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News

He made the call to cancel summer camp for 10,000 kids. Here's what he has to say.

By Aiden Pink

Ruben Arquilevich is a Jewish summer camp guy. He says his life was shaped by Jewish summer camp. Over the past three decades, he's been a camper, a counselor, a professional staffer and the director of a Jewish summer camp. He met his wife at Jewish summer camp. He sent his kids to Jewish summer camp. Now he's a vice president of the Union for Reform Judaism, in charge of North America's largest network of Jewish summer camps.

[We want to hear from you: The year of no summer camp](#)

And for the past few days, he had been keeping a heartbreaking secret, one that he and the rest of the URJ finally shared with the world in a [mass email](#) on Thursday: This year, there will be no Jewish summer camp.

Arquilevich talked to the Forward a few minutes after the URJ announced that all 15 of its camps – serving 10,000 campers – would be closed this summer because they did not think they could operate safely given the COVID-19 pandemic. He said he knew how sad this would be for thousands of Jewish children who've been cooped up at home, dreaming of seeing their camp friends – because his family was going through the same grieving process.

"There was something so powerful my daughter said," Arquilevich recounted. "She knows that we can't have camp together in person this summer, and that we should not have camp. And at the same time, she said, 'Dad, I would be okay with spending a year sheltering in place in order to have my one month at camp.'"

"It's hard for me to look at my kids without choking up,"

he added. “I can feel it from them. And I can feel it from all the young people out there for whom I know camp is the most precious experience in their young lives.”

Arquilevich said that he was drawing on one of his favorite moments from his time as director of Camp Newman in California as solace. On the final Shabbat of every session, all the campers and staff would gather at sunset. He’d ask them to look around at their friends and imagine the years and decades ahead, as they gathered to celebrate their friends’ weddings and family funerals, moments of joy and moments of loss. “This is one of those moments of loss,” he said.

Heartbreak for children and parents

In addition to the campers, some 3,000 young adults hired to work as summer staffers and nearly 1,000 adult educators, clergy and artists- and scholars-in-residence will also be affected by the URJ closures.

Summer camp is one of the most influential parts of American Jewish life – [studies have shown](#) that children who attend summer camp are much likelier to be involved in organized Jewish life as adults, even when controlling for their parents’ varying levels of observance. For many Jewish children, the camp experience – combining fun secular activities like swimming, sports and arts & crafts with Jewish prayer and educational projects – is the highlight of their year.

“For me, the real heartbreak of all this is these kids,” Arquilevich said. “Especially knowing that they’ve been sheltering in place, physically isolated from their peers for so many weeks, being together this summer would have been an ultimate gift.”

He added that he knew that making the call would be tough for parents too – both because parents can see the positive attributes that camps help children develop, and because having the kids out of the house for a few weeks or months would have been a very welcome respite. “I’ve been encouraging parents to hug their kids at this moment, and to listen, and to let them grieve, and to grieve with them,” he said.

Conversations had been happening for weeks between camp directors, board members, volunteer doctors and nurses, local health departments – who ultimately

would have had final say whether camps could legally open at all – and national experts from the American Camping Association and the Foundation for Jewish Camp. Ultimately, Arquilevich said, they decided a few days ago that they couldn’t in good conscience operate knowing that the novel coronavirus would still be prevalent. After making the decision, camp leaders have spent the last few days arranging the logistics of cancellation and preparing to help the children and families affected by their decision.



At the same time, he said, if new testing or other developments allow camps to open safely, they’ll “absolutely” pivot to opening back up.

Still, such possibilities are unlikely. The closures, he said would likely lead to “significant financial challenges” for the camps.

Financial consequences for camps

Summer camp tuition is often paid in installments throughout the year. At many camps, families have already paid most, if not all, of tuition already. Most Jewish summer camps have said that they will return the tuition to anyone who asks for it – but they’re urging families to consider letting them keep it as a donation, or at least allow them to roll over the payments to cover next year’s tuition.

Having to return too many tuition payments would likely be financially disastrous for many camps, [experts have said](#). Arquilevich said that the URJ as an institution had received some support from the Small Business Administration’s Paycheck Protection Program loan scheme, but that the amount they received “does not bringing us anywhere close to our financial need.”

Some not-for-profits and philanthropic organizations have stepped up, including the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, which set up a \$10 million donation

matching program for summer camps. Local camp directors have [appealed](#) to local Jewish Federations, philanthropists, and alumni for donations to help keep their camps solvent.

But despite the heartbreak and the likely financial losses, he added, “I’m really proud of our leadership and our organization for completely leading from a place of highest values and principles.”

The URJ system is not the only camp system to have announced closures. Two units of the Ramah system of Conservative Jewish summer camps [announced Thursday](#) that they would delay opening until at least June 30.



To keep campers and families connected during quarantine, many camps have dramatically increased their online outreach, including Zoom Havdalahs and Facebook Live classes in everything from Israeli dancing to lanyard tying. Arquilevich said that sometime next month, the URJ will announce plans to provide “virtual programming” to families who have already paid for camp this summer.

But even the most optimistic camp enthusiasts would admit that that temporary solution provides only a fraction of the real camp experience. Arquilevich said that if there’s any silver lining to the situation, it’s that the summer of 2021 will be even more magical.

“All the connections we’re creating right now will lead to the sweetest embraces on the planet when we can come together in person,” he said. “That level of appreciation and gratitude will be incredible.”

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News

The 10 Commandments of Zoom

By Rob Eshman

Jewish life is now, officially, Zoom life. The meetings, meals, ceremonies, seminars, concerts, debates, panels and classes that defined Jewish life have, thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, migrated to Zoom and other teleconference apps (but mostly to Zoom).

Unfortunately, too many of us aren’t quite ready for prime time. What’s the right camera angle? What about hair and makeup? Does lighting matter? It’s remarkable that so many members of the tribe that invented Hollywood are still not ready for their close up.

We’ve all learned, thanks to a viral video of [#poorjennifer](#) that using the bathroom during staff meetings is a no-no. But beyond the obvious faux pas, what can we do to crush our new Zoom life?

These commandments are intended to help everyone get on the same page. Download, send out with your next Zoom invite, or just, you know, carve them into stone.

I. Set your camera at or just above eye level.

There’s a reason movie monsters are shot from below: it’s scary. Do not give yourself the same angle as Frankenstein. Use an inexpensive telescoping phone holder, a stack of books, a standing desk—whatever it takes to get your camera level with your eyes. The only time you should keep your laptop of phone camera below your nostrils is when you’re Zooming your ENT.

II. Back away from the lens.

Web cams are wide-angle. The closer you get, the more distorted your face.

III. Don't be a total shlub.

Just be a *shlub* from the waist down. Yes, one upside to this cursed virus is casual Friday starts Monday. So taking a little pleasure in PJs is fine. But don't go full Lebowski. Wear flip-flops but a presentable blouse or

button-down. Hollywood stylists recommend solid colors for men, something bright for women. Suits are overkill on Zoom, but clean, pressed clothes that you'd wear to the office also belong on video chat. Shonda Rhimes' stylist Dana Asher Levine told the [Hollywood Reporter](#). "No one wants to see you in your pajamas or wearing a tube top – use common sense."

IV. Light yourself up, naturally.

Natural light is the best, when at all possible. But make sure you're facing a window with the light on your face. Having a window behind you backlights you into oblivion. If you need to use a lamp, position it for an even glow.

V. Check your face.

All that time and energy you'd normally put into your pants and shoes? Think like a television newsreader, and put it into your face. Wash, shave, pluck errant hairs and check yourself out in a mirror or camera before logging on. For the make-up inclined, Nicole Thompson, author of *Making It Up*, told [The Guardian](#), "highlighting is great, whether it's a cream or a powder ... it'll make things look fresh." Blush will quickly give your face definition, as well. If none of these appeal, check the *Touch up my appearance* box in Zoom's video settings menu. It's a soft-focus lens that smooths over rough mornings.

VI. Prep your set.

No one needs to see your half-eaten breakfast burrito from yesterday. Again, treat your desk like a newsreader's: remove distractions, clean up any jumble.

Dogs, cats and kids wandering in the background can be endearing, but too much cute is distracting to other participants. On the other hand, don't be too self-conscious: no one believes you're actually reading that copy of War and Peace casually propped open behind you. One happy solution is to learn to use Zoom's Virtual [background feature](#), which enables you to be

anywhere else but at your messy desk.

VII. Turn off your mic until you speak.

Zoom – unlike, say, your normal dinner-table conversation – only works when people take turns talking. When it's not your turn, mute your mic to cancel out your house noises. Same with Zoom's chat feature: we can see your side convos, so keep it subtle.

VII. Remember: We can see you.

Want to clean your teeth? Yell at someone off camera? Read or chat with a friend? Feel free to hit the "Stop Video" button momentarily.

VIII. Be prepared for Zoombombing.

Sad but true: as Jews have migrated to Zoom, so have anti-Semites. There are already many documented cases of sad-sack swastika lovers worming their way into and disrupting Jewish events. The [Anti-Defamation League](#) has a list of best practices for avoiding and responding to these incidents, including having a plan beforehand, recording and taking screenshots of disturbances, and reporting them to authorities. Be prepared.

IX. Everybody will be patient with your crap connection, once.

Yeah, we all hate our Internet provider. Yeah, we all have glitches. But if your connection keeps cutting out, freezing and crashing meeting after meeting, it's time to fix it. Not being able to hold a coherent Zoom conversation is like not showing up for an IRL meeting. You're just not really there. So look into range extenders like Amazon's [Eero](#), or call your provider, but get on it.

X. Learn Zoom.

Seriously. Stop what you're doing and take 10 minutes to figure out Mute, Camera, Hosting, and all the other tools *before* you go online. Then, graduate to [pro level](#). Last month, [Hilda Namm](#), a 94 year-old Holocaust survivor, mastered Zoom so she could hold her long-delayed bat mitzvah on the platform. You can master it too. Because, for the foreseeable future, Zoom is the new Jewish normal.

News

NYPD helped plan chaotic Orthodox funeral de Blasio blamed on 'Jewish Community'

By Ari Feldman

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio blamed “the Jewish community” for a Brooklyn funeral procession that broke social distancing rules, yet New York City police officers helped arrange the event, the Forward has learned.

De Blasio said he has been clear with religious Jews and everyone else that no gatherings will be tolerated until the pandemic has lifted its grip on the city. Yet the funeral attracted thousands of people, and raises questions about whether police have consistent guidance on how to address religious gatherings.

“It was strictly through NYPD’s permission,” said Moshe Weiser, a long-time liaison between police and the Hasidic community in Williamsburg, where the procession took place. “If they would say no, it would be no.”

The procession sought to honor Rabbi Chaim Mertz, a Satmar rabbi beloved for his deep piety and devotion to study – a traits he learned from his father Yechezkel Mertz, who with his wife survived World War II in Hungary before moving to America and founding Tolaas Yaakov. That’s the synagogue Chaim Mertz led until his death on Tuesday, at age 73, from COVID-19, according to Yitzchok Frankfurter, the publisher of the influential Orthodox magazine *Ami*, and a second-cousin of Mertz.

“He was dedicated 24/7 to serving God,” said Frankfurter. “It was a home of piety and nothing else.”

Chaim Mertz was a rarity among Satmar leaders: a prominent rabbi who didn’t involve himself in politics, building yeshivas or even the internal divisions of the community. Even after the Satmar group famously split in half in 2006, each faction led by a different son of the last lone Grand Rabbi, Mertz could be seen at weddings, bar mitzvahs and fundraiser dinners hosted by people on both sides. He presided over a small shul – a *shtiebl* – with standing room for at most 200 people. Under normal circumstances, his funeral would have drawn tens of thousands of mourners, said Yosef Rapaport, a Hasidic media consultant.

The funeral that occurred on Tuesday wasn’t nearly that big, and it only happened at all under the aegis of community liaison officers from the 90th Precinct, said multiple Satmar sources with knowledge of the plans. Former city council member David Greenfield said the same. Those officers have a close relationship with Hasidic leaders and the area’s Hasidic patrol group, the Shomrim.

The day he died, his family asked figures in Williamsburg’s Hasidic community who frequently deal with secular authorities – called *askunim* in Yiddish – to request from police, on their behalf, a short funeral procession. Weiser, the liaison, acted as the go-between.

The plan was to have the car bearing the casket proceed down six blocks of Bedford Avenue, one block at a time, ensuring that there would be few enough people on each block that they could maintain social distancing, according to a person familiar with the funeral preparations, who spoke only on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly. Shomrim and police set up barricades on the sidewalks, to keep bystanders from approaching the car ferrying the casket. Shomrim also handed out thousands of masks to people watching the procession, known as a *levayah*, or “escorting.”

A photograph obtained by the Forward shows two officers from the 90th precinct meeting on Tuesday afternoon with Shomrim members in the home of a relative of Mertz to plan the procession. Weiser said he was present at the meeting. The person with knowledge of the funeral procession plans said he was briefed on the meeting and recognized the Shomrim members.

The family arranged for loudspeakers to be set up along the street, so that people could listen from blocks away to eulogies made by the synagogue. But at the last minute, Weiser and others said, the police asked for the speakers to be taken down.



A meeting between local police officers and members of the Williamsburg Shomrim, at the home of a relative of Rabbi Chaim Mertz.

“Once there was no mic, it was very hard to do social distancing,” he said.

Dermot Shea, New York City police commissioner, said Wednesday morning that more officers were called in to break up the gathering, and ultimately 12 summonses were issued, both for violating social distancing warnings and for refusing to disperse. Video from the procession captured a chaotic scene, with police officers and Shomrim members trying to move the crowd away from the car carrying Mertz’s casket.

On Wednesday morning, however, de Blasio and Shea did not answer multiple questions posed to them at a press conference about whether police played a role in planning the procession.

“Everyone knows what is acceptable and what is not,” Shea said. “That event last night never should have happened, it will never happen again. You are putting my cops’ lives at risk, and it’s unacceptable.”

The NYPD declined to answer specific questions sent via email.

The messy break-up of the funeral procession is the latest incident in recent weeks to suggest that police are tacitly allowing “socially distanced” prayer gatherings in Hasidic neighborhoods. [In Crown Heights](#), men have prayed almost daily in front of the Chabad movement’s headquarters, at 770 Eastern Parkway, with police looking on, sometimes calling via loudspeaker for men to move farther from one another.

In an email shared with the Forward, police officers from the precinct that oversees Borough Park – a densely Hasidic neighborhood in South Brooklyn – told a man reporting a violation of social distancing at a ritual bath that the Department’s Legal Bureau was reviewing federal guidance on distancing rules and religious observance.

The email referenced a statement issued by Attorney General William Barr on April 14, which said that “government may not impose special restrictions on religious activity that do not also apply to similar nonreligious activity.”

The NYPD has not responded to multiple requests for comment about the Department’s legal guidance for officers when responding to religious gatherings.

In response to the funeral, de Blasio said Wednesday that the city would no longer issue warnings for violations of social distancing, and would instead issue summonses and make arrests in some cases.

The incident left some feeling betrayed by de Blasio, who has longstanding, mutually-beneficial relationships with many ultra-Orthodox communities, including the Satmar. They voted for him for mayor, and some supported his short-lived presidential campaign.

“No matter how well-intentioned the Mayor might be, words that could be seized upon by bigots and anti-Semites must be avoided at all costs,” said Agudath Israel of America, a large Orthodox umbrella group, in a statement, which also backed up the de Blasio’s claims about the importance of social distancing.

And Mertz’s synagogue apologized, saying it recognized that de Blasio was reacting because of his concern for the health and safety of Jewish people.

“New Yorkers walk the streets daily, thus, a funeral – we thought – shouldn’t be different, as long the rules are followed,” the statement read. “Unfortunately, this didn’t pan out, and NYPD had to disperse the crowds.”

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News

De Blasio's tweet about a funeral soured his relationship with the Orthodox – for now

By Ari Feldman

Four months ago, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's relationship with Brooklyn's Orthodox Jewish communities was solid as it ever was.

Amid a 20% uptick in anti-Semitic violence in the city, the mayor [announced](#) in December that his police department would beef up patrols in Borough Park, Crown Heights and Williamsburg. That same month, the de Blasio administration [was found to have delayed the release](#) of a report on education at the city's Orthodox yeshivas, a probe that eventually found only two of them in compliance with state standards. And in January, de Blasio [intervened](#) to return to prison a woman named Tiffany Harris, whose early release on bail after an alleged anti-Semitic attack had outraged Jewish leaders.

What a difference a pandemic makes – at least, temporarily.

The mayor's Tuesday night [tweet](#) slamming "the Jewish community" after Hasidic mourners defied social-distancing guidelines drew outrage from all corners of New York's Jewish world. Criticism poured forth from the Anti-Defamation League, which had been the mayor's partner on responding to the anti-Semitic violence with security and education initiatives, and from city councilmen like Chaim Deutsch, who represents a significant Orthodox population.

"My message to the Jewish community, and all communities, is this simple: the time for warnings has passed," de Blasio said in the tweet, which received more than 38,000 replies. "I have instructed the NYPD to proceed immediately to summons or even arrest those who gather in large groups. This is about stopping this disease and saving lives. Period."

The leadership of the Satmar Hasidic sect that planned the funeral protested, saying that the procession had been [coordinated with the police and was known to](#)

[City Hall](#). The mayor and his police commissioner did not address these claims in a news conference Wednesday morning.

In his press appearance, de Blasio offered an apology "if the way I said it in any way gave people the feeling of being treated the wrong way," but defended himself against accusations of hypocrisy and concern that he was singling out the Orthodox for condemnation.

"I understand politicians, everyone, who said this is like people gathering in the park," the mayor said. "It's not like people gathering in the park, it was thousands of people."

The funeral imbroglio illustrates the push-pull relationship that Mayor de Blasio has had with the Orthodox communities of New York City during his mayoralty and throughout his time in public life.

On the one hand, he faces allegations that he gives religious Jews special treatment in exchange for their votes and donations - that the Orthodox see few consequences for skirting state and city policies like those governing [secular education in religious schools](#), [measles vaccinations](#) and a risky circumcision practice known as [metzitzah b'peh](#).

On the other hand, he has sometimes faced criticism from the same community he works to please, and that's what happened on Wednesday. Jews have periodically accused his administration of [disproportionately focusing](#) on Jewish misdeeds, such as when he [complained about their low vaccination rates](#) while other communities with similar lack of herd immunity went uncriticized. Others have argued that he was slow to combat anti-Semitic assaults in Brooklyn when (or perhaps because) it became clear that the crimes were largely perpetrated by young men of color and not white nationalists. In the long run, however, his relationships with Orthodox

leaders are likely still solid, despite the sourness occasioned by his Tweet about the funeral.

The mayor's relationship with New York's Orthodox world goes at least as far back as 1999, when he was working as a campaign manager to then-United States Senate candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton. De Blasio did

damage control after Clinton was photographed greeting the wife of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat with a kiss. [A call to Rabbi Yitzchok Fleischer](#), the founder and executive director of an organization associated with the Bobover Hasidic dynasty, smoothed things over and established a relationship that would serve – and sometimes torment – de Blasio for the rest of his political career.

In 2001, de Blasio ran for and won the City Council seat that governs District 39, which includes the heavily Orthodox neighborhood of Borough Park, after [visiting synagogues](#) – [even at midnight](#) – to speak to future constituents.

On the city council, de Blasio made a good name for himself among religious Jews by defending a program aimed at helping parents afford childcare and after-school programs, known as “Priority 7” or “P7” vouchers, that [overwhelmingly benefitted](#) Orthodox families in Borough Park, Williamsburg, Crown Heights and Midwood.

He endeared himself to Orthodox New Yorkers again, during his campaigns for mayor, and during his time in office – and in return, he received much-needed support.

In 2013, a prominent Satmar leader, Rabbi Moishe Indig, threw a [fundraiser](#) for de Blasio and helped deliver what's estimated to be 7,500 votes in the Democratic primary from the Aroni faction of the Satmar community.

In exchange, Politico [reported](#) at the time, de Blasio agreed to overturn a Bloomberg-era requirement that parents sign a consent form acknowledging the dangers of metzitzah b'peh, oral suction after circumcision, that can spread sometimes fatal cases of herpes to baby boys.

In 2015, the mayor [signed a bill](#) that would reimburse private and parochial schools for the cost of hiring unarmed guards to the tune of \$20 million each year. That bill was supported by the Orthodox Union.

And most recently, in December, a joint [report](#) released by the New York City Department of Investigation and the Special Commissioner of Investigation for the New York City School District accused the mayor of “political horse-trading” to delay the release of a damning report about the quality of instruction for secular subjects like English and math at Orthodox yeshivas. The report called out a “generally accommodating approach” to scheduling school visits and negotiating with the lawyer representing the yeshivas.

Naftuli Moster, the head of YAFFED, an education advocacy organization that originally brought forth a complaint about secular education at yeshivas, said de Blasio has taken part in a “continued effort to shield Hasidic leaders from criticism.”

But despite this history, de Blasio got hit hard by a range of critics after Tuesday night's social media storm. The next day, bleary-eyed and fiddling with a pen, de Blasio sought to turn the page on the episode. “Again, this is a community I love,” he insisted.

And it's likely that the community still loves him back. Organizations that criticized him for giving fodder to anti-Semites, like [Aqudath Israel](#), still took pains to back up his points about the importance of social distancing. And even the synagogue of the deceased rabbi tried to help smooth things over, saying it recognized that de Blasio was reacting because of his concern for the health and safety of Jewish people.

“New Yorkers walk the streets daily, thus, a funeral – we thought – shouldn't be different, as long the rules are followed,” the synagogue said in a statement. “Unfortunately, this didn't pan out, and NYPD had to disperse the crowds.”

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Opinion

De Blasio is stoking anti-Semitism. He's not alone.

By Batya Ungar-Sargon

On Tuesday night, Mayor Bill de Blasio declared war on New York's Jewish community. The very same mayor who [went to the gym](#) the day after closing New York City's schools, restaurants, and bars and who [took a stroll](#) in Prospect Park on Saturday, [as news was breaking](#) that 28 New York City schoolteachers had died from the virus, has ventured out yet again into a crowd. This time, he went to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where a large number of Satmar Hasidim had gathered. The mayor went to personally "ensure the crowd was dispersed," the mayor explained [in a tweet](#).

And then, he took things one step further.

"My message to the Jewish community, and all communities, is this simple: the time for warnings has passed," the Mayor tweeted. "I have instructed the NYPD to proceed immediately to summons or even arrest those who gather in large groups. This is about stopping this disease and saving lives. Period."

The tweets would have been outrageous coming from any elected official. Certainly, the city has the right to police people breaking its stay-at-home ordinances. Protecting first responders and flattening the curve are absolute values in the public interest. But the mayor painted a whole community with the brush of its offenders – portraying the *entire* "Jewish community" as diseased malefactors requiring police intervention to stop the spread of the virus.

It was grossly anti-Semitic, casting New York City's 1 million Jews with the brush of a few hundred. And it was doubly offensive given the mayor's failure to protect Orthodox Jews last year as they suffered daily physical attacks on the streets of New York City.

Unsurprisingly, de Blasio had no opprobrium for the thousands of New Yorkers who, like himself, were tempted by the weekend's warm weather to enjoy the city's parks.

Couple all that with the fact that Satmar Headquarters [is claiming](#) that the mayor's office initially approved the funeral and coordinated it with the NYPD, and you have a truly shameful debacle.

The mayor is being roundly denounced, and rightfully so. But de Blasio's ugly sentiments do not stand alone.

From the beginning of the outbreak, Orthodox Jews have been uniquely cast by the media as the villainous spreaders of the coronavirus, despite there being little evidence to substantiate that claim. Indeed, while being beaten up on the streets of New York for a year, Orthodox Jews couldn't get anyone to pay attention to them. Now that they can be cast as villains rather than victims, [the media can't seem to get enough of them](#).

Though Brooklyn's Prospect Park is filled with families every time the weather breaks 60 degrees, though other communities have struggled to convince their members not to attend funerals, though New Yorkers just keep finding their ways into big crowds, it's pictures of Orthodox Jews in black hats that people keep posting and sharing - voraciously - on social media.

Certainly, some Orthodox Jews have flouted the rules; they deserve censure and even intervention. But breaking the rules to give respect to the dead – one of the most important tenets of the Jewish tradition – is certainly of a different moral order than breaking the rules because you're worried about your expanding waistline. And the amount of attention – the *kind* of attention – that Orthodox rule-breakers have attracted has been completely different from that of any other community.

Compare the coverage of Orthodox funerals – photos of which are breathlessly shared on social media – to the (correctly!) mournful coverage accompanying [a southern funeral](#) with 200 attendees that turned into a

“super-spreading event,” or the [compassionate concern](#) for communities in New York struggling with the never-ending feeling of isolation.

Two New York Times stories on April 9 provide an instructive compare-and-contrast. One article was headlined “Fear and Frustration Increase With Spike in Cases in Jewish Enclaves.” It was about Monsey, a hamlet in upstate New York, where cases were spiking, and the reporters started by saying that Monsey had the highest per-capita rate of infection in the state – a number that would no longer be accurate just a week later, as Ari Feldman [reported in The Forward](#). “The source of the problem,” The Times explained, “lies in small pockets of the county that are home to a large number of Orthodox Jewish residents, some of whom, according to authorities, have refused to adhere to social-distancing requirements.”

While Orthodox Jews were cast as the “source of the problem,” absent any substantiating data, another article in the same edition of the paper bemoaned the “Losses Sweeping Immigrant Enclaves in Queens.” This piece explored reasons immigrant communities were suffering so much loss from the virus, including overcrowding, high rates of poverty, and a big language barrier – all things that are equally true of the Orthodox community, but that American journalists almost never bother to mention.

Perhaps this would make sense if there was evidence that Orthodox Jews were worse offenders. But while the infection rates were highest in Monsey at the beginning of April, they were quickly eclipsed by [Garnerville and West Haverstraw](#). Purim, the religious holiday blamed for the spread, occurred on March 10 this year – five days before New York City closed restaurants. Three days after the rabbis of Lakewood, N.J., were issuing official edicts to their followers to stay home, Mayor DeBlasio went to the gym.

After a year of mostly silence from the news media as Orthodox Jews were attacked daily, the lurid excitement at casting a community in mourning as diseased predators is sickening.

Mayor DeBlasio should be ashamed. But so should

those of us in the media who have furthered the canard he stumbled into.

We can all understand how the virus can spread in poor immigrant communities and why ethnic groups in the South attending funerals deserve our compassion. It’s telling that we can’t extend the same to Orthodox Jews.

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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.

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Opinion

“Unorthodox” is a dangerous, misleading fairy tale of transitioning from the secular world

By Frieda Visel

Before I left the Satmar Hasidic community in Kiryas Joel, I believed my journey would be similar to that of Esty in the Netflix miniseries “Unorthodox.”

Like Esty, who is immediately welcomed into a circle of diverse and good looking Berlin musicians, I'd be easily embraced into the secular social milieu. Like Esty, who gets a scholarship on the basis of her raw talent, I'd get special academic privileges because leaving the community with a child shows fortitude. And like Esty, who is taken out to lunch by a professor from a prestigious conservatory and enjoys a sexy fling in Germany, I thought people who were kind to me would be uncomplicated in their motives; surely, I reasoned, no old geezers or men on the prowl would take sexual advantage of my vulnerability.

Why did I believe this?

Obviously, I was very naïve. I did, after all, spend the first 25 years of my life in a sheltered world. But I also believed this because it was how secular media portrays it, and the secular story was the only version I had.

Imagine that you are a sheltered Hasidic woman with few contacts on the outside. Now imagine that you watch “Unorthodox” and see how much the world will appreciate you, largely because of your exotic backstory. Now imagine further that everywhere you go in your religious garb – your scarves and long, old-fashioned skirts and the little handbags and the stroller – you are told by outsiders that your story is amazing. This happens to everyone from the community that I know; outsiders make assumptions based on our religious clothing and then talk down to us as if we are children. Let's say you are on the Metro North and an older couple sits next to you, and you get into a bit of a conversation. You tell them you were just shopping at Macy's.



“My, you are so intelligent!” they'd say. “I'd never have imagined by the way you look...”

And even though the condescension comes through, let's be honest, this kind of flattery would get to your head too. And so, you'd come to believe that you are special, and that when you leave you will be treated as such.

Another reason why I believed doors would open easily for me was because even in the Hasidic community, I was always told I was very creative. When I was a kindergartner, my teacher stopped the entire class to show them my artwork of some grapevines. How I glowed! It's my first memory of many. My mother always went on to everyone that “My Freidy is so creative!” How I shone every time! I didn't get many compliments – I was bad at prayer, at chores, at being nice and mature. But this one talent was mine, and I assumed it would carry into the secular world. I figured – I'm a very hard worker, I'm creative, I have a unique perspective. Surely the world will ensure that I can contribute!

Well... It's been ten years since I left the Hasidic community. Ten years. It's been a very hard ten years.

I often felt like I was going under. I sometimes worked four jobs at once just to pay the bills. I'd Airbnb a spare room, tutor, work for an insurance firm and give walking tours of Hasidic Williamsburg. I was so exhausted that I felt I had burned through my creative spark and became a hollow shell.

I want to tell anyone who watches "Unorthodox," Please don't think that this is how the story goes. I lived it, I watched many others live it. This is not how leaving works.

For one, we ex-Hasidic women are very naïve in our interactions with men. And boy, do we learn how to navigate these interactions the hard way. In a realistic depiction, the professor who takes Esty out for a meal would probably expect sexual favors in return for his assistance. Many of us have learned the hard way that people who we thought truly were trying to help us were suddenly standing far too close, breathing down our newly-exposed collarbones and telling us in so many words that either we giggle and go along, or the favor-well and compliment-well and the friendship-well – all the good wells will dry up. And we will be left high and dry and more vulnerable than ever.

I can tell you that it took me many years to face these scenarios and even hear myself think, hear myself say, "This is not what I expected of this relationship." And until then, I would stand there with a man and his ultimatum and a dark, wrenching confusion would rise up from within me. And because it didn't make sense, I torturously suppressed it. The real ends of these stories are much darker than Esty's.

Another thing that happens when we leave is that we stop looking "exotic." This is a relief. We learn to hide the muffin top that spills out from jeans and to buy funky glasses and cut our hair very short or grow it very long, and we suddenly are perceived as normal. Hallelujah! The longer I have been out, the more I have forgotten that I'm different, and this new normal feels, well, normal. But that doesn't change the reality that I left at 25 with sole caregiving responsibilities for a young child, and that I was about as advanced in my

academic path as my 14-year-old son is today. [One could argue that my son now has more tools to make it in the secular world than I had when I left.] Part of the reason is because Hasidic education is inadequate. Part of it is that the secular world has so many layers of gatekeeping that it's very hard to succeed without a head start.

And you know what? The same people who condescendingly told me how utterly brave I was didn't want me to cut ahead of them for a scholarship or an opportunity that they worked their entire academic lives for. I understand them, but I also wish they would be more honest with themselves about how generous the outside world is to those from a different life.

I think outsiders tell themselves a fanciful story in which they – the secular people – are the heroes. Notice how in "Unorthodox," everyone in Berlin is so kind, tolerant, open, forthcoming. This flattery is for the viewer. It tells the viewer, "Esty is a hero but more importantly, so are you." I know from experience that many people will, on an individual level, feel for those who leave and mean well. But these individuals live and support a system that doesn't empower people like Esty to succeed. No matter how kind an individual might be, if the scholarship system and the many levels of red tape make success unaffordable and inaccessible, then individual kindness loses its potency.

There is plenty of individual kindness in the Hasidic community. But there, like here, it is the system that makes the real difference. And here, like there, the system is unforgiving to the ex-Hasid.

Here is the irony [or perhaps hypocrisy] in this: In "Unorthodox," Esty is given an incredible chance despite her very unpolished talent. The secular world has opened a door on the basis of her inexperience and challenging background alone. But "Unorthodox" was actually produced by a German TV crew with a largely Israeli cast. It took our story – the one story that might have helped us break through any doors – and used it for the ambitions of a team almost entirely comprised of outsiders.

I know that many of us from the community want to write, to act, to direct, or like Esty, to go into music.

We have no contacts. For the few contacts we do have, we are vulnerable to being taken advantage of. And journalists, artists, writers consistently ask us for free labor so they can use our stories for their own ambitions. We give them our time and souls because we think it will open doors. But all it does is open doors for the journalist or the screenwriter who paid us in a few profuse thank you's.

So the reality is that not only did "Unorthodox" not play out its own mythology; it did the opposite. Instead of opening doors, it's a show made by people with no skin in the game who borrowed a story and moved on, with little regard for its effect on the ex-Hasidic or Hasidic individuals from whom it borrowed.

For me, 10 years has made me less naïve and more feisty. I learned that life after Hasidism won't be like the fairytale but it can be other things. My life now has much more room for my assertiveness, my opinions, my full messy self. I learned that it's okay to stand up for myself. I learned that it's okay to not be so nice. Unlike Esty, who is forever indebted to all her Good Samaritans and naively takes all the favors, I have a handful of loyal friends. And the rest of the time, I stand up for myself.

My life outside has been very hard. It shouldn't be this way. I hope that those after me can have an easier time. But I have also enjoyed an unexpected delight: I get to be complicated, opinionated, rough around the edges. I get to be a much more realized woman than the version in which I am indebted to everyone around me. And for this, all my struggles have been worth it.

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Culture

The Forward investigates: Is Doron from 'Fauda' hot?

By PJ Grisar



We need to talk about Doron's body count.

Not the many, many terrorists the antihero of "Fauda," played with bracing intensity by the former special forces soldier Lior Raz, has dispatched over three seasons. I'm talking about Doron's record with women. Against walls and kitchen counters, and in the war room within earshot of his unit: The dude has a lot of sex.

A member of an elite undercover unit, Doron begins the show married to Gali, a Sabra stunner who – tired of his antics – is having an affair while shielding their children from his influence. He later hooks up with a beautiful, fiercely intelligent Palestinian doctor, Shirin Al Abed. And in the latest season, Doron gets with the much-younger commander of the Shin Bet's Gaza desk, the tastefully-tattooed Hila, who is just as daring as he is and whose presence prompts the men on his team to swap some HR-violating remarks on her figure. [The women of "Fauda" are objectified far more than Doron ever is.] But the ruggedly- and

classically-handsome soldiers in Doron's company assume they don't have a chance with her; they know that she has her eyes on Doron. We are meant to accept their eventual tumble in the sheets as inevitable.

But I, a heterosexual male, wondered: Should we? Do people who like men really like Doron, a bald, 5' 7" guy with a 7 o'clock shadow, a sizable scar across his forehead and a not-inconsiderable double chin?

His success with women suggests a different mismatched couple dynamic than we typically encountered on television. In American sitcoms – say “King of Queens” or “According to Jim” – schlubby comedians reliably marry and begin families with petite women several years their junior. Those men are funny, and the shows at least attempt to be, so we all recognize the pairings as a bit of a joke.

Doron has more in common with Vic Mackey from “The Shield” or Tony Soprano: He's known for being dangerous, not entertaining. We know his conquests are meant to be taken seriously. And so Raz, a stocky spark plug with gleaming green eyes and a swarthy complexion, is an untraditional sex symbol, one whom David Remnick, editor-in-chief of The New Yorker, once [physically likened to a trash compactor](#).

In an April 20 Zoom panel with Jewish Insider, Raz, who co-created “Fauda,” admitted that he's hardly a leading man out of central casting. “You can see me, I'm a bald guy, not with the curly blond hair,” he said. “I'm not the typical hero that you cast all the time.” He framed his against-type casting as an boon for people that resemble him, claiming there are “so many men, now, calling me and writing me. They're bald and have a little bit of beard. They're saying ‘now my wife finds me attractive again because of you.’”

To test this formulation I asked my mother, who is married to a short, bearded guy with a shaved head, if she finds Doron attractive.

“He has an appeal,” my mom said over text. But she added that she prefers Steve, a wiry member of Doron's team played by the very good-looking Doron Ben-David. Later, she updated me, noting that my father –

the aforementioned short bearded guy – thinks that Doron is “sexy.”

I turned to colleagues, who said, after scanning Google images – for a Jewish publication, the Forward is weirdly short of “Fauda” watchers – that he wasn't their type. Other people in my life who are attracted to men responded to Doron's [kavorka](#) with tepid enthusiasm at best.

Something wasn't lining up. “Fauda” positions Doron as irresistible; the response from my friends was a solid “meh.” So I turned to the internet to see if reality held up to fiction – surely someone, somewhere, would come through with the “Doron is hot” hot take.

My first find: A [2017 article](#) from Heeb that ranked characters on Israeli TV by their “f**kability.” Doron made the top 10 list, ranked at an ambivalent number eight. “Doron, the star of Fauda, is a crazy counter-terrorist operative addicted to violence and also not the best looking feller around, but DAMN does he have that *je ne sais quoi*,” the article's author, Sarah Rosen – creator of the blog Porn4Jews and its accompanying book, [“Kosher Porn”](#) – wrote. I asked her – what exactly is his *je ne sais quoi*?

“I lived in Tel Aviv for a couple of years and my roommate and I had a heated debate about his hotness,” Rosen, a millennial, said.

“He's not exactly my type, but he sure was my roommate's type, and she told me that he was the epitome of like macho, masculine hotness. That Israeli machismo archetype. I was really surprised that she was into him because she was like a hipster and I thought she would go for more of this indie poet type. But she loved this guy.”

Could this be a cultural divide between Israelis and Americans, I asked, realizing my lack of Hebrew might be limiting my hot Doron hits.

“I don't think that's true based on my very anecdotal research,” Rosen said. But, she said, she's since begun working on a TV project about an American Jew in Israel with Raz and “Fauda” co-creator Avi Issacharof, meaning that she's seen Doron – or at least the man who plays him – in the flesh.

“He has the *je ne sais quoi* in person, too,” she said.

Mike Hale of The New York Times was of some help, arguing in an [April 16 article](#) that Doron, alongside Harry Bosch of the eponymous Amazon series, presents “the platonic ideal of a tough guy.”

“[A]t the core of each is that same laconic hero, the volatile outsider who bends the rules [in Harry’s case] or shatters them [in Doron’s] in order to uphold a status quo that’s showing serious signs of wear,” Hale wrote. He went on to enumerate the men’s shared qualities: “the defensiveness, the loneliness, the distrust of bosses, the attraction to similarly hard-edged women” and “a cold stare that would make granite blanch,” before concluding that, in their Sisyphean insistence, these men present a “comfort” for trying times.

But does that tough obstinance make Doron hot? At this point I became desperate, tweeting out an appeal for answers to my urgent question. I received a token response from a veteran – an older gentleman – writing to say that “Doron is effective and a loose cannon simultaneously.” So, kinda.

Searching Twitter for combinations of “hot,” “sexy,” “Fauda,” and “Doron” found only a handful of relevant results, all but convincing me that Doron’s mojo is in fact, far more muted than the show would have us believe. In a last-ditch effort, I followed up with one of the tweeters, Amy Alkon, an advice columnist whose body of work promised a unique rationale for Doron’s sensual draw.

“He rings all these evolutionary bells for women,” said Alkon, 56, author of [“Unf*ckology: A Field Guide to Living with Guts and Confidence”](#)

“Women are commitment skeptics,” she said. “Female emotions push us to look for men we can count on – who are willing and able to invest in the children we might have with them.”

For Alkon – who admitted her take might not be “woke” – Doron fits that expectation. While the show has portrayed him as a less-than-suitable parent, she thinks he broadcasts the capacity to provide the protection that she says women are programmed to find attractive.

Plus, the fact that he’s a firebrand who often goes rogue also indicates that he is capable of intense love and follows a code of his own design – a serious turn-on.

“Powerful people can afford to break the rules,” Alkon said. “If you’re a peacock and you have a big huge tail, it’s probably going to be a little harder for you to get away from the lion. So the fact that you still exist with a big huge tail, you are Mr. Buff Peacock, you are high quality mate material.”

In terms of looks, Doron may be more of a peahen than a resplendently-tailed peacock – as Raz himself said, he doesn’t have much in the way of plumage – but that’s not really a strike against him. It’s all about attitude.

After exhaustive research, it’s clear that Doron’s attractiveness is strictly a matter of taste. If retaining the ability to hold our attention and cautious sympathy despite a series of increasingly poor decisions counts as attractive – and it often does, from the long-running appeal of Jack Bauer on “24” to the seemingly [inexplicable thirst](#) surrounding Howard Ratner of “Uncut Gems” – there can be no question that Doron is appealing. Even if he’s more hot-headed than hot.

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Jodi Rudoren contributed reporting for this story. PJ Grisar is the Forward’s culture fellow. He can be reached at grisar@forward.com

Opinion

Debate | Should American Jews celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut?

By Ari Hoffman and Joel Swanson

For half a century, Israel has been a mainstay in American Jewish identity. The ties that bind our diaspora community to the State of Israel and its people are undeniably strong. At the same time, the values and perspective we have developed as a Jewish minority living in a country that is a majority Christian diverge at times from our Israeli brothers and sisters, who enjoy the status of a majority in the Jewish state. And these days, it feels like these differences are ever more present, and ever more pressing.

It led us to wonder, given these differences, should American Jews even celebrate Israeli Independence Day?

We turned to Forward contributing columnists Joel Swanson and Ari Hoffman to debate the issue.



Joel Swanson and Ari Hoffman



Artist: Noah Lubin

JOEL SWANSON: Last August, President Trump sparked outrage in the American Jewish community by [accusing Jews who vote Democratic](#) (a group which, in 2018, comprised [79% of American Jews](#)) of “great disloyalty.”

Whether Trump realized it or not, he was invoking the long history of the anti-Semitic [dual loyalty trope](#) – the idea that diaspora Jews cannot be trusted because we

are more loyal to the Jewish people than to our adopted nations. “Polish, German, and French Jews are primarily Jews because that is their race,” argued nineteenth-century German nationalist [Constantin Frantz](#) while opposing citizenship for German Jews. “Polish feeling, German or French feeling cannot enter his soul as long as he remains a Jew.”

But when he was asked to apologize for his dual loyalty slander, Trump did something interesting: He inverted it, clarifying that [American Jews who vote Democratic](#) are “very disloyal to Israel.” If for the nineteenth-century European nationalist, the Jew could not be trusted as a loyal citizen [because she represented](#) “a foreign element in an organism,” for Trump, in contrast, American Jews *ought* to prioritize the interests of Israel – which would lead us to vote for him.

It’s deeply ironic: Trump thinks it’s bad that American Jews fail to do exactly what nineteenth-century anti-Semites accused us of doing; he condemns us as disloyal because when we go to the ballot box in the United States, only four percent of us [consider Israeli politics](#) one of our top priorities. Trump wants us to have dual loyalties that we don’t have.

This is the context in which I want us to think about Yom Ha’atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. [Jewish calendars list this day](#) as a Jewish holiday; [synagoques often list it](#) on their holiday calendars. The question is, why?

Yom Ha’atzmaut is a holiday that celebrates the independence of a modern state where, by definition, American Jews do not live. Why should we base our culture as American Jews on the celebrations of another country? It’s not a historically Jewish holiday; it has only existed since 1948, and it certainly isn’t attested in the Torah or the Talmud or any other traditional Jewish text. Indeed, some Haredi Jews in the

land of Israel [refuse to acknowledge](#) the holiday at all, considering it idolatry to conflate a nation-state with a religious holiday.

Of course, some American Jews have family in Israel or have lived there, and might well celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut for that reason, just as Jews with French ancestry might choose to celebrate [Bastille Day](#) for similar reasons. No one suggests it should go on our synagogue calendars.

If Israeli national identity, which is what Yom Ha'atzmaut explicitly celebrates, is a central part of Jewishness, doesn't that mean Israeli Jews are more complete Jews than we are? If we base celebrations of our Jewish identity around a country where we do not live, we can only ever be secondary, always defined in relation to a national identity we aren't fulfilling.

Would it not be better instead to get to work making new holidays that celebrate [being here, where we are](#), the lives we're building in our adopted lands?

ARI HOFFMAN: It's good to be back at it.

Let me start with your final point. I would argue that far from undermining American Jewish identity, the blending of American and pro-Israel stances is natural rather than untenable. To quote a mentor of mine, [Ruth Wisse](#), a strong attachment to both Israel and America, to the Jewish arc of history and the American story, is not *dual* loyalty but rather *doubled* loyalty, twice as strong rather than twice suspect. When it comes to national love, there is no demand that we be monogamous, apart from extreme cases of espionage, or taking up arms.

But it goes farther than that. Many people, and not just Jews, see their support for both Israel and America as funded by the same moral and imaginative capital; many Americans, Jewish and non-Jewish, support the rhetorical and aspirational overlap between the American and Israeli projects, an alliance that feels different in degree as well as kind from that enjoyed with other countries [giving the lie to the accusation that it's "[all about the Benjamins](#)" as one of our illustrious stateswomen surmised].

A sense of investment in Israel does – and *should* –

lead one to a shared vision of the world. The harder case to make is certainly the one made by those who accuse Jews of disloyalty while professing support or sympathy for nations and movements that are avowedly *anti-American*, whether the socialist butchers in [Venezuela](#), the theocrats in Iran, or the bouquet of [anti-American factions](#) in Palestinian society.

But your aversion to celebrating Israeli Independence Day makes even less sense to me in an American context. The idea that an American is not one thing but many is one of the great joys of living here. At its best, being an American means opting out of the binary loyalty tests that held (and hold) sway for so many minorities for centuries in the lands of [Christendom](#) and [Islam](#), where your citizenship was a matter for clerics and bureaucrats to prod and inspect.

By conceiving of a country tied together by principles and aspiration rather than faith and blood, the founders made accusations of dual loyalty a stain on America's canvas, rather than its primary color. We celebrate the 4th of July, and many of us celebrate the storming of the Bastille ten days later.

Finally, the celebration of a holiday not on the general calendar is close to the core of what it means to be a Jew. We mark [giving of laws](#) besides the U.S. Constitution, [liberation](#) that happened in a world away from our own, [harvests](#) that have little to do with the North American agricultural cycle and [palace intrigue](#) in far-away lands.

We bring these holidays wherever we go, trooping around in time as well as in space.

Yom Ha'atzmaut is firmly in this tradition. To be sure, the recentness of Yom Ha'atzmaut has precipitated [rich debate](#), much of it in the religious community. What does it mean to re-open prophetic history? How do we celebrate an occasion without Biblical guidance? Are we sure we see the hand of the God of History, or are our goggles just foggy? These questions are fascinating; they indicate a people living in history rather than nostalgia-stricken over its past.

The Jewish experience in the twentieth century was every bit as catastrophic and miraculous as the events recounted in the Bible. The eradication of European

Jewry and the restoration of a Jewish commonwealth in its shadow are so extraordinary as to demand the witness of all Jews.

JOEL SWANSON: I began with President Trump's scurrilous [accusations of American Jewish disloyalty](#) to Israel because I think they actually get at an important truth of American Jewish identities today. I obviously disagree with President Trump in his moral evaluation of the fact that [American Jews do not](#) make the modern nation-state of Israel central to our identities, but he's right that we don't. When we actually [ask American Jews](#) about how we define ourselves, the nation-state of Israel isn't nearly as foundational to our identities as a lot of the American Jewish establishment might have you believe.

Only [30% of American Jews](#) describe themselves as "very emotionally attached" to the state of Israel, lower than the 31% of American Jews who say they are "not at all" attached to Israel. [Fewer than half of us](#) – just 43% – have ever even visited Israel.

And when you ask American Jews what it means to be an American Jew, [only 43% of us](#) say "caring about Israel" is essential to Jewish identity – far lower than the percentage who say remembering the Holocaust is an essential part of being Jewish [73%], leading an ethical or moral life [69%], working for justice and equality [56%], and even "being intellectually curious" [49%].

It might, then, be more relevant to American Jewish identity to have a holiday devoted to intellectual argumentation – perhaps a holiday that you and I are celebrating right now, in our way!

Making Yom Ha'atzmaut a central part of the American Jewish calendar seems to me to impose a political litmus test on American Jewish identity that actually delimits the full scope of potential for our diverse, pluralist identities – a political litmus test that, after all, cannot be met by the [one in five American Jews who are not Zionists](#).

Yom Ha'atzmaut is just about the only Jewish holiday that requires accepting a political program – support for political Zionism and a Jewish state – and not just

Jewish cultural and religious identity. You don't have to have specific politics to celebrate Pesach or Sukkot. You do in order to celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut.

And for me, the great potential of American Jewish identity is that being Jewish *doesn't* have to force you into only one specific political position, doesn't have to limit your political imagination, a political pluralism, and freedom that so many [other societies have denied to Jews](#).

I celebrate that multiplicity and pluralism, and part of it ought to include offering a wide range of Jewish holidays that celebrate the diverse range of Jewish experiences throughout our history – [Zionists, diasporists, non-Zionist Orthodox, Bundists](#), and all the rest.

For American Jews for whom Zionism and the state of Israel is an important part of their Jewish identity, I don't object to celebrations of Yom Ha'atzmaut. If you want to celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut because it is relevant to you, go right ahead! Far be it from me to stop you. But it seems to me that including it as part of our Jewish liturgical calendar, in ways that holidays for other forms of Jewish political identity [such as Bundism](#) are not included, seems to me to limit rather than celebrate the full scope of identities and politics that defines the rich tapestry of American Jewry.

ARI HOFFMAN: I take it that your objection is to granting that event a *religious* significance. I would imagine that for the vast majority of synagogues, Yom Ha'atzmaut is celebrated as mostly a civic holiday, akin to the 4th of July, or in the way that Thanksgiving-themed events make their way into a shul calendar.

But I doubt that this would assuage your concerns, which seem to militate against *any* presence of Israel in the space of the synagogue. I just don't think most synagogue-goers would agree; for them, it is perfectly natural to see Israeli and American flags flapping in the wind outside or stationed in the sanctuary itself. On a walk this morning, I saw just that outside the Reform congregation in my hometown.

I think the vast majority of Jews who *do* celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut would demur from claiming that it is a

holiday on par with Passover or Yom Kippur. The liturgy that has been developed is relatively sparse and consists mostly of prayers of thanksgiving that can be recited at any time. There is some dancing and some singing. There is no *halachic* prohibition on labor, or specifically designated Torah reading.

I think there is another element to this as well. The simple reality is that what happens in the Land of Israel plays an outsized role in the Jewish imagination. In ancient times, *the calendar itself* was determined by spying the New Moon in Jerusalem. Every single “religious” holiday bears some signature of the Land of Israel – its cycles and seasons, memories of exile and homecoming. Israel has been at the core of Jewish *religious* practices for as long as there have been Jews. I don’t see why that should change in 2020.

I also think that Yom Ha’atzmaut pitches a bigger tent than you describe. In Israel, it is not seen as a “right-wing” event and brings together Israeli Jews of all stripes, as well as [some Arab Israelis](#) and [Druze](#). You might suggest that the operative word there is *Israeli*. But the resonances and implications of the return to Zion are so large, so synced into the Jewish bloodstream, as to transcend a more narrow definition of national culture.

JOEL SWANSON: It seems to me that you and I have two basic points of disagreement here, and we should be careful not to conflate them. There’s the descriptive and the prescriptive, the question of how American Jews *should* feel about Israel and the question of how we *do* feel.

And while these two questions are obviously not unrelated, it strikes me as important to tease them apart. It seems to me that the [elevation of Yom Ha’atzmaut](#) to the level of a religious holiday – even one that, as you say, doesn’t come with the same *halachic* prohibitions as a holiday like Yom Kippur or Shabbat – is an attempt not to provide American Jews with holidays that celebrate our identities as we are, but to construct our identities politically.

The fact is, I just don’t think the state of Israel is as central to American Jewish identity as you seem to think it is. (I am here speaking of the state founded in

1948, not the land of Israel upon which the cycles of the Jewish calendar are based. There’s an entire [branch of Jewish theological thought](#) devoted to distinguishing between land and state.)

The numbers show that the majority of American Jews do not consider [caring about the state of Israel](#) an essential part of Jewish identity.

And when you describe the foundation of the state of Israel as “a seminal event in the history of the Jewish people,” I don’t disagree. But the fact is, American Jews do *not* consider the foundation of the state of Israel the most important historical event in twentieth-century Jewish history. [By a 30-point margin](#), we think of the Holocaust that way.

[Only 31% of American Jews](#) belong to a synagogue at all, and [even fewer](#), 18%, are members of Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Congress.

And when you interview young American Jews who disaffiliate, the politics of Yom Ha’atzmaut celebrations come up as a major reason why. For example, [one Jewish student said](#) she stopped going to synagogue on campus because of the false impression that “all Jewish students were pro-Israel and all people who were pro-Israel were Jewish,” while [another said](#), “even if I want to go to a Shabbat dinner and stuff, I feel like it still has that political climate, which I’m not a fan of.”

At a time when the American Jewish community is increasingly [concerned about declining Jewish affiliation](#), it seems hypocritical and self-defeating to impose a political litmus test.

I would never say Jews who personally want to celebrate Yom Ha’atzmaut ought to be excluded from any Jewish community, nor would I say all American Jews need to celebrate the unique cultural [holidays of the Jewish Labour Bund](#). Why, then, do we consider a 72-year-old political holiday part of the Jewish liturgical calendar?

If we do, it is worth thinking about the voices we are leaving out.

ARI HOFFMAN: I appreciate your distinction between the prescriptive and the normative, but I think that’s a

blurring I'm willing to accept, largely because it is self-sorting in a variety of ways. My guess is that the majority of these folks don't drop out of synagogue life because it's too political; they are likely to seek Jewish spaces that are *more* avowedly political, usually with a leftist bent.

I would love to see more Jewish engagement, more holidays, more past histories and alternative achievements commemorated and celebrated. But one of those surely is the creation of the State of Israel, a miracle so large that it would have staggered even the prophets.

Part of being a Jew is believing history is linear – we live in our time, do our best, try to separate meaning from the mundane. And when the clouds part a little bit, you dance. And I wish every Jew would feel that joy.

I'll drink and dance to that.

–

Ari Hoffman and Joel Swanson are both contributing columnists at the Forward.

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

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