors to their plasma collection efforts have been Orthodox.

“The plasma isn’t just used for *frum*” – religious – “people or Jewish people, it’s for people in general,” Lebovits said. “We as observant Jews have an obligation to preserve life, and save life, and help as many people as we can.”

The effort has the literal and figurative blessings of the Orthodox establishment. Two respected decisors of Jewish law – Rabbi Yisroel Reisman and Rabbi Reuven Feinstein – have said that Jews are encouraged to donate plasma – and can even drive on Shabbat and holidays in order to do so. The Orthodox Union and Agudath Israel of America, the two largest Orthodox umbrella organizations, are sending messages to the

community about the science of plasma and its use in treating Covid-19.

Wealthy Orthodox philanthropists are also involved, according to Serle, in some cases buying machines for blood centers so they can take more donations. He declined to name any of the philanthropists.

Lebovits and his fellow volunteers have been working with health centers in Orthodox hubs to do the testing, to see if people have a sufficient number of antibodies to donate plasma, and then arranging appointments with and transportation to the blood banks that can receive the plasma.

Lebovits said he has sent tests from Orthodox hubs to Mount Sinai and Montefiore network hospitals in New York, as well as to small urgent cares that can send the tests to large labs and to Minnesota’s Mayo Clinic.

Once people are approved to donate, there is the task of finding space at blood donation centers, many of which are at capacity. Mordy Serle, a lawyer from the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn who is helping with the effort, said that New York Blood Center, a nonprofit that supplies blood to hundreds of New York hospitals, tells them at 5 p.m. how many slots they have open for the next day, and Serle finds donors to fill the slots.

The first community to get involved was Young Israel of New Rochelle, the synagogue that was one of the country’s early hotspots. Lebovits said that 40 Young Israel congregants donated plasma about three weeks ago.

The latest efforts have seen more than 120 Hasidic Jews from Monsey and New Square, perhaps the most insular Hasidic village in Rockland County, N.Y., take an entire day to travel to Delaware to get hooked up at the nearest blood bank that had the capacity to take them. Nuchem Lebovits, Chaim Lebovits’ 18-year-old son, was among the donors earlier this week; his father posted a picture of him on Twitter.

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On Sunday, the Mayo Clinic received 1,000 blood samples to test for antibodies from donors in Lakewood, N.J., a major Orthodox hub, to be tested for antibodies, according to Dr. Mike Joyner, who leads the convalescent plasma program at Mayo. The testing was conducted by Lev Rochel Bikur Cholim, a medical assistance provider in Lakewood. Refuah Health Center, a community health provider network based near Monsey, has processed more than 2,000 tests, Lebovits said.

Joyner said he expects to process thousands more tests from Orthodox Jews, and that the community’s contribution to making New York a center of plasma donation could help people across the country recover from the disease faster. He said he wants New York City to become the “Saudi Arabia” of supplying plasma.

Now that cases of the virus are starting to spread rapidly outside New York, Lebovits is trying to rally Orthodox communities around the country. He has already contacted people in Minnesota, Baltimore, Detroit, Montreal and other places to spread the word about the importance of plasma donation.

Lebovits, Serle and others have worked not only through Shabbat and the recent Passover holiday, but also through the kinds of life events that, in a normal world, would merit at least a moment’s pause. Serle said that two weeks ago he got on a conference call with Dr. Joyner, of the Mayo Clinic, 15 minutes after the birth of his daughter – at the urging of his wife.

Last week, on the last day of Passover, Lebovits’ brother Yitzchak died of cancer at 47. Since then, Lebovits has been working through the *shivah* mourning period.

“He personally asked, when I was with him the last time, that regardless of what happens to him, I should make sure to not stop this effort,” Lebovits said. The project has now been named for Lebovits’ brother.

When this is all over, Lebovits said, he’ll stop and grieve. But not yet.

“I don’t think I have the right to be selfish, when other peoples’ lives are at stake,” he said.

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Opinion

Fauda Is Our Reality. We Tried To Tell You – But You Called Us Anti-Semites.

By Kefah Abukhdeir

We used to tell you that Israelis were hiding among us, learning our habits, speaking our language, insinuating themselves into our lives so they could watch our every move.

You called us anti-Semites. Now you love *Fauda*.

The series, the third season of which recently went live on Netflix, is all about *mista’arvim*, Israeli intelligence operatives who dress up as Arabs. Those infiltrators of our nightmares are now heroes on Netflix, characters romanticized and beloved by the same people who never believed us, who silenced us for broaching the subject.

But it’s just fiction, you say.

It’s fiction to *you*.

*

Siti, my grandmother, bought me new underwear. They were huge.

I was in fourth grade and visiting Palestine from Georgia where my parents had moved. In the summers, they sent me to Shufat in East Jerusalem, as they would keep doing until I got older, to live with my Siti.

The underwear was purchased when I was due to fly back to the USA. The extended family wanted to send letters to my parents and the rest of the family in the USA. I was to carry the letters in the pocket that my grandmother would sew in the front panel of the huge underwear.

My grandmother was so proud she had found such a huge underwear that would fit me. The pack had a few pairs. Siti and my great-grandmother sat down and made a secret panel from one of the pairs, and attached it to a second pair. Neither Siti nor my great-grandmother could read or write, but they could measure and sew with the precision of machines.

My grandmother was always up before dawn doing chores inside and outside the house. She would milk the goats for fresh milk, gather fresh eggs from the hen,

bake bread, then drench the fresh baked bread she had made in olive oil and zaatar. Mealtimes were a simple cover thrown on the floor. The family would eat bread the on their knees [for me, the American granddaughter, utensils were procured].

I loved my Siti. Her simplicity would be Palestine for me.

And now, she had a mission for me. Of course, fourth grade me, clad in a Toys R Us light saber sword and barbie shoes, said yes.

Palestinians have never had a postal system. Even today, there is no organized postal service. There are companies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with offices where you can pick up letters and packages. If you happen to live in the nicer areas, maybe some mail will be delivered to your home. But there isn't any certainty about mail delivery.

But that wasn't the only reason Siti was sending letters in my underwear. She was certain her mail was opened by the Israeli authorities; when we received European-style envelopes, the seals were already broken.

Hence the underwear letters. My mission was clear: As I went through security at the airport and I was drilled in the usual way, I was never to disclose what was in my underwear.

Traveling to visit Siti and then traveling home, the airport was a place of nightmares. Searches could last for hours. Every article of clothing was taken out of my suitcase, including toys like my battery operated baby doll, confiscated and sent back to me later with its talking mechanisms diffused because security has checked the doll's wiring for a bomb.

This time though, I made it through the search without having to strip after they patted me down. My grandmothers had sewn me a thobe, and I was wearing it along with shorts and two pairs of underwear - one for letters, one for me. The thobe had caught the fancy of my assigned security detail. He asked me about it and who made it. In my North Georgia-inflected English, I answered him. I was very polite.

The letters made it through. My parents read theirs, and sent off the slew of others to other relatives in the land of the free, home of the brave.

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It's not just letters that have to be hidden. My other grandmother learned how to read after her sons married. She would show me the fabric she had hidden, solid colored materials of white, green, red and black, the colors of our flag.

Like Siti, she could sew masterfully. She had an American Singer sewing machine my grandfather had brought back from the USA. Before he died, her only son who never married had her learn how to sew the flag so he could fly it during processions. She kept the skills for the younger sons and grandkids. They would fly the perfectly measured and proportional flags she proudly sewed during intifadas to fly over the heads of soldiers.

The many searches of her home would never uncover the hidden store of fabric, or even the sewing machine. Siti knew how to hide things in plain sight. The machine flipped over and became a set table, and the fabric was in the *merchaz*, the stack of high-quality cotton and wool comforters she proudly had in the hollowed-out wall space, next to the corner where the radio was proudly displayed. The radio relayed programs I did not understand yet, from separated families in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, people who would never see their family members again but could send messages through weekly programs.

Some things we managed to hide. Others we didn't. Sometimes we managed to get mail, to keep our things, to have our events. Other times they would get shut down. The constant was the surveillance – surveillance everyone told us didn't exist. Undercover agents everyone denied. Traitors and collaborators hidden in plain sight that would get you called anti-Semitic if you discussed openly.

Then came *Fauda*.

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The show's cast of characters infiltrate Palestinian communities, living as close friends, only to betray Palestinians time and again. It capitalizes on Palestinian misery and romanticizes the monsters of our nightmares and disappearances.

In a small way, I guess it's good that now you know. But the truth is, it's almost unbearable to see this show get plaudits when we were not believed, when we were silenced, when we were called racist for pointing this out for decades.

When we would try to report the *mustarav* before *Fauda* fame, we were told we were anti-Semitic and racist because Jews don't do what we described: They do not go undercover into communities, learn our habits, our language, rile up our friends and family, entice them to acts of terror to gather intelligence about the most intimate details of our lives.

You probably also didn't know much about collaborators, people coerced in different ways to help the Israeli security forces police us. A Palestinian collaborator may need a job, or money or – worse – the Shabak might have information on their personal life, details they don't want disclosed that will be used to blackmail them if they don't play along. Sexual assault victims and members of the LGBTQ community are the most vulnerable and targeted.

And maybe you didn't know about the searches, that they sit outside your house and wait until everyone is home, and then come in with their guns and turn the house into a dump. They come into a ritually pure house with a dog. They rip our mattresses up and read our books and literature, looking for whatever incriminating evidence of resistance they can find.

And the phone taps that you used to call us paranoid for being afraid of! Now you know why Palestinians have a phobia about using the Israeli phone service Bezeq. We always knew we couldn't have private conversations on those phone lines.

So in a way, it's good you know. But it's also infuriating. You could have just believed us. Instead, you're now enjoying a show that's sensationalist entertainment capitalizing on the chaos of subjugating another people.

As you listen to the writers and actors give interviews about their creative process, I want you to think of the revolving door of captivity – lives shattered and lost, the administrative detention, the political prisoners and incarcerated children, the sex crimes that go unreported so that the victims are not targeted, their details fodder for blackmail.

Fauda is fiction. But it's only fiction for you. Next time, believe us.

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

Culture

The Dead Sea Scrolls Are In Self-Isolation – But They Mean More Than Ever

By Naomi Zeveloff

In the weeks since the Israel Museum temporarily closed due to the coronavirus, Hagit Maoz, a curator there, has been dreaming of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In one of her dreams, the Great Isaiah Scroll, the oldest full version of the Book of Isaiah, has somehow come loose from its case. The parchment, free, flies away.

Maoz told me about her dream in a phone interview last month from her home in Ramat Raziell, near Jerusalem. At the time, she was adjusting to the new reality of spending her days there, instead of the museum, where she has worked for 21 years. Since 2016, she has been the curator at the Shrine of the Book, the hushed repository for the museum's eight Dead Sea Scrolls. [The museum holds the most impressive scrolls; others are dispersed around the world.]

The Dead Sea Scrolls, which include some of the earliest biblical texts, are considered the most significant archaeological find of the 20th century. Maoz is one of the people charged with their safekeeping. Yet when I asked if the coronavirus had spurred fears over their fate – as her dream seemed to suggest – she brushed my question away. She knows exactly where the museum's scrolls are: behind five locked doors in a humidity and temperature-controlled vault at the Shrine of the Book. She put them there herself.

For most of their 2,000 year history, the scrolls were hidden in the Qumran Caves near the Dead Sea. Since their discovery in the 1940s and 50s, they have been on a steady path to celebrity. Before the pandemic, up to 3,000 people visited the Shrine of the Book every day. Now, no one knows exactly when the public will see the scrolls in person again. The museum's entire trove has returned to indefinite hiding. Among the many losses of the coronavirus, it is a small but disorienting one.

This marks the first time since a 2004 renovation that all of the scrolls have moved into the vault. Maoz made the

call almost as soon as she learned of the museum's closure. The shut down portends untold challenges for the museum – a dizzying loss of ticket and restaurant sales, around 200 workers placed on leave, a steep transition to online programming – but she saw it as an opportunity. It was a good time to clean the Shrine of the Book.

The Shrine of the Book, a shining white meringue-shaped building, was designed to emulate the lids of the clay jars in which the first scrolls were discovered. The interior walls are ribbed, making them complicated to clean. The facility last enjoyed a full scrubbing during the 2004 renovation. Since then, millions of people have walked through the entry hall, meant to evoke both a series of caves and a birth canal, and into the main atrium to marvel at the texts. "People who come from all over the world bring their dust with them," said Maoz.

In order for the cleaning to take place – it's a four-day operation conducted by four conservators – Maoz had to first place the scrolls in the vault. Thus, at 10:00 in the morning on March 15, Maoz and the museum's head of conservation, Sharon Tager, donned blue medical gloves and began the slow process of extricating the scrolls from the exhibit, piece by piece.

Each section floats in what Maoz calls a "cassette," a kind of protective box made up of multiple layers. The parchment lies between two pieces of Danish linen so fine that they are virtually invisible to the naked eye; to minimize movement, the linens are stitched together around the border of the scroll. Below the scroll, offset by a spacer, are sheets of absorbent material to regulate the moisture level. Then come two layers of plexiglass, one above and one below, also offset by spacers.

The cassettes are exhibited horizontally – a vertical position risks cracks in the parchment over time – behind three layers of glass in shatter-proof showcases imported from Italy. Under the eye of an armed museum guard, Maoz and Tager unlocked the first case and opened it, revealing a piece of the War Scroll, which tells the story of the seven-stage battle between the "Sons of Light" and the "Sons of Darkness." Working together, they lifted the cassette out of the case and placed it into a specially fitted acid-free cardboard box.

The pair then slowly walked the scroll section into the

vault, passing through five open doors to place it onto a shelf in the innermost room, so secure that only Maoz and three other museum employees have permission to enter. When they returned, they closed the case, opened the next one, and started the process over again. The vault is just 10 or so yards from the exhibit, but it took around 90 minutes for them to complete the task.

More than a storage unit, the vault is a kind of convalescent home. Their delicate parchment is sensitive to even the low light of the exhibit, so in typical times, the scrolls on display are rotated out every three months to minimize their exposure so they can "rest." With all of the scrolls now in the vault, they will have a long-deserved communal sleep. "They will rest in peace," said Maoz.

To call the coronavirus a new chapter in the history of the Dead Sea Scrolls would be a vast overstatement. It is merely a brief footnote to the modern story, which began in 1947 when Bedouin shepherds discovered the first seven scrolls. It was a discovery that forever changed Jewish and Christian scholarship, moving back the date on the oldest known collection of biblical manuscripts by about 1,000 years. It also deepened and transformed belief. Christians see the scrolls as part of the story of Jesus in the first century; Zionists view them as evidence of the Jewish claim to the land of Israel.

But if it is just a footnote, it is an eerily resonant one, harkening back to another, ancient period. One dominant theory holds that the scrolls – which date to between the third century BCE and the first century CE – comprised the library of a radical Jewish sect which decamped from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea area over religious disputes regarding purity, tithing, and the calendar. The sect vowed to return to Jerusalem to purify the holy city but its plans were foiled by war. In 68 CE, invading Romans wiped out the settlement en route to Jerusalem to quell the Jewish rebellion. According to this theory, members of the sect stashed the scrolls into the cave for safekeeping, never to return. Today, the scrolls have again been stashed, though this time, the invading enemy is not an army, but a virus. The scrolls may have gone back to the cave, so to speak, but they haven't disappeared. Several scrolls have been digitized by Google, using NASA technology. In 2012, the Israel Antiquities Authorities announced a free digital library where

visitors could peruse these images. Touted as “equivalent in quality to the original scrolls,” they obviate the need to go to Jerusalem to get a good look.

But people still go; the Shrine of the Book is one of the city’s major tourist destinations. Strangely, many visitors erroneously believe that the exhibit displays mostly copies; Tripadvisor is full of petulant comments by people disappointed not to see the “real” scrolls. According to Maoz, this fiction is partly spread by misinformed tour guides. In fact, there is only one replica on display, the Great Isaiah Scroll, which fills an eye-catching vertical case in the shape of a giant inkwell. The original Isaiah, too sensitive to stand upright, lies nearby.

The desire to get close to the scrolls, and only the real scrolls, is part of what has propelled a cottage industry of forgeries. In March, National Geographic revealed that all 16 Dead Sea Scroll fragments on display at the Museum of the Bible in Washington are fakes.

For many, seeing the originals is about more than checking off an item on a bucket list; it is an act of deep reverence. Adolfo Roitman, the head of the Shrine of the Book, told me that the scrolls have the power to transport people through “the tunnel of time,” where they can imagine the scribe in front of their eyes. The manuscripts serve as a “physical remnant” or a “metaphor” of a world that we can no longer touch. “There is no way to be a part of that history except for the fact that people have the chance to look at the originals,” he said.

Viewing the scrolls, in other words, has the potential to root us in our collective story, reminding us – in shades of sand-colored parchment – of the human continuum that stretches far behind us. It is a bitter irony that at the moment when we could use such a reminder – when so much of life feels anomalous and unfamiliar – the scrolls are inaccessible, locked away in the vault. We can still see the scrolls on our screens, just like we can still meet our friends, family, and colleagues over Zoom. But we know that it isn’t the same.

Yet we might find a shred of comfort in the fact that, for the moment, we are in the same position as the scrolls. They are sheltering in place for their own protection; many of us are, too. Maoz told me that she misses the scrolls. But one day, she will bring them back out of the vault. Most of us, at least the lucky ones, will get to exit the vault, too. At that point, perhaps we will all meet in Jerusalem.

Opinion

Let There Be Camp – Please!

By Jodi Rudoren

Let there be camp.

That is what I pray to I’m-not-sure-who each night of this pandemic. With every announcement like Thursday’s that school in New Jersey will stay closed at least until May 15, with every email message like the one I got last week saying “Eben’s Bar Mitzvah has been moved to Zoom,” with every news alert about a cultural event far in the future being made virtual (Burning Man!), I am just thinking: Please, please, please somebody find a way to let there be sleepaway camp this summer.

Let there be Shabbat song sessions where nobody cares if you’re off key as long as you’re loud. Let there be ga-ga games and tetherball tournaments, where the geeks get a chance to win. Let there be bug juice, gallons of red and orange sticky-sweet bug juice in too-small paper cups. Let there be late nights reading by flashlight under the covers, late enough to hear the counselors come in whispering the gossip of their evenings “out.”

Yes, let there be camp. No, not Zoom Camp. Camp is not virtual, camp is tactile. Camp is the antithesis of social-distancing. Camp is all about togetherness. Let there be camp camp.

Let there be mosquito-ridden outdoor movie nights and teva trips with hot dogs on sticks over open flames. Let there be job wheels that seem to always saddle the same sad sap with toilet-cleaning duties. Let there be fights about who gets the first shower, let there be clothes-swapping among the tweenage girls, let there be hand-holding on the walks back to the bunk after evening activity, let there be marathon rounds of Crazy Eights and Magic: the Gathering.

Lord, if you’re listening, let there be camp – if not as it is meant to start in July, at least for second session in August?

Let them lock it down tighter than ever. Let them turn lice check into a full-body scan. Let them cancel Visiting Day if they must, ban all packages – please, by all means, ban care packages! – even kill the beloved Trip Days. Let

them put more space between the bunks, put tents six feet apart on the lawn, send home anyone who sniffles.

[Let them cut back on the photographers, too, to save money – we can live without obsessively checking the Internet to see our little pishers smiling, or not, and just wait for the maddeningly cryptic and all-too-short letters, like our own parents did.]

Just don't cancel camp.

I know that people are dying, and the economy is flailing, and that it is only from a position of privilege that I could possibly be making this plea, but we need camp.

Yes, we working parents need camp – need to be able, just for a few weeks, to only have to feed ourselves; need to have our annual Chinese-restaurant outing with two other couples whose children are also at sleep-away camp; need a weekend away somewhere, anywhere, just ourselves.

But our kids *really* need camp. They need their space away from us to become who they're meant to be, to solve their own problems, to suffer their own setbacks – all in a society whose ruling authorities are mostly only a few years older. Our kids need to wear the same clothes for days on end if they want, eat nothing but cereal for weeks if they must. To make friends and break up and form cliques and feel left out and make other friends and not make others feel left out – but also to figure out how to have fun alone, sometimes, wandering in the woods or canoeing in the lake or making a lanyard in the shade.

They need to scrub a toilet once in a while, endure a cold shower. And to sneak a first kiss behind a tree, be part of a team that doesn't depend on athletic ability, learn the hand signals to the Birkat Hamazon. They need to sing their throats dry at a Shabbat song session, they need to hear a few Hebrew words like "Hadar Ochel," they need to meet an Israeli soldier, maybe even learn the meaning of Tisha B'av.

And the Jewish world needs camp. The way it creates a feeling of home rarely replicated in synagogue or school. That sense of calm that washes over everyone as they emerge each Friday evening in their whites. That intensity, that closeness, that warmth and pure fun – all essentially, intrinsically, tied up in Jewish identity and sealed with a singalong.

So let there be camp. Let the politicians argue over who gets to decide when to open what, but let whoever is going to decide about camp be a person who gets camp. [Did Dr. Anthony Fauci go to camp?] Let them remember that kids are the least vulnerable to this virus, let them be safe and smart but also sympathetic and something of a softie for the miracle that is summer camp.

Let there be color war – and please, call it Maccabiah – with its days of exaggerated competition down to whose cabin floor is best swept and whose ruach most authentic. Let there be an Apache relay – even if we can no longer call it that – in which the ability to whistle after eating a cracker or carry an egg on a spoon is as valuable as running fast and being a trivia whiz. Let there be true teamwork, and let the losers weep because it feels like it really, really matters.

Let there be that last day of camp, when we cry like we've never cried, hug like we've never hugged, trade phone numbers and photos, sign scrapbooks and sort sweatpants. Let the kids climb into the cars, tanned and skinny and hoarse and depleted, tears racing down cheeks but but also humming those Shabbat songs, and counting the days until camp can start again.

Jodi Rudoren is editor-in-chief of the Forward, and a proud alumna of Camp Pembroke [Outstanding Lower Camp Athlete, 1979] and Camp Yavneh [co-captain of the losing Maccabiah team, 1986].

News

I Went On Holocaust Pilgrimage As An Adult. A Virtual March Of The Living Isn't Enough.

By Julie Gruenbaum Fax

Through the dark forest, my parents and I inched our way over rocks and twigs, to a clearing surrounded by a short fence edged with unlit candles and flowers, some fake, some wilting. My feet pressed into the spongy weeds as our group gathered to hum a niggun, then say Kaddish.

Huddled near my parents in the damp autumn night, it was not hard to conjure the last moments of the hundreds of Jews in this mass grave.

I knew that visiting Poland would be hard. I had no idea that it would be so devastating, that it would challenge what I thought I knew about the war, and that it would force me to reframe my connection to my grandparents – all of them Holocaust survivors, all of them now gone.

My parents and I were, in a way, lucky. We took our trip in November, before the coronavirus pandemic. We went, primarily, to connect more deeply to my grandparents, to pull aside the veil of mythology that surrounded their lives before and during the war.

As it turns out, we were part of a trend.

Since the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of teens have embarked on pilgrimages to Poland and Eastern Europe, most on March of the Living. In the last few years, many more adults have been taking these trips.

This year, 1,500 adults signed up for March of the Living – triple the number of adults who went in 2017. Now all of these plans have been swept into the wave of coronavirus cancellations.

March of the Living postponed its program a few weeks ago. Organizers are hoping to bring groups in November, around the anniversary of Kristallnacht, in

addition to resuming the April 2021 march, if global travel is permissible by then.

Instead, this year March of the Living will hold a virtual ceremony with an April 21 broadcast featuring testimony from survivors and March of the Living alumni, addresses from Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and Holocaust scholars and activists, and a musical presentation.

But March of the Living organizers know that nothing can replace the experience of actually going – and I believe they're right.

"You can read the books and you can watch the movies, but I think standing on the soil is the closest you can come today to imagining the unfathomable," said Monise Neumann, who organizes and leads adult delegations for International March of the Living.

I came back from our seven-day tour of Poland devastated, astonished, even embarrassed, that in all my years of remembering and studying the Shoah – as the granddaughter of four survivors, a student of history, an author of books about survivors – I had somehow missed something. That it was so much worse than I ever allowed myself to think.

On our trip, which was not connected to March of the Living but followed an itinerary common on many of these journeys, we focused heavily on the Holocaust and tacked on one day to visit Sosnowiec, my grandmother's hometown.

We visited three of Poland's six death camps, mass graves in forests and mass graves in towns. We went to cemeteries in various states of disrepair, and shtetls with barely a trace of a Jewish heartbeat. At each stop, I wondered if I would be able to pull myself off the bus again.

Holocaust educators often focus on individual stories of victims or survivors, because students can relate more easily to one person than to an mind-boggling number like six million. In Poland, that distinction collapses. You see an emptied shtetl, a destroyed shul, a town square where 30 people were hanged, and you see both the individuals, and the six million.

More than anything else it did, my time in Poland disrupted my framing of the Holocaust as story of inspiration and survival – the living truth I saw in my grandparents' resilience.

They lost so much. My maternal grandmother lost her son, five years old when he was killed. They all lost their parents, some of their siblings, their homes. Most of their 20s.

But my father's parents, who escaped into Russia in the first weeks after Germany invaded Poland, met on the train to Siberia, and got married in a labor/prison camp. And as my mother's Romanian parents wandered across Europe after the war, they came upon an abandoned Torah scroll. They carried the Torah with them onto a ship that got diverted to Cyprus. They arrived in pre-state Israel with my newborn mother, and the rescued Torah scroll.

For me, and for many descendants of survivors – indeed, for all of us who know the war primarily through survivors – our stories are of redemption and triumph. In Poland, you lose the filter of the survivors' experience. You lose any sense of redemption or triumph. You see and feel just how much we lost.

While studies show that teens come back from March of the Living supercharged to fight against intolerance and for social justice, and that they commit themselves more strongly to Jewish living and to Israel, the impact of such experiences on adults is still to be studied. Neumann said she has witnessed adults – even Holocaust scholars and those who have been numerous times – internalize the trauma and come back as I did. Like the teens, determined to bear witness and to fight for a more just world. But also sadder, heavier, believing more strongly in an incurable, global, eternal anti-Semitism.

“Once you've been to these places, it becomes part of your DNA,” said Neumann, who has been on March of the Living 17 times, first leading teens for Los Angeles' Bureau of Jewish Education, then adults.

She points to her experience in the Children's Forest, where a mass grave holds 800 children who were taken from an orphanage and clubbed to death.

“You cannot virtually visit a site like this. Until you are standing there, you cannot understand how the trees, the birds talk to you. It is almost like you are coming there to tell the souls you did not forget them,” she said.

In Auschwitz, I walked between my parents on the train tracks, holding their hands as our ankles twisted on the stones between the ties. I saw the piles and piles of human hair harvested to make fabric, and wondered if my maternal great-grandmother's hair was among them. She was around my age when she, my great-grandfather, and my grandmother's five-year-old son were murdered there.

Standing inside the gas chamber at Majdanek, or looking at the unnaturally pleated grass that covers a field of bodies there, the depth of the hate seeped deep into my bones.

For the thousands of teens and adults who won't travel to Poland this season, that is what they are missing. Throughout our tour, I anticipated something of a reprieve from the horror in our final day, which we would spend in Sosnowiec, a city of 120,000 just a half-hour from Auschwitz.

There, our young Polish guide, Tomasz, had used my research to locate the cobblestone lane where my grandmother's apartment building once stood, her school, the spot of the shul where her father and brothers prayed.

And Tomasz found where my paternal grandmother likely used to ice skate, the Schön Palace, an old industrialist estate that was once surrounded by ponds, just across the river from her home. Ice skating, and owning her own skates, was one of the few positive memories of Poland my grandmother shared with us.

Now, standing with my parents in the shadow of the neo-Gothic mansion, I felt the wind blowing through my grandmother's hair as she swooshed across the ice. I felt her cold cheeks as she paraded back up the cobblestone lane, her ice skates slung over her shoulder, looking for her mother in the third-floor window. Her mother was always waiting at the lace-covered window for her four children to return.

Of course, when my grandmother came back to Sosnowiec after the war, her mother was not there. The woman then living in the apartment refused to give my grandmother the needlepoint she herself had sewn.

My grandmother left Sosnowiec for the last time in 1946, never to return.

And then we went back.

We swallowed our nausea at stepping foot on soil my grandparents considered cursed, because we sensed that touching the place ourselves was the way to bridge the divide between their living memory and our mythology. No virtual visit, no museum or class or movie, could have done what standing there did. In the streets of Sosnowiec, I found my grandmother, no less inspiring than she had always been to me, but so much more real, carrying so much more heaviness than I had ever fathomed possible.

Standing on the scruffy lawn that now covers the ice skating pond, I held out my arms and kicked a leg behind me, just as she might have.

And I knew that my foot was coming back down on soil that is soaked in blood and scattered with ash.

Standing there, I saw – I felt – how she lived and what she lost.

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Culture

“She Didn’t Like It Salty” – A Tale From The Zabar’s Lox Counter

By Len Berk

Her left arm was securely held by the health care worker who accompanied her.

They approached the fish counter very slowly and carefully. With total disregard for who was next in line, she looked me in the eye and spoke.

“I don’t want salty” she said in a belligerent tone.

“I don’t want salty,” she repeated.

She seemed to be at least ninety years old. I asked her if she wanted Zabar’s Nova and she replied, “yes, but I don’t want salty.”

I cut a small taste size from my salmon and handed it to her over the counter. “Taste this, you’ll love it. If you want salty you’ll have to go to another store,” I said.

“It’s good. Two half-pounds,” she replied with a pained expression.

They came weekly thereafter for repeat performances of the “I don’t want salty” routine.

Then, one day I cut her off at the pass. “NO SALTY FOR YOU TODAY,” I said.

She smiled.

That was the breakthrough and the last time “salty” was ever mentioned as a possible problem.

As the months passed, I managed to earn her trust and a fishy relationship evolved. We had repeated conversations about how “not salty the salmon was, this time.” On one occasion her health care worker – I don’t know her name so let’s just call her Olga – felt that her charge was, perhaps, asking too many questions and taking up too much of my time. Olga reprimanded her and it bothered me. The woman was obviously going through that stage of life when she could recognize the loss of her powers on a daily basis.

I told Olga that there was no problem with the questions and suggested that the woman was old and fading and that, although I knew how difficult her job could be at times, she could try to be kinder. On past occasions, Olga and I had discussed the difficulties of aging and she seemed to both understand and appreciate my advice.

My relationship with the old lady matured, and it wasn't long before we were discussing other types of smoked fish.

A year passed and, on her weekly visits to the store, she started appearing in a wheelchair.

A year later Olga came in alone.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"She's outside in the wheelchair."

"Why don't you bring her in?"

"She has Alzheimer's and it wouldn't be good if I brought her in."

I felt terrible. "I'm so sorry to hear such news." I tried looking for an upside. "But apparently her tastebuds are still working since you're buying smoked salmon for her," I said.

That was the best I could do.

"She must be well off," I said. "This stuff costs a pretty penny, \$24 a pound."

"Oh, it's the son; he pays for everything," Olga said.

"Is he a good son? Does he visit her often?" I asked.

"Oh yes, about three times a week. You know who he is, don't you?"

"No! Who?"

"She's Woody Allen's mother! I thought you knew."

I was flabbergasted. "You mean all these years I've been having lox talk with Woody Allen's mother and I didn't know who she was?"

It took some time for me to recover and then I felt so good because I knew that I couldn't have taken better care of her even if I had known who she was.

And you know, she looked just like him.

Len Berk worked for 26 years behind the lox counter at Zabar's.

News

For A Family That Faced A Medical Crisis Before The Country's, A Lesson In Radical Kindness

By Sarah Wildman

On the Friday after my daughter, Orli, received a new liver, in a new city, a doctor appeared in the doorway bearing a small sack. He was, it turned out, the husband of one my 8th grade Camp Ramah counselors—and also the head of the medical ICU. In the bag was... Shabbat, a vegetarian soup, a chicken dinner, sides, challah, and LED candles. The following week, we were no longer in the ICU, but on the transplant ward, when he appeared again, this time with a larger bag containing Shabbat dinner for four. Orli was, by then, awake and eating. She had requested we create a real Shabbat. Now we could.

As the world faces the coronavirus crisis, acts of kindness have been called "disaster altruism." People dust off old sewing machines and create masks for first responders and neighbors. Donations of PPE pour in to help ER teams. Meals are made for the homebound and dropped off without contact. But for us, a family who navigated a medical crisis well before the country faced its own, and endured a form of social distancing for the many months Orli has fought the cancer that encompassed her liver, I call it something else: radical kindness.

We saw this form of ultra-altruism, this radical selfless kindness, over and over at our home in Washington, D.C.

It is the sort of kindness that comes from a friend who not only shows up again and again with bags of groceries, but who texts you, from the store, insisting you send a list. It is the person who arrives with the waffle that a kid who hasn't been able to eat in a week craves. It is the time given by those who have shown up for hospital shifts, or come, unmasked, to quietly fumigate our rotting, abandoned, refrigerator. It is the weekly wellness check in that requires no response. It was the legwork done by an airline executive to reserve and secure flights, if we needed them, to get

between cities quickly. And it is the effort made by the people who carefully pack up your life in Washington and send it, piece by piece, to the city you temporarily live in. It is a kindness that becomes like air, essential. You can't imagine the fear that would exist were it to disappear, nor can you ask for it.

But in Washington, we had community. In Boston, where Orli found a match for a liver, we had none. We dreaded facing the ordeal alone, in a lonely Air BnB, in a new city. And yet, immediately, we experienced that same sort of radical kindness.

Not long after our arrival at Boston Children's Hospital, an old friend I hadn't seen in years turned up - three times - bearing bags of home-cooked meals [spanakopita and chocolate chip cookies, chicken pot pie and black sesame dotted bourekas] and some basic essentials [Olive oil! Chocolate!]. We heard again and again that Boston shuls were communicating to their members our story: a family, displaced for an essential organ, seeking accommodations and help navigating the city. We had offers of playdates for Orli's six-year-old sister Hana and offers of Shabbat meals. We had offers of a space for Hana to attend school, if she didn't return home, and we had offers of homes to live in. Empty nesters had extra bedrooms. One even had a home with a car we could use.

And then the virus hit.

Gone was our ability to go on playdates, gone was the chance of school, gone was our chance to live with other families. But the radical kindness remained.

The woman who had offered us a place to live, and a car to use, no longer had a place for us. Her kids were now home from college after all, and we were now in isolation. But when we showed up at the Butcherie, Brookline's kosher emporium, with a large call-in order for pick up, set to stock up the apartment we ended up renting a mile from the hospital, we discovered she had paid for all of it. She waved away our protests, saying only that had we been here at any other moment, in any other year, we would have been hosted again and again for Shabbat, playdates, and meals. [We have still yet to meet her.] The kindness of that gesture helped staunch the profound loneliness of this experience - the double isolation of the Covid-19

crisis and Orli's transplant.

Even our endless extra weeks in Boston were buoyed by altruistic donors of another sort, from our shul in Washington, Adas Israel. Two people sponsored the apartments we rented, sequentially, during Orli's initial post-surgical convalescence.

We have encountered radical kindness in the most breathtaking form as well: in all those who were screened as potential live-liver donors for Orli. People who offered to put their own lives on hold for an 11-year-old girl in desperate need. People who sat down with partners and wives, husbands and children, to say they would take four to six weeks off, to give life to a child.

We are so grateful for all of it.

But it is not always easy to receive such largesse. It can be exhausting to need so much.

Early on in Orli's liver cancer ordeal, her younger sister Hana articulated the discomfort. We were, by then, receiving meals every few days from members of their school and synagogue community. "I want to be a helper," she said one night, "not be the helped,"

I understood her. I've worried about the same. But one of my rabbis, Elianna Yolkut, recently shared something that helped me shoulder the fear of our need, as large as it is. "I have been for a number of years been firmly rooted in the idea that _chesed," she wrote on Facebook, using the Hebrew word for kindness, "is the most important lived concept Judaism offers us. It is meant to sustain us when we are struggling, guide us when we are lost, elevate us even higher when we are joyful. It roots us to our highest selves, to others, and to the Holy One."

Having experienced such radical kindness, such selfless giving, we've been given a window into not just what we can receive, but of what we too are capable. The thing is, I told Hana that night, we all get our turn.

Sarah Wildman is the author of Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind.

Culture

How Trump Uses Blood Libel Rhetoric Against 'Invisible Enemy'

By Aviya Kushner

When President Trump uses the phrase “invisible enemy” to describe the coronavirus, he is using the vocabulary of medieval libels against Jews.

While it may seem like we are in 2020 and not in 1348, this rhetoric about the “invisible enemy” has been heard loud and clear—by protesters outside the Columbus, Ohio statehouse this weekend holding signs depicting Jews as rats who are the “real plague,” and by the man who tried to blow up a Jewish nursing home in Massachusetts.

There is no other way to say it; just like “America First,” the phrase “invisible enemy” has an ugly history that is now being revived and exploited at the kind of moment when such ugliness thrives—when everyone is scared for their lives and their basic survival.

The idea that “someone” is “secretly” trying to destroy you in a way you cannot see – poisoning your wells, for instance, as Jews were falsely accused of doing during the Black Death—has now morphed into the idea that the coronavirus is a secret plan by “others” to destroy freedom.

Sound familiar? Sound like something previously published and distributed by Henry Ford?

“The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” claims to describe how Jews invisibly control the world. It’s supposed to be the “proof” of this “invisible enemy” idea.

“If ever a piece of writing could produce mass hatred, it is this one,” Elie Wiesel said. “This book is about lies and slander.”

The phrase “lies and slander” certainly describes what we are hearing on a daily basis from the President, from his “assurances” on the virus’s disappearance to

his attacks on Dr. Anthony Fauci to his repeated invocation of the role of an Invisible Enemy – in his capitalization.

But listen closely: the key element of the “Protocols” which can be heard now is the idea of secrecy, or in Trump’s parlance, “invisibility.”

Here is how the U.S. Holocaust Museum explains that aspect of the Protocols:

“In 24 chapters, or protocols, allegedly minutes from meetings of Jewish leaders, the Protocols “describes” the “secret plans” of Jews to rule the world by manipulating the economy, controlling the media, and fostering religious conflict,” the US Holocaust Museum explains on its website.

Fortunately, the ratcheting-up of the “invisible enemy” rhetoric by the President has been met with a swift response by editorial writers and anti-Semitism watchers who recognize historical strains of hatred when they see it. The Anti-Defamation League’s deputy national director, Ken Jacobson, immediately responded to Trump’s language with a detailed editorial on the connection between the phrase “invisible enemy” and centuries of dangerous anti-Semitic rhetoric focused on this idea of “secrecy”:

“The desecration of the Host accusation, the charge that Jews were secretly destroying the Christian religious ceremony, hence “killing Christ” all over again, was a product of this thinking,” Jacobson wrote, as he parsed the “invisible enemy” line.

And The Chicago Sun-Times ran a scathing piece with this eye-catching headline: “Donald Trump is the virus: His coronavirus response confirms how toxic he is for our nation.”

The President’s conspiracy theories in a time of national emergency are specifically endangering public health, S.E. Cupp of The Chicago Sun-Times explained.

“He’s allowed his followers to stoke nonsensical conspiracy theories about Dr. Anthony Fauci, an esteemed public health official, even retweeting a #FireFauci tweet,” Cupp wrote.

Sadly, as editorial writers rage, Republican lawmakers

are amplifying this dangerous rhetoric.

Representative Tom Cole of Oklahoma, deputy whip of the Republican conference, for instance, has “invisible enemy” on his website statement about the virus.

And as the economic effects of the lockdown worsen, the darkest part of the “invisible enemy” rhetoric may be Trump’s Twitter-amplified insistence that once the “invisible enemy” is gone, financial prosperity will take over:

This is another old canard that has led to bloodshed—the idea that the “invisible enemy” is the reason for your financial problems.

And of course, it sounds like a lift from the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” with its false assertion of secret Jewish global domination of the financial system.

While it has been disgusting enough to observe Trump blaming “foreigners” for the virus, he’s clearly setting the stage for blaming the economic collapse—a slowdown clearly caused by the shelter-at-home order required for public health—on the “enemy” too.

As the stock market seesaws, we should remember that the connection between “invisible enemy” and financial health is potentially as dangerous as this President’s shameful and repeated attempt to tie “foreigners” with physical health—which has resulted in attacks against Asian Americans and attempted murder of Jewish nursing-home residents.

It may be easy to dismiss those attacks as the behavior of “lone” individuals.

But as Elie Wiesel warns us, “mass hatred” is the deep danger, and one that is never as far away as history may make it seem.

With a president whose rhetoric has infected too many with lies and slander, from “protesters” to lawmakers, we can never be vigilant enough about mass hatred.

It is and has always been the most murderous infection.

Aviya Kushner is The Forward’s language columnist and the author of “The Grammar of God” [Spiegel & Grau]. Follow her on Twitter @AviyaKushner

Culture

Youth Essay Contestant: Finding Freedom In The Epicenter Of A Plague

By Ilana Drake

I had never thought about freedom until my freedom was curtailed. Last December, coronavirus was a mysterious illness halfway around the world. Although I had read articles about this illness, it remained in the background of my mind as I continued “business as usual.” After all, junior year was tough enough without having to worry about one more thing that might impede my getting from point A to point B. In New York, freedom to a teenager means access to the subway, the mode of transportation where you could enter a new land with just a single swipe of your student [free] Metrocard. During this time of innocence (and denial), I trudged through my first semester exams and paid close attention to the weather forecast in the hope of a snow day. However, as the weeks passed by, the virus infiltrated the foregrounds of our cluttered minds. New cases popped up quicker than popcorn kernels in a microwave, and mathematical models of the virus’s spread became the norm. My friends who attended independent schools had school cancelled, and, on March 15, Mayor De Blasio announced that New York City Public Schools would transfer to remote learning. As the case numbers went up and Purell, masks, and toilet paper were nowhere to be found, COVID-19 became real.

Before COVID-19, I would have given a more abstract definition of freedom and not thought about the specific domains that the word might encompass. I would have noted that freedom is being able to be who you are without having fear of feeling vulnerable by showing your true identity. However, over the past month, my physical ability to get from point A to point B, and to even have a point A and a point B available to me as exit and entry points, has been curtailed in incremental steps. For example, my new definition of

freedom has become the ability to walk outside with a mask, either wearing gloves or holding a travel size bottle of hand sanitizer, and walking at least six feet away from anyone other than my parents and younger brother. Yet, ironically, as my physical freedom has diminished, my emotional freedom has blossomed.

Prior to COVID-19, my school day spanned from 8am to 3:35pm, which, if you reach school early or leave later in order to get extra help from a teacher, is the equivalent of a full-time job. Because my school does not have lockers, I used to feel that I was on a loaded march with a 50 pound backpack, trying to get to the nearest rest stop (Friday). And, since my school day does not contain any free periods, I never got a chance to take off my blinders in order to allow ourselves to think. Through distance learning, my school day only lasts from 8am to 1pm. Like Gregor Samsa in “The Metamorphosis,” I have been transforming into a less reactive, and a more reflective, teenager while COVID-19 has penetrated and infiltrated our City. Instead of leaving New York City, like many of our neighbors, I have learned how to appreciate our freedom to write, to work, and, in my case, to hope and to dream.

My friends outside of New York City ask me why our family has chosen to stay and, there again, I realize that having a choice means freedom. Last week, Passover had a new meaning to me as we held a family Seder on Zoom. And, as we recited the Ten Plagues, I thought about Gregor Samsa once more. While Gregor had turned into an insect, he also felt emotionally liberated and began to understand his inner workings. So although I may not be as physically free as I used to be, I now have a greater understanding and appreciation of the components of freedom as well as health. Because of this, I have begun to embark on a journey in order to find emotional and spiritual freedom in the epicenter of a plague.

Ilana Drake is a 17-year-old student at the High School for Math, Science & Engineering in New York.

Culture

Coronavirus Has Made Flaunting Wealth Taboo. What's An Influencer To Do?

By Irene Connelly

When Arielle Charnas developed symptoms of the novel coronavirus in mid-March, she found herself in the same boat as many New Yorkers: Sick, and scared.

What happened next was less common. While the city's medical system was even then stretched thin and tests for the virus were – as they remain – hard to come by, within a few days Charnas had finagled her way into a test and learned it was positive. After several days of recovering in her four-bedroom apartment in Manhattan's Flatiron district, she sought more spacious quarantine quarters, relocating, along with her husband, nanny, and two daughters, to a rental home in the Hamptons.

Many wealthy New Yorkers have, in recent months, done similarly. But Charnas is different: She's an influencer accustomed to publicizing every detail of her life, and she documented every step of her coronavirus saga – from calling on a semi-famous doctor friend for help with testing to taking her first strolls in the Hamptons – for her 1.3 million Instagram followers. Each step of the way, fans could see exactly how her wealth mitigated the fear, uncertainty, and physical danger that have become the norm for many Americans in the era of coronavirus.

And they were not pleased.

Influencers accrue followings on social media platforms like Instagram by presenting curated, aspirational versions of their daily lives for public consumption. Many profess expertise in fields from skincare to motherhood, which they use to market products to their followers, often receiving lucrative sponsorships or free products from companies in exchange. But the coronavirus pandemic has made

the practice of flaunting a certain amount of wealth, previously essential for influencers, newly verboten.

And, at least in Charnas' case, audiences who previously welcomed a steady diet of high-fashion mirror selfies have are now infuriated by the stark difference between their pandemic experiences and those of the wealthy.

Charnas initially ignored negative comments, continuing to post about the loungewear brands she favored while social distancing. But as disapproval mounted, she stopped posting for several days, before resurfacing with a lengthy Notes apology in which she expressed remorse for her actions, but also explained how she saw each of them as justified. More than anything else, the apology reflected Charnas' genuine confusion at the backlash she was experiencing.

She's not alone in that confusion. A spin through the Instagrams of several Jewish influencers reveals a variety of approaches to handling the new influencer normal, in which the old rulebook – convey authenticity while providing a window into a world that, for most people, doesn't mirror any kind of authentic experience – has abruptly been thrown out. That change poses a fundamental threat to the influencer lifestyle: If they aren't better attired, better organized and better connected than the rest of us, who will want to buy the stuff they're selling?

Some have seriously toned down their online presence. Actress Jenny Mollen's Instagram, normally a montage of snapshots from fancy dress events, has featured only a few photographs in the past weeks. Instead, her feed is filled with typed quips about the challenges of quarantining with kids, to which all – OK, some – parents can relate: "Remember when the biggest threat to our daily lives were non-organic strawberries?"

In contrast, fashion blogger and perennial gala attendee Elizabeth Savetsky's Instagram is just as styled as ever. [Disclaimer: the Forward has previously interviewed Savetsky for our newsletter *Our Time*.] But in her captions, the influencer is opting for a more reflective, restrained tone. She's posted about drawing inspiration from observing Shabbat HaGadol, the last Shabbat before Passover. She live-streamed a

conversation with her rabbi on coping with coronavirus. And after he suggested that she and her family journal through this period, she posed with her daughter, pens in hand, in their spacious sunroom. (If that doesn't seem particularly restrained, consider that one post from late February featured the Valentino-clad influencer reclining in a sports car.)

Meanwhile, parenting blogger Ilana Wiles, who in recent weeks had all the symptoms of coronavirus but was never tested, has offered a tutorial in chronicling a case of likely coronavirus without incurring backlash. Wiles, who runs the blog *Mommy Shorts* and whose social media presence has generally been more informative than overtly envy-producing, announced her family's evacuation to their Long Island summer house in a blog post, forestalling criticism with a detailed explanation of their safety precautions and an acknowledgment of the privilege inherent in her decision. "We feel incredibly lucky to have the house as an option," she said, stressing that it was isolated even from neighbors.

As she prepared to leave New York, Wiles also posted candidly about stalled brand partnerships and the virus' toll on her own livelihood. As the economy slows, many brands are at least temporarily stepping back spending on sponsored content. While some influencers are independently wealthy, many depend upon that revenue to maintain their enviable lifestyles. "Financially, this is a scary time for me too. Not as scary as for some people, but still scary," she wrote.

When Wiles developed coronavirus symptoms, shortly after decamping to Long Island, her doctor advised her to isolate from her family in her room, informing her she wasn't a candidate for testing. With particular emphasis on her adherence to those instructions, she shared much of her ensuing experience on Instagram, posting reflections on the unenviable task of homeschooling a seven-year-old from behind a closed door. She marked the end of her quarantine with a funny TikTok in which she emerged from her bedroom, surveyed the mess that had accumulated in her absence, and retreated back to bed.

Her dispatches from quarantine remained as chic as her normal posts. Even in confinement, she maintained

an impressive blowout; her children studied at small Scandinavian-style desks, and I had to watch the TikTok multiple times to get the joke because the “messy” living room looked, by my standards, fairly tidy. But by focusing on widespread features of the pandemic, from the unavailability of tests to the reality of confinement in a small space, she successfully characterized her experience as similar to that of her followers. “Thank you for the dose of ‘real,’” wrote one commenter.

Some have suggested that the coronavirus will permanently curb our collective appetite to participate vicariously in more privileged lives. It’s easier than ever for influencers to appear “detached or tone deaf,” Flora Tsapovsky wrote in *Wired*: photos of plush quarantine pads hint at a level of comfort and security impossible to approximate by buying a scented candle or a pair of shoes. And in a time of massive unemployment and financial uncertainty, it’s hard to argue that broadcasting that comfort constitutes a meaningful service to followers. In *Vanity Fair*, Kenzie Bryant argued that the current moment has exposed a longstanding truth about influencers: “Their world is not set up to serve anyone else.”

But while Charnas, whose Instagram apologies met with mingled skepticism and heart emojis in the comments section, will have to keep her head down for

a few more weeks, and some influencers may be modulating their posts, others have shown that even in the era of coronavirus, it’s possible to proceed with business as usual.

Danielle Bernstein, founder of the fashion blog *We Wore What*, recently posted a photo of herself taking a work call in front of the Westhampton Beach home where she is waiting out the pandemic. It’s unlikely that many of her followers have modernist mansions at their disposal during this pandemic, or can afford the Chanel bag or designer eyewear she sported in the post. But, Bernstein noted in the caption, she was wearing trousers from the fast fashion retailer Zara. By buying them, followers could approximate her quarantine lifestyle – if only very loosely.

With over 20,000 likes, the post was a success. Commenters evinced admiration for Bernstein’s vacation house and interest in purchasing the one widely accessible item pictured. “Obsessed with this look and this house!” one commenter wrote.

“I need those pants from Zara,” another said.

Irene Katz Connelly is an editorial fellow at the Forward. You can contact her at connelly@forward.com.



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