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Image by Cherev Gidon

## News

# 'Training and sweating and bleeding': American Jews learn how to shoot back at synagogue terrorists

By Ari Feldman

Colonel Sharon Gat wants to put a gun-wielding terrorist response team in every synagogue in America.

How? By training volunteers from the synagogue itself.

His firm is launching the first organized effort to teach Jews across the country how to use guns to defend their congregations against shooters like the ones who perpetrated the attacks in Pittsburgh, Poway and Jersey City, bypassing the traditional security guard model and drawing concern from top communal security officials.

"The average person in these trainings, after 40 hours, I can say there's a very, very good chance that if an active shooter comes into his synagogue, the active shooter will be dead, and people will be saved," Gat said.

In the next two months, even amid uncertainty about

whether synagogues will be open for the High Holidays due to the coronavirus pandemic, he will be doing 10 week-long training sessions in synagogues, mostly Orthodox, in California and Texas.

But the trainings contradict a key recommendation of major North American Jewish security groups: Leave the guns to law enforcement professionals. It is professionals who receive costly, lengthy trainings in which they learn how to deescalate a situation, and how to recognize biases themselves and mental illness or impairment in others. That education forms the backbone of effective security and policing, communal security experts say, and it's not included in the more "tactical" training Gat offers, which emphasizes drills and the use of equipment.

"I think that it's a slippery slope for us to think that we

can train non-law enforcement individuals to understand all the perils and pitfalls of carrying a handgun in support of security for an organization,” said Brad Orisini, a nearly 30-year veteran of the FBI and who served as head of security for the Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh from 2017 until earlier this year.

### **A gun-buying spree**

Most of Gat’s clients are synagogues in the Orthodox and Hasidic communities. Together, they make up about 10% of American Jewry, and they were the victims of the two most recent attacks on American Jews: last December in Jersey City, N.J. and Monsey, N.Y. Those deadly episodes themselves followed a years-long spate of random street assaults in Brooklyn.

In learning synagogue defense from former Israeli commandos, these communities are now planning to mimic the Israeli model of security, where Jews with guns are an accepted part of synagogue life.

Synagogues across the country already employ members in service of day-to-day security, often standing alongside security guards as greeters, to monitor who is coming inside. Overall, few of these volunteers are armed, though there are clusters of communities, such in northern Chicago, where the greeters carry concealed handguns.

That Gat’s initiative is going national now, after a pilot run last year with 10 synagogues in the San Diego and Los Angeles, reflects a broader American trend.

Across the country, Americans are on a gun-buying spree. Gun purchases spiked during the beginning of the pandemic, then spiked even more dramatically during the marches against racist policing and systemic inequality. There were 3.9 million guns sold in June, the highest number recorded since such data collection began, in 1998, according to the Brookings Institution.

Security experts who primarily serve Jewish communities say that Orthodox Jews are likely among those buyers.

“It used to be one Sunday a month I’d have a class of 10,” said Jonathan Burstyn, an Orthodox Jew in Chicago who teaches basic gun safety classes required for a

carry license, primarily to Jewish clients. “I’m doing weekly classes now of about 15, 18 people.”

### **Training and sweating and bleeding**

Indeed, individual Jews and synagogues have sought out tactical training – meaning training that teaches skills primarily used in combat zones, in this case with a focus on fighting in buildings and enclosed spaces – for a few years already.

If you’re in the Los Angeles area, you can book Raziell Cohen, a.k.a. The Tactical Rabbi. In the New York area there is Cherev Gidon, a training firm and facility in Pennsylvania run by Yonatan Stern, an Israeli-American security instructor. Stern said his company is partnering with Caliber-3 in the tactical training initiative, while having already trained volunteer teams at 40 synagogues around the country over the past year.

Gat’s training is free to participants because a Jewish Republican political donor and philanthropist based near San Diego, Robert Shillman, covers most of the costs through his foundation, Gat said.

Shillman, founder and chairman of a large tech company, Cognex, contributed more than \$660,000 to Republican campaigns and committees during the current election cycle, according to the most recent Federal Election Committee filings. He is also a major donor to pro-Israel causes such as Friends of the Israeli Defense Forces and Christians United For Israel, and supports Project Veritas, a conservative group that uses hidden cameras to try to film journalists in sting operations. He has also funded several figures and groups known for their vitriol against Islam, such as the David Horowitz Freedom Center and the academic William Kilpatrick.

Caliber-3 was founded in 2003, and is headquartered in Efrat, a West Bank settlement outside Jerusalem. The company was included in a “blacklist” released by the United Nations earlier this year of companies that operate in the West Bank, and which the U.N. said “raised particular human rights concerns.”

The company trains thousands of Israeli soldiers, police and security personnel a year in courses that can last months, and in recent years has begun offering half-

-day or shorter training to tourists, as well as weeks-long paramilitary drill courses marketed to observant American teenagers and young adults. It opened its first American location outside San Diego in 2018.

After the attack on Chabad of Poway in April of 2019, Shillman called Gat, Gat said, and proposed the joint project. In addition to the 10 synagogues already trained, Gat said he has 10 more communities in California and Los Angeles lined up for week-long sessions over the next two months. The trainings, with small groups of five to 10 people, are going forward as of now despite rising Covid-19 cases in both states. He declined to name the synagogues, citing privacy and security concerns.

The synagogue team trainings last 40 hours, and are run by Caliber-3 instructors who are former IDF special forces officers. The synagogue volunteers learn handgun skills and safety, Krav Maga hand-to-hand fighting techniques, first aid and strategies for responding to an active shooter as a team.

"There's not a lot of speaking, not a lot of theory," Gat said. "Besides eating a little bit at lunch, you're just training and sweating and bleeding, that's it."

Gat declined to say how much money Shillman or he were donating to the effort, or divulge how much such a training would cost a paying participant, but similar ones cost up to \$500 per person per day, Stern and Cohen said.

Part of the training takes place in the synagogue, to tailor response strategies to the space. Drills involving loaded guns, where volunteers are expected to shoot accurately while running or being shoved, take place on a specialized gun range or in a "shoot house," a plywood-and-sheetrock mockup of a space under attack by a terrorist, where participants practice dragging wounded people out of the line of fire and aiming in close quarters under pressure.

Gat said that he seeks out the best volunteers before training begins by doing criminal and psychological background checks, and that 95% of the people selected for the training get his recommendation to bring handguns to their synagogues.

"I'm not looking for heroes, I'm not looking for show-offs, people who can be dangerous," he said. "I want an average person with a sense of responsibility."

Some Jews consider the tactical training so important, they have taken it without their synagogue's knowledge.

One Orthodox Jewish community leader in the Los Angeles area said he has attended tactical trainings – and has carried his handgun to religious services – without the knowledge of his synagogue, and spoke on condition of anonymity for that reason. He said he has kept his synagogue in the dark to shield it from liability issues, but feels that having a single security guard is not enough to keep his family safe.

Not everyone can be handed that responsibility, he acknowledges.

During a days-long training with Cohen, "The Tactical Rabbi," another congregant performed so poorly that the community leader advised the man not to carry a gun into a Jewish setting. That man agreed with the assessment.

Stil, the community leader said, any gun is better than no gun.

"I'm scared to death that some people I know who carry them on Shabbos have no business," said the leader. But, he added, "I would rather have a couple amateurs in the room, than be sitting ducks with nothing in the room. That's the alternative."

#### **'What works in Ramallah'**

Communal security officials worry having amateurs in the room could actually be more dangerous.

Michael Masters, the head of the Secure Community Network, which helps shape security policy for nearly all major institutions of American Jewish life, said he has heard concern from law enforcement officials in areas where Jewish communities have pursued their own training to defend against terrorist attacks.

He said he worries that people who undergo tactical training will think that's all they need to know about

training will think that's all they need to know about security. That, he said, could lead to knee-jerk responses to incidents with people of color or mentally ill people, undermining relationships between the Jewish community and the surrounding community – and eroding security.

"It's not about being" a soldier, Masters said. "It's about understanding the complex dynamics of human engagement. When all you're taught to be is a hammer, the whole world is nails."

There are also differences between American-style security – which is broadly defensive – and Israeli-style security, which mandates all-out pursuit of a terrorist threat.

"There is an incredible kinship with Israel in many ways," Masters said. "But what works in Ramallah and even in Tel Aviv is not necessarily what works in Richmond or Toledo."

Yet the tactical training may be here to stay. Yonatan Stern, of Cherev Gidon, said that Hasidic communities around New York, where gun rules are stricter than California or Texas, are clamoring for more.

Stern called the Secure Community Network's guidelines that guns be left to law enforcement personnel "totally ridiculous," saying that a highly trained volunteer, who will lay down their life to protect their community, is always better than a paid guard. Though he emphasizes that the teams must be officially sanctioned by the synagogue, he says congregants secretly carrying is better than no guns in the sanctuary at all, like the community leader in Los Angeles.

"Members of a congregation, that's their community – if someone comes in shooting, it's their children, their parents, their spouse," Stern said. "Those are the people I trust to defend a synagogue."

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## Opinion

# Editorial | I don't recognize the NYT that Bari Weiss quit

By Jodi Rudoren

I do not recognize the New York Times that Bari Weiss describes in her resignation letter, and it terrifies me.

This is not to say I do not believe Bari's description of her experience, nor that I did not see some of what she laments in her letter before I left The Times last year after more than two decades as a journalist there.

Rather, it is to say that her experience took place in an Opinion section undergoing a transformation during an intensely polarized period in our history – not in the newsroom where I spent my career. And still, I am terrified at the rapidity and range of the changes inside this institution I have so deeply loved and admired for so long.

A New York Times that has no place for Bari Weiss is a weaker New York Times. A New York Times Bari Weiss feels she must leave is a New York Times not living up to its own ideals. A New York Times without Bari Weiss's voice, and the voices she has cultivated, is thinner, duller, less original and just plain less valuable for all of us who depend on it.

"The paper of record is, more and more, the record of those living in a distant galaxy, one whose concerns are profoundly removed from the lives of most people," Bari said in the letter. "I've always comforted myself with the notion that the best ideas win out," she added. "But ideas cannot win on their own. They need a voice. They need a hearing. Above all, they must be backed by people willing to live by them."

When James Bennet was forced to resign as Opinion editor last month after a contretemps over the publication of Sen. Tom Cotton's essay calling for military troops to quell violent protests, I was worried. I found the argument that publishing the OpEd

endangered anyone's life to be specious, though it was repeated by many of my former colleagues on Twitter; I thought that organized, open revolt violated every code of collegiality; and I worried that the paper was cowering from its historic role as the host of raucous but respectful debate.

My friends inside told me that the publisher, A.G. Sulzberger, had simply concluded that Bennet would not be able to lead his staff after this very public uprising, and I accepted that. I served on the masthead and know those roles are a privilege, and that life at that level isn't always fair. I was sad for Bennet, a role model of mine, but what I cared about most was that Sulzberger would continue to be the voice for diversity of opinion.

Bari's resignation is, in ways, more worrying. Her feeling pushed to relinquish the most powerful and most stable platform in journalism, is a serious indictment of the devolution of debate at The Times – and, indeed, across our industry, our politics, our culture.

I don't know Bari particularly well, but I know she embodies much of what always spelled New York Times success. She is a fast and sharp thinker, a terrific writer and speaker, a brave iconoclast. Her piece about the Tree of Life massacre, "When a Terrorist Comes to Your Hometown," was probably the best thing written about that tragic event, anywhere.

The only time Bari and I really worked together was in a program I was running called the Australia Residency. We had invited journalists across the organization to propose special projects, and Bari's application was wide-ranging: I should have known something was seriously wrong with how the place regarded her when an editor in sports questioned the idea of having such a controversial opinionist write a journal on learning to surf.

It only got worse.

Bari writes in her resignation about her work and her character being assaulted openly on Slack channels, ax emojis posted next to her name. Even before I left last summer, these channels had become cesspools, a major distraction from the core journalism, and a threat

to the clarity of the values and principles that undergird The Times.

And still, as I lament the loss of an Opinion section capacious enough for Bari, I know the newsroom is still a daily miracle of independent, original reporting unmatched by the competition.

When Bari writes that stories are "told in a way to satisfy the narrowest of audiences rather than to allow a curious public to read about the world and then draw their own conclusions," and when she says that "intellectual curiosity – let alone risk-taking – is now a liability at The Times," it's important to remember that her experience was in Opinion, not news.

The foreign correspondents I worked with who risk their lives to bring us truth about the Uighurs and Rohingya, Hong Kong protesters and Russian oligarchs, are guided by pure intellectual curiosity and devoted to serving that curious public. When I was bureau chief in Jerusalem, I fielded so much criticism by advocates on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but I knew that I was there not to feed their well-crafted narratives, but to inform readers in Nebraska and Nepal who did not have a particular stake in the game. In other words, I was working for people who did not already know what they thought, who wanted to understand their own instincts with more nuance.

Before you unsubscribe from The Times in anger over Bari's resignation, please, open the app. Read the stirring piece a young Metro reporter named Edgar Sandoval just published about returning to his family home in the Rio Grande Valley as Covid-19 was ravaging the place, and his own family. Read Dan Barry's remarkable elegy to the last reporter working for a local paper in a Pennsylvania town. Listen to The Daily episode in which Rob Gebeloff describes the absolutely heroic data journalism that is holding the government accountable for its handling of the coronavirus – and helping us all understand the pointedly discriminate ways it is ravaging our communities.

And while you're there, check out the piece Bari wrote in 2018 with a woman named Eve Peyser.

This article was not about Israel or anti-Semitism, it was not about Trump or politics. It was about the terribly toxic Twitter relationship the two had, and how they met in real life, and found common ground – as Jewish women writers of about the same age, as lovers of swimming and sourdough, as intellectually curious people trying to better understand how those who disagree with them think.

We need more of that, not less – in The New York Times and everywhere else.

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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.**

Forward

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### Culture

# How Woodstock revolutionized art – a story that has nothing to do with a music festival

By Jackson Arn

At the end of the 60s, for reasons that had nothing to do with Jimi Hendrix, the town of Woodstock, N.Y. changed the course of American culture. By the first day of the Woodstock Music & Art Festival – which didn't even take place in the town it's named for, and was more retrospect than game-changer, anyway – Woodstock's major contributions to arts and letters were, truth be told, mostly in the rear-view mirror.

50 years ago, if you were a famous, East Coast-based artist of some sort, there was a well-thumbed playbook for you to consult. You came out with a new book, or album, or solo show. People loved or hated you for it, but in either case refused to leave you alone. You got sick of the attention. You realized you weren't getting anything done. You became disillusioned. You decided to move upstate, where there were artists and intellectuals aplenty but no awkward run-ins, coke parties, or hordes of critics and sycophants. You spent a couple quiet years there, trying to unlearn the lessons of celebrity. You returned to the big city, bursting with new ideas that were utterly, deliberately unlike the ones that made you famous. And then, of course, your ideas flopped.

That is how, in the spring of 1969, America's greatest living novelist, America's greatest living painter, and America's greatest living musician – or, to put it more concisely, Philip Roth, Philip Guston, and Bob Dylan – all happened to be living in a town with a population in the low four figures.

### MEN OF MOSTLY BOUNDLESS APPETITES

The pioneer of the trio was Guston, who'd had a

house in Woodstock since the late 40s, and who's been teetering on the verge of household name status since his death in 1980. Born to Jewish immigrants in Montreal in 1913, Guston has a fair claim to being the most influential American artist of the last few decades – it's hard to imagine Dana Schutz's portrait of Emmett Till, to name one much argued-over example, without him. By all rights, 2020 should have been the year he crossed over: he was the protagonist of two major shows, since delayed, and a scene-stealing bit player in the Whitney Museum's "Vida Americana," maybe the most significant recent New York exhibition. Instead, he remains a painter's painter, beatified and borrowed from but lacking the absolute visibility of Pollock or Warhol – which is just the way he'd like it.

Guston had a boundless appetite for the new, and an autodidact's impatience with isms. By 1967, he had made his reputation as a WPA muralist after the fashion of Rivera or Siqueiros, switched to easel painting, forged another career as a first-generation New York School painter, and then given up on that, too. His work from the 50s and early 60s was abstract and expressive, but he disliked the term "Abstract Expressionism," with its ponderous Latinate syllables, its academic primness.

Guston, to quote another disillusioned Jew named Philip, "felt he'd exhausted the means that had unlocked him as an abstract painter, and he was bored and disgusted by the skills that had gained him renown. He didn't want to paint like that ever again; he tried to convince himself he shouldn't paint at all. But since nothing but painting could contain his emotional turbulence, let alone begin to deplete his self-mythologizing monomania, renouncing painting would have been tantamount to committing suicide."

Note the combination of affection and disdain in these sentences, the way disgust gets piled on top of boredom (you'd think they wouldn't go together), the way "monomania" is tossed off mid-sentence – could this be the prose of anyone but Philip Roth?

In the spring of 1969, Roth's third novel, "Portnoy's Complaint," was still high on the bestseller list, and the joke about wanting to meet the author but not wanting

to shake his hand was already a cliché. Roth was 36, rich (for "Portnoy," the advance alone was a quarter-million), heavy with prizes (a National Book Award for "Goodbye, Columbus"), and unsure of what came next. The only thing he knew he shouldn't do – and, for the rest of his career, never really did – was try to out-Portnoy "Portnoy."

Woodstock beckoned. Roth followed. When he wasn't working on new fiction (or his girlfriend at the time, "a young woman who was finishing a Ph.D.," he was shooting the breeze with his new best friend, Philip Guston. Guston was a generation older, but the two men shared a fondness for Samuel Beckett and roadside diners, a pious disdain for the Judaism of their youths, and a weariness, implicit in their being in Woodstock at all, of all things Manhattan.

As Roth was settling into his new home, Bob Dylan was preparing to leave his. In 1969, Dylan was in the midst of his most avant-garde performance so far: a deafening, years-long silence that his fans analyzed with the same obsessiveness they'd applied to the lyrics of "Like A Rolling Stone." The silence had begun in 1966 with, depending on who you asked and when you asked them, a motorcycle accident or a nervous breakdown.

Dylan used the crash as an excuse to move to Woodstock with his wife and kids, and spent much of the next few years in an 11-room house overlooking the town. He wasn't a recluse by any means – by any sane standard, his Woodstock time was star-studded and action-packed. There were new recordings, most notably "The Basement Tapes." There were performances (Woody Guthrie's memorial concert in 1968) and celebrity guests (Allen Ginsberg). There was a photo feature in the Saturday Evening Post. But there was no Summer of Love for Dylan, no Monterey Pop, no Vietnam demonstrations.

And no Woodstock music festival.

Dylan had turned down an offer to perform there, supposedly because his son was sick, though this didn't keep him away from accepting top billing at the Isle of Wight around the same time. The truth is clear enough: after years of providing artists and writers with

close to isolation, Woodstock was losing its charm. The secret was out. By the fall, Dylan was living in Greenwich Village. When asked why he'd returned to Manhattan, he said Woodstock had too many druggies.

Too many druggies! If you didn't know better, you'd think this a hopelessly square thing to say. But then, Dylan was never the counterculture warrior his fans wanted him to be – more Beat than Hippie, more stoner than acidhead, more Kerouac (a lifelong Republican, incidentally) than Kesey. Like Roth, like Guston, he got mistaken for a New Leftie because he broke so many of the rules. Most rule-breaker artists die well before society catches up with them; a few live long enough to see a few of their tricks catch on. By the end of the 60s, Roth, Guston, and Dylan were in the awkward position of being both avant-garde and utterly uncontroversial, with many years left to go. Fleeing to Woodstock – and, soon enough, right back to New York City – was a way for them to rethink their relationship with the public that had slapped them with early success.

### ESCAPE BACK TO NEW YORK

It's easy to be nostalgic for a time when people fled New York City for reasons other than a deadly virus – and even easier, perhaps, to be nostalgic for a time when one of the biggest celebrities in America could go off-grid and count on a few years of peace and quiet. It's easy, but in some sense it misses the point. Dylan, Guston, and Roth backed away but never really took a break. They kvetched about the New York cultural establishment, but they brought it with them wherever they went. I'm reminded of the critic René Girard's observation that those who choose to live in isolation nurse a sickly obsession with the herd.

To be an artist is, in some overt or not-so-overt way, to hate the herd, and to hate the herd is to love it, and be loved and hated in return. The 70s got off to a bumpy start for Roth, Guston, and Dylan – how could it be otherwise? After declaring themselves tired of New York City, the three of them had come back, and critics could barely resist the opportunity to remind them that they weren't above the law.

The closest thing to an exception was Roth. "Our Gang," his first post-"Portnoy" novel, was a broad

political satire of Nixon's America, from Vietnam to the Boy Scouts. Released toward the end of 1971, it stayed on the bestseller list for 18 weeks and got a good review in *The Times*, courtesy of Dwight MacDonald, though even MacDonald's compliments sounded curiously backhanded – e.g., "I laughed out loud 16 times and giggled internally a statistically unverifiable amount. In short, a masterpiece." More typical was *The New Republic's* pan: "tasteless and dreadful," "gross and difficult-to-excuse," and so on. Perhaps the most notable reviewer of "Our Gang" was Richard Nixon, who wasn't amused with Roth's decision to structure a novel around a character named President Trick E. Dixon.

I'm afraid I have to side with Nixon on this one. Roth has made me guffaw more than any novelist I can think of (though, unlike the meticulous MacDonald, I haven't tallied every snort and chuckle) – but has anyone ever written more ham-fisted "satire?" "Our Gang" appears to have been whipped up for an audience that finds knee-slapping hilarity in names like "John F. Charisma" and "Mr. Asslick." A year shy of the election, Roth took on Nixon with all the cringey self-importance of "SNL" taking on Donald J. Trump (speaking of whom, what could be more Trumpian than calling LBJ Lyin' B. Johnson?).

"Almost neurotically unfunny," Martin Amis said of "Our Gang," though it seems fairer to say that Roth was taking a break from his neuroses, before diving back in for the next 40 years. Guston had encouraged him to direct his outrage outward, at the GOP, and it would be more than a quarter-century before he'd do so again, in "The Plot Against America." Guston himself took Nixon as an artistic subject many times in the early 70s; in August 1971, he drew a series of ink-on-paper sketches with the cheap, inevitable title "Poor Richard." If pressed to explain why I think these broad, clumsy drawings are masterpieces while "Our Gang" is just broad and clumsy, I'd point to a certain sinister vagueness that's missing from the latter.

Crude as they are, Guston's drawings are never obvious. Often it takes you a minute to understand what you're looking at, and even then, you keep looking in the hopes that it turns out to be something else. The

drawings abound with squat, hairy little cones which may or may not be Klansmen – a disturbing presence in any drawing, let alone drawings featuring likenesses of jowly, big-nosed Nixon that veer queasily close to anti-Semitic caricature.

Deft satires these were not – but by the early 70s, Guston had more or less given up on deftness in art. His new work was blunt, earthy, cartoonish – and, perhaps worst of all, figurative. As such, the New York art critics ate it alive. In October 25, 1970, the Times published a thousand-word sneer by Hilton Kramer.

Guston's new show at Marlborough Gallery, he wrote, was more than just an embarrassment; it was a sign of all that had been fraudulent about Guston's work since the beginning. Guston was a "mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum." He painted without any real feeling. His only talent was for spotting trends – in this case the return to figurative art, albeit of a primitive kind, led by Dubuffet and Red Grooms.

To pretend, as Kramer did, that figurative art was some kind of tiresome, played-out fad, when in truth it was just getting warmed up after a full generation in hibernation, took some world-class myopia. Still, it wasn't the most myopic review Guston got that fall – that honor belonged to Robert Hughes who, two seconds after arriving in the States, felt qualified to declare paintings of Klansmen historically obsolete.

These critics failed to grasp the depth of feeling – decades' worth – that underlay Guston's new style. At the age of ten, Guston had found his father hanging in his shed; on the rare occasions when he spoke about the event, he suggested that local Klansmen had bullied his father into suicide. The Marlborough Show represented a return as much as a fresh start – the Klansmen evoke adolescent trauma, the weighty bodies and warm lagoons of color, not to mention the heart-on-sleeve leftism, echoed the early WPA murals.

Guston's disillusionment with the purity of Abstract Expressionism led him outward, into the political sphere, and inward, to his own nightmares. The tragedy, and the miracle, was that these two places turned out to look very much alike.

The cover of "Self Portrait" – Bob Dylan's first album of the 70s and, by general consensus, his worst – looks like a 70s Guston painting without the irony, and perhaps there's something more to this comparison.

After a few worried years in Woodstock, Guston returned to the gallery scene with a series of bulky, deliberately crude, repetitive images that were, for all that, deeply personal, and which critics insisted upon interpreting as an obsolete attempt at hip irony.

Dylan's album, his first double since "Blonde on Blonde," was equally overstuffed, so repetitive it had to be at least a little tongue-in-cheek, and sung in a vocal style he'd helped make obsolete. The first track, "All the Tired Horses," doesn't feature Dylan's voice at all, just a female chorus singing, "All the tired horses in the sun / How'm I supposed to get any riding done? Hmm," again and again and again.

You have to admire a world-famous musician who retreats from the public eye, releases a highly-anticipated album called "Self Portrait," and remains unheard for the first three minutes and twenty-four seconds – and then sings a cover of someone else's song. A good chunk of this album consists of covers ["The Boxer," "Let It Be Me," and a lovable gaggle of folk standards] and even some of the Dylan originals come from earlier albums. If this is a Duchampian practical joke, and plenty of people have suggested as much, it stops being funny by the middle of side one.

Maybe I'm being unfair. Dylan's voice is low, rich, lubricated like a new machine, building on the croon he'd developed for "Nashville Skyline" the previous year. He knows what exactly he's trying to do, and he does it. "Self Portrait" is the kind of album that seemed to exist, from the very beginning, in order to have its reputation restored someday. Dylan himself – if his interviews from the mid-70s, can be trusted – made statements to the effect that he was trying to make a bad album and shake off, once and for all, people's expectations that he be the voice of a generation – but of course this sort of claim only encourages the rehabilitators' fervor ["But that's what makes it so brilliant!"]. Speaking only for myself, I'm happy I never have to listen to "Self Portrait" again.

### WHAT THEY LEARNED FROM WOODSTOCK

When I look at Dylan, Roth, and Guston's creative output in the immediate aftermath of their Woodstock years, I find art that's defined, and at times overshadowed, by what it's not: an album, born from the desire to confound expectations and overstuffed with other people's songs; unfunny fiction written by

a comic genius hellbent on not rewriting his bestselling book. This is the way it should be. Great art is, if you can follow what I'm saying, very, very hard to make. Past excellence is no guarantee of future success, and any swerve as sharp as the one Roth was making was bound to be a bit uncomfortable. In hindsight, Guston seems like the exception, though few recognized his new paintings' greatness at the time, and it's hard to know how many false starts there were between 1967 and 1970.

Of course, the real measure of Dylan, Roth, and Guston's time in Woodstock isn't the work they did immediately afterward – it's the work they did for the rest of their lives. Guston painted right up to the end; he lived just long enough to have the pleasure of hearing Robert Hughes recant, and nowadays he seems like a plausible candidate for the most inspired American painter since 1945. Dylan finally got the Nobel his disciples had been lobbying for him to receive since the 60s; Roth never won one, but it didn't matter, seeing as he'd already won everything else.

In some quiet way, I think, this wouldn't have been possible without the Woodstock years. History is full of promising talents who find their wheelhouses early on, get the recognition they've dreamed of, and then, because they're terrified of upsetting the fans and critics who've been so kind to them, gradually shrink into lauded, jovial irrelevance.

Woodstock taught Guston, and Roth, and Dylan, that it didn't have to be this way. They didn't give up on their audiences altogether – I doubt any artists ever really do, whether or not they care to admit it – but they seemed to decide they could get by just fine without the attention. They could do whatever they wanted. All of which suggests that we're remembering Woodstock the wrong way. It was never really an incubator of bold, new talents, or a countercultural Mecca. It was the detox clinic where talent, addicted to prestige, went to dry out, clear its head and get back to work.

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*Jackson Arn, a Forward contributing art critic, recently took second place for Excellence in Features from the Society for Features Journalism*

## News

# Jewish day schools still don't know if they'll reopen in the fall. Why is it taking so long?

By Molly Boigon

Doron Wesly, 45, has two children, six and two, who are supposed to be taking the summer off from their Jewish day school in New York City. But on a muggy Monday in July, he was taking time out of the older child's vacation to practice reading. After months of distance learning necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic, Wesly is worried that his son will not be ready for first grade in September.

He's also worried that the start of school will just bring more distance learning. His six-year-old son's school, Hannah Senesh Community Day School, has not yet been able to tell families if they're reopening – although they have sent some emails with possible scenarios.

"Some schools are basically pushing out the final decision until literally two weeks before school," Wesly said, "which is frustrating."

There are 861 Jewish schools with nearly 255,000 students in the United States, according to the most recent count. They are a diverse bunch, from massive yeshivas to tiny Montessori day schools. But these days, parents like Wesly have something big in common.

They are united in worry, and hoping that there will be a safe way to get their kids back in the classroom – for the sake of both those kids, and their own sanity. In the meantime, they're stuck in limbo as school administrators try to figure out what will happen in the fall by talking to state officials. In most cases, state mandates will have a big impact on families'

lives, including how many days, if any, their children will be out of the house; what kind of childcare they'll need and how children will get to school, if it opens.

Anxiety is running especially high in New York State, home to the country's largest Jewish community, because New York is running relatively late in releasing final health and safety guidance for how to reopen public and private schools. Now the state is saying they will make it available on Wednesday, but they've also given the schools a tight deadline. It needs the schools' reopening plans by July 31, said the governor and the education department.

By contrast, other states with big Jewish populations – Texas, Florida, Illinois, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and California – have already released their reopening guidance.

The variation in reopening plans across states and districts reflects a tension that's afflicted the entire nation since the start of the pandemic – the need of a society to keep its members safe, and also educate its children. The pandemic is exacerbating inequality and difficulties for students who have already struggled in school, yet as the pandemic comes screaming back in states like California, in-person school may feel like too much of a risk.

Compared to other states, New York State is still in the early stages of that analysis. Sara Seligson, managing director for day schools and yeshivas at the Jewish Education Project, said New York schools will have to make a "quick turnaround" to have their reopening plans done by the deadline at the end of the month.

Seligson has been working with the state on private school guidelines, and said part of the hold up was the need to include advice from the state's Department of Health, which contributes to the guidance as well.

"It is a bit of catch-22," she said. "There are many schools that already have developed their plans because they can't wait. They are using CDC guidance and if there are tweaks that need to be made, they'll do so."

To be sure, there's uncertainty in other states, too.

In New Jersey, private schools will not know how many school buses will be available until public schools have made their final plans.

In California, the state provides guidance. Masks are suggested, for example. But there, school districts are the ultimate authority, and two of them – San Diego and L.A. – have already declared that schools will remain online-only due to a spike in cases. Schools and parents are waiting for the verdict from other districts.

In Maryland, private schools are not subject to state mandates on reopening. That means schools have more control, but they're still sorting out their plans, said Rabbi Ariel Sadwin, the mid-Atlantic regional director for Agudath Israel, an Orthodox lobbying and social services group that works with schools.

And in New York, even the word "guidance" is a bit of a misnomer. It will likely contain both requirements, like communicating with families about reopening in their preferred language, and suggestions, like providing technological help to families, according to a preliminary document.

A spokesperson for the governor's office, Jason Cornwall, said that private and public schools could be subject to inspection, and violations of the guidance could lead to fines or other consequences.

Many of New York's Jewish schools are preparing multiple plans as they await the final word from the state – one where children come back entirely, one where they learn entirely at a distance and one hybrid model, said Jewish education experts and school staff, including Judith Talesnick, director of professional learning and growth at the Jewish Education Project.

Hannah Senesh, for example, is planning to have supplies for each individual student, stagger pick-up and dropoff and eliminate water fountains if students are able to come back in person.

Some schools in New York and New Jersey have even met with an architect to figure out the best ways to use their space, said Paul Bernstein, the CEO of Prizmah, a network for Jewish day schools.

To prepare, some administrators have forgone their

usual vacations this time of year, said Bernstein.

Transportation to and from school is another big, stressful unknown in New York State, where public school districts provide private schools with school buses. The state Department of Health might ask that school buses operate at 50% capacity, said Seligson, which would reduce the number of available school buses.

“If they are strapped in terms of transportation, the thinking is that the private schools will kind of be the stepchildren” and might not be able to access the buses, said Seligson.

Cheryl Rosenberg, 39, is a mother of four children between the ages of seven and 14 that attend three different schools in New York and New Jersey – Salanter Akiba Riverdale elementary and high school in the Bronx and Ben Porat Yosef in Paramus, N.J..

“We have no idea whether we’re going to have to get four kids to three different schools at four different times next year, and we have no idea what level of childcare we’re going to need,” she said.

Rosenberg said that the uncertainty of the upcoming school year is actually more stressful than the period of lockdown and virtual learning, because at least she knew what to expect when her children were at home: “There’s nothing to plan for, so we have no idea when we’re going to hear, how flexible the school’s going to be, how flexible work’s going to be.”

While the lack of decision-making is frustrating parents, teachers and administrators, others see some upside.

Corey Katz is the director of college guidance for the girls high school at Hebrew Academy of Long Beach in Long Island and private college counselor, and she said that while she wishes she could plan ahead for the year, scheduling college visits and classes on college essays, she thinks a cautious approach is the right one.

“Even though I like to prepare in advance and in this situation we can’t, I do have confidence that the governor and the state are doing it the right way,” she said. “I’m just waiting for more information.”

And for parents like Doron Wesly, the desire to get back to school is related to a desire for some semblance of normalcy. He said his son watches the news and talks about coronavirus constantly. Screens have taken over their home.

Wesly and his extended family quarantined before they met up in Kent, Conn. this month, to make sure everyone could enjoy time together without risking a coronavirus infection, but it is taking the kids a while to adjust.

“The kids have been separated almost for five months from most human contact, and we have to constantly remind them, ‘Go hug your grandparents,’” he said. “They’re not used to it because they’re used to us telling them, ‘Don’t hug, don’t touch, move away.’”

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## News

# Bay Area community rallies for family of Dr. Ari Gershman, killed in shooting in the Sierras

By Gabe Stutman

A GoFundMe campaign for the family of a Bay Area Jewish doctor shot and killed while off-roading with his teenage son in a remote part of Sierra County, Calif. has so far raised over a half-million dollars.

Ari Gershman, a 46-year-old pulmonary doctor who worked in pharmaceutical research, was with his son Jack when the attack occurred on July 3. They were in a brand new Jeep exploring near Downieville in the Tahoe National Forest, according to police and the GoFundMe page created for the family.

Jack, 15, fled into the woods after the attack. He called police, saying his father had been shot and that he was lost, according to a press release from the Sierra County Sheriff's Office.

Earlier in the day, police had received a report of two other people sustaining gunshot wounds in the vicinity, near Poker Flat about 10 miles north of Downieville. The suspect was said to be driving a utility terrain vehicle. "Neither victim knew the shooter, and the act appeared to be a random act of violence," police said in the release. The two victims were transported to the hospital with injuries reported to be non-life-threatening.

After receiving Jack's call, officers were able to locate Gershman, who was found deceased. A multi-agency team began a search for Jack, a student at San Ramon Valley High School, that lasted the entire night and well into the next day. The agencies included the U.S. Forest Service, California Highway Patrol, California Department of Fish and Wildlife and more than five police departments from Sierra and nearby counties.

On the afternoon of July 4, with help from a K-9 tracker, officers found Jack, who had survived more than 30 hours alone, drinking from a stream, wearing only shorts and a T-shirt, according to the San Francisco

Chronicle. Despite spending the night outdoors, "he was in good physical condition and did not need medical attention," the release said. He was given food and water and transported to the sheriff's office, where he was reunited with his mother, according to police.

Police set up a checkpoint on Saddleback Road and later that day encountered the suspect, driving a utility terrain vehicle at high speed. "A vehicle collision ultimately occurred," the release says, and shooting took place before officers arrested 40-year-old John Thomas Conway of Oroville.

Conway was a fugitive wanted by the Butte County Sheriff's Office on a felony warrant for vandalism, battery and two counts of making terrorist threats, according to the Chico Enterprise-Record.

The case was referred to the Sierra County district attorney's office, which had not announced charges as of July 13.

Bordering Nevada, Sierra County is one of the most sparsely populated counties in the state with a population of just under 3,000, according to the most recent census data. It had not seen a homicide in 17 years.

The Gershman family is affiliated with Temple Isaiah in Lafayette. The coroner's investigation is ongoing and a funeral has not been scheduled, according to a spokesperson for Sinai Memorial Chapel in San Francisco, which is handling the arrangements.

A semi-private candlelight vigil is scheduled for July 14 at the family home, with pictures to be posted on social media.

"Ari was an avid bicyclist, a vegetarian, an outdoorsman, an Internal Medicine Doctor, a devoted and loving father and fantastic friend that was willing to

drop anything for his friends and family,” reads the GoFundMe page. “He was witty and wise. He died doing what he loved with his son in an area he had hoped to retire in one day.”

Gershman is survived by three school-age children and wife Paige, a speech and language therapist who is undergoing cancer treatment. Paige is “in the fight for her life,” the fundraising page states.

“He was humble and easygoing,” said a former colleague of Gershman’s at Genentech, the pharmaceutical company in South San Francisco. “He really seemed like a wonderful guy, with everything going for him.”

The family’s GoFundMe page raised more than \$375,000 in just two days to support funeral costs, chemotherapy treatments, family counseling and other expenses. “The financial burden is overwhelming,” the page says.

Jared Stratton, one of more than 3,800 donors, shared a message in support of the family along with a \$5 donation.

“It is not much but it is what I can give today,” he wrote. “This poor kid went through hell for 30 hours. His mom is sick. There are also other children in the family. This is a tragedy.”

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*This story first appeared in Jweekly.com. Reposted with permission.*

## News

# ‘We’re all Amir Haskel’ say Jerusalem protesters. Who is Amir Haskel?

By Ilan Ben Zion

At first glance, Amir Haskel is an unlikely leader of the protest movement against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: a retired general who has spent much of the past two decades researching the Holocaust.

But he leaped into the public eye last month when he was arrested by police at a protest and detained for over a day.

On Tuesday, the general was back.

Haskel stood among several thousand Israelis massed outside Netanyahu’s Jerusalem residence, calling for his resignation while facing corruption charges, in the latest expression of mass discontent with the prime minister.

The massive gathering came just a few days after Israeli police and Jerusalem municipal officials swept through the protest camp and confiscated the demonstrators’ tents, chairs, banners and other equipment.

Protesters claimed the police used excessive force, while city authorities contended the sit-in “was placed without a permit and harms public order.”

Many participants wore T-shirts and protective face masks bearing the words “crime minister.”

With a touch of the biblical, dozens wore T-shirts with a quote from Isaiah 1 that has become one of the protest’s slogans: “Alas, she has become a harlot, the faithful city that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt...Your rulers are rogues and cronies of thieves, every one avid for presents and greedy for gifts.”

Netanyahu is under indictment in three separate cases involving accepting bribes, fraud and breach of trust. Netanyahu's criminal trial began last month, and since then the "Black Flag" protesters calling for him to step down have set up a protest camp outside his residence in Jerusalem.

The accusations against Netanyahu include accepting lavish gifts from billionaire friends, and orchestrating positive media coverage from media barons in exchange for favorable legislation. Netanyahu has denied any wrongdoing, accusing law enforcement and the media of a witch hunt and "attempted coup" to depose him from office. As prime minister, he is not legally required to resign from office while facing criminal indictments.

In spite of Israel's struggle to contain the coronavirus pandemic and address its crippling economic impact, demonstrations outside Netanyahu's residence on Jerusalem's Balfour Street have gathered steam.

On June 26, Haskel and others held a Friday afternoon rally outside Netanyahu's Balfour Street residence. The demonstration had been cleared with the police. But shortly after the crowds started massing and spilling into the street, an officer arrested Haskel on the grounds of violating the conditions of the protest.

Haskel and seven others were detained and questioned by police, and conditioned their release on posting 5,000 shekels (\$1440) in bail and assenting to a ban from entering Jerusalem for 15 days.

Haskel and two others refused. Because Shabbat was beginning and they couldn't be brought before a judge, the protesters were put in jail. That Saturday evening a judge ordered their immediate release without condition.

Following his release from custody, Haskel assembled a press conference and said that "a line was crossed that must not be crossed."

"The reason for my arrest was a desire to silence the protest against the person accused of a crime, Benjamin Netanyahu," he said. "If my arrest, and the arrest of two of my friends, lit the flame, the price was worth it."

Indeed, Haskel's arrest sparked public outcry and has galvanized Netanyahu's opponents, who have taken to the streets in even greater numbers. Over the unceasing din of horns and whistles and chants audible for blocks around on Tuesday, a woman who identified only as Sisi wore a shirt with the words "We're all Amir Haskel."

"Since they arrested him the protests have grown even more," she said, noting she had traveled to Jerusalem from her hometown of Shlomi near the border with Lebanon. "Yesterday they came and brutally broke up everything here, so that's why even more people came."

Haskel is a straight-talking career soldier who served 32 years in the Israeli Air Force, first as a pilot, then as a squad commander, until ultimately rising to the rank of brigadier general. Since his retirement from the military in 2003, he has devoted his time to studying and researching the Holocaust and has published three books on the subject.

"The greatest insight that I have learned is that the inclination of most people is to stand on the sideline, and I grasped just how dangerous standing aside is," Haskel said in a telephone interview.

Now the Balfour Street sit-in is his new command post. Since mid-June, he spends most days of the week entrenched there, wearing a black T-shirt and hat emblazoned with the anti-Netanyahu slogan "No way."

Haskel said three main motivators propelled him to participate in protests against the Netanyahu government starting in October 2016: the fading prospects of a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians, which he called "foremost an Israeli necessity;" Netanyahu's "brutal attacks on the left and the identification of the left as enemies of the state" and sowing of deep divisions in Israeli society; and the prime minister's "ongoing undermining of the foundations of Israeli democracy."

"A country whose society is laid waste and torn asunder has no future," Haskel said.

"I don't remember a period like this in the history of Israel: a time of an absence of trust in the leadership, a

situation in which the Knesset effectively doesn't function, a wasteful government and a lack of faith in politicians," Haskel said.

Netanyahu's refusal to step down in the face of criminal indictments is anathema to Haskel. "I don't know an enlightened country among those that we aspire to emulate, in which a prime minister remains in office when facing a criminal trial for fraud, bribery and breach of trust at the same time. This cannot be, this is not correct."

Like many other participants in the growing protests, he hopes public pressure will bring about change. But unlike many other former generals – among them Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, and opposition lawmakers Yair Golan and Moshe Yaalon – Haskel said he is "not suited" for Israeli politics and isn't considering a run for public office.

"Israel prides itself on the fact that it has the most moral military in the world," Haskel said. "I want the state of Israel to be proud of the fact that it has the most moral politicians, government and prime minister in the world. And if you ask me, I want a prime minister who is foremost trustworthy, who leads by example with his behavior, who looks citizens in the eye."

## News

# Will Rosh Hashanah 5781 come with a payroll?

By Ilene Prusher

The High Holidays are designated for spiritual stock-taking, but this year synagogues are wrestling with a decidedly non-spiritual issue: money.

The Days of Awe also happen to be the season in which many synagogues garner enough income – in the form of ticket sales, membership renewals and Yom Kippur appeals – to sustain themselves for the rest of the year. With COVID-19 infection rates skyrocketing and a vaccine still just a distant promise, most non-Orthodox communities are looking at the likelihood that high holiday services will be partially or entirely virtual. And while people are by now accustomed to attending events of all sorts on Zoom, they're also used to doing most of it for free.

All of this leads to a somewhat uncomfortable question: Will Rosh Hashanah 5781 come with a payroll?

But how to serve the community, provide a meaningful experience and stay afloat financially is a very real conundrum facing American Jewish communities in this unprecedented period. Alongside the uncertainty, loss and suffering of the pandemic itself is a cratering economy and historic unemployment, all of which makes it less-than-realistic for synagogues to expect the faithful to contribute what they normally would.

The dues-related portion of a small to medium-sized synagogue could be anywhere from 50% to 80% of the annual budget, said Rabbi Dan Judson, the Dean of Hebrew College in Boston and the author of *Pennies for Heaven: The History of American Synagogues and Money*. Although many synagogues still offer the option of tickets just for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the emphasis in recent years has

moved more in the direction of membership.

“If synagogues don’t sell tickets this year, it’s a loss, but it’s not a devastating loss, because they’ve already not been relying as much on ticket sales,” said Judson. “The bigger question is about getting people to pay their yearly dues at this time. That’s what’s keeping people up at night in terms of synagogue finances.

Some synagogues have in recent years been working to transition from a mandatory membership model, which works for some people but can make others feel like Judaism is a kind of country club to which they can’t afford to belong. Newer, out-of-the-box thinking means that many communities are already working to find financial models that allow people of various means to contribute what feels reasonable to them without there being a pay-one-price admission fee.

For Kol Hadash in Deerfield, IL, for example, members are now welcome to be “contributing members” rather than “supporting members” as their children grow up, as a “pre-existing no-shame, guilt-free alternative” to dropping their membership, having to request a discount, or taking the more economical route and only purchasing high holiday tickets.

But this year perhaps more than any other in living memory, raising money to keep synagogues running is a fraught topic of discussion. The financial crisis of 2008 was also tough on the Jewish community, and Judson estimates that about 10% of members of non-Orthodox synagogues left due to the recession and did not return. This high holiday season presents its own unprecedented challenges, and how much to charge - if at all - to attend services that may primarily be virtual is just one of them.

That big Yom Kippur Appeal speech with the pledge cards that get passed out in synagogue and then collected? Ixnay on that one. Yizkor books - a way to remember loved ones and simultaneously raise funds for the shul? Those too, like the appeal, are being reimagined as online campaigns.

“Besides income from tickets, the high holidays have always symbolized where your membership was, how much enthusiasm there is,” said Barry Mael, the

Conservative Movement’s Senior Director of Synagogue Affiliations and Operations. “It wasn’t just how much money was generated, it was providing a sense of how many people would be active for the year...and many synagogues fear that they’re in for a more difficult year.”

Rabbi Michelle Missaghieh at Temple Israel of Hollywood says that her Reform community of about 900 families will primarily be meeting virtually, with clergy members running the service from different parts of the shul, so that the synagogue architecture will be visible behind them to allow for the “emotional connection” of seeing the ark during the holiest days of the year.

“Everything’s going to be free and open to everyone. We’re not going to require tickets because it will be over Zoom,” she said. But that would potentially be a financial hit, one that her synagogue’s board is trying to figure out how to accommodate.

“Many of us do have brick and mortar buildings that need to be sustained,” Missaghieh acknowledged. But on the upside, she said, interest in being connected and in doing additional learning has increased in this era of uncertainty and prolonged lockdowns, and she plans to provide a whole range of additional study opportunities for the Hebrew month of Elul (starting Aug. 21), a traditional time of preparation for the high holidays that in a normal year, many American Jews seem too busy to engage in.

“Especially in a time when Tuesday blends into Wednesday which blends into Thursday,” she added, “people are turning to us more to give the week structure and meaning. What people in our synagogue really want is intimacy and connection.”

That is a theme that verberates around the country. Or, as Rabbi Dan Levin of Temple Beth El of Boca Raton puts it, “A synagogue isn’t worth much if it’s only there when things are good.”

Levin, the senior rabbi of a Reform community of 1550 households, said the last thing he wants is for people dealing with personal loss, isolation and economic strain to feel like they need to pay to pray.

In addition to memberships - a patron pays \$3,600 a year and options to dig into deeper pockets rises from there - there will be a different approach to those who purchase high holiday tickets only.

“We’re going to call them all and say, ‘Normally you’d be buying four tickets at \$720. We’re not charging this year, but would you be willing to make a contribution to the synagogue of the same level to help us continue to do the kind of programming that you love and say you want to support?’” Levin explained in an interview. “That’s *trumah* in its true form: You give not because you have to, but because you want to. So we’d rather do that than something like a payroll.”

Such phone calls, of course, are more realistic when the synagogue has been in touch with people during the pandemic to check on them and offer support. Beth El - and all the synagogues contacted for this article - has worked to make sure that everyone gets contacted, that people who are most vulnerable or living alone feel supported, and that front-line and “essential” workers feel appreciated.

As the country shut down in March, everything from Hebrew schools to big bar mitzvahs went virtual or were postponed. As a result, there have already been hundreds of furloughs, layoffs and pay cuts in synagogue and non-profit jobs throughout the Jewish community..

Temple Beth El decided that rather than face that situation, all salaries - from clergy to support staff - would be cut 20 percent. Later, when the synagogue got a PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] loan from the government, they were able to restore 10 percent, Levin noted.

“The value that we wanted was to retain as much staff as possible,” he said. “We decided it was better to share that. We realize that for some it’s a lot more to shoulder than others.”

Now, his synagogue faces the difficult decision about exactly how to do a high holiday season like no other. When Levin polled his community, they were split down the middle: About half wanted an in-person experience (distance and masked, of course) and the other half would stay virtual. (Given the spike in coronavirus cases in Florida over the past two weeks, those sentiments may have already changed.) Some congregants ask that it be as traditional as possible while others say that

given these strange times and new technologies, it ought to be as creative and out-of-the-box as possible. The only thing they’re fairly sure will happen is a congregational *tashlich*, since that takes place outside.

For some mega-shuls, like Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, the pandemic has brought an influx of spiritual seekers to an already large congregation. The Conservative community founded in 1906 draws upwards of 5,000 worshippers during the high holidays.

And for that reason, explained Rabbi Nicole Guzik, the high holidays have long involved multiple options for different demographics and preference styles - from traditional *minyanim* to more musical ones with a full band playing the *Avenu Malkenu*. This year, those options will also vary in search of ways to both cope and connect.

It’s difficult, she noted, to get away from the traditional model of “tickets equals membership.” But moreover, having upended so much already, it might not be the best time to reinvent the wheel.

“What we realized is that as much as we want to jump away from that model, we’d have to do it in a way that both honored the trauma of this moment and not do such a radical shift that would cause more anxiety,” Guzik noted. “So we’re trying to take advantage of the moment and find opportunities to collaborate with the congregation to figure out what is the value of membership for them.”

Particularly in such a large congregation, break-out experiences could be the key to making sure that the high holidays don’t feel like just another mass performance or yet another Zoom call. These will each come with their own prices for members.

“There will be certain members-only experiences - online and offline,” said Guzik. “There is the potential of gathering in cars in a parking lot for a service, and that would be limited to members only.” In the past, she said, congregants were accustomed to “a different price-point to sit in the first row near the *bimah*” or for those wanting to connect mostly with their peers, to sit in service geared at young professionals.

“Our idea is that the online activities can be open to the world, but there will be some members-only experiences that are a kind of hybrid model,” she added.

In recent years, many synagogues have been working to move away from mandatory dues and towards a voluntary commitment model. Judson of Hebrew College along with two colleagues authored a plan called as Synergy - sponsored by the UJA-Federation of New York - to help synagogues across the US study the possibility of adapting this new paradigm.

Tiferet Bet Israel (TBI), a Conservative congregation in Blue Bell, PA, for example, just moved to this voluntary dues structure on July 1. After two years of research and preparations, says Susan Kasper, the Executive Director, TBI just launched “Heshbon Lev,” roughly translated as giving from the heart, she said. It’s also a kind of play on the Hebrew words heshbon nefesh, referring to the soul-searching Jews are commanded to do during the days of awe.

“What this says is we want you to be a part of it and it’s not about what you can give financially. We came up with a sustaining amount, hoping that a certain percentage of people would give more, and some people would give less,” Kasper explained.

The ask is \$3571 for a family unit, which is the amount that the synagogue would need if all 350 members paid equally and covered all its expenses. “That’s a sustaining amount, not an obligatory amount,” she noted.

“You can give us less and give us more. You can be part of the community if you can afford \$18 or \$5,000,” Kasper said. “We think it’s going to be a wonderful alternative to the tickets and the Yom Kippur appeal that sometimes left a sour taste in people’s mouths.”

Though this model has been studied in many communities - and ultimately not worked in a few - Kasper thinks that the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic are making more people step up, willing to make commitments and try a new way of building community.

“It used to be about growing community and which one is larger,” Kasper added. “And now it’s just, let’s be there for one another. Let’s hold each other.”

## News

# Booker: Blacks and Jews must work together to fight prejudice

By Aiden Pink

African-Americans and Jewish Americans must unite to challenge violence and prejudice as they did in past generations, Sen. Cory Booker said in a Zoom interview Monday with Forward editor-in-chief Jodi Rudoren.

Booker is pushing to pass his police reform bill, which has been blocked in the Senate, but said that the most significant change in policing would only occur with cultural change by ending people’s indifference to racism.

“I just want America to know itself, to know the wretchedness of the assault on Black bodies,” he said.

Booker said that he was not surprised by the wave of activism that emerged after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May, but was concerned that the movement would peter out.

“I get delighted when I see some teenage white girl speaking about racial issues in a way that my ancestors and [author James] Baldwin would be proud of,” he said. “This gives me delight and gives me sustenance, but I can’t get comfortable. I can’t believe that somehow we’ve got momentum that sustains.”

Booker singled out two groups that have experience fighting long battles against injustice: Jews and African-Americans. The communities “have been forced to figure this out for at least eons,” he said.

Rudoren asked him to comment on recent episodes involving prominent African-American figures, such as TV host Nick Cannon and Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver DeSean Jackson, sharing anti-Semitic statements on social media. Booker said he wasn’t familiar with those incidents, but added, “It’s not up to Jewish people to defend anti-Semitism. It should be

Black folks, Christian folks, Muslim folks - in the same way that I don't want to have to be the one to call out racism all the time."

Although polls show former Vice President Joe Biden with a comfortable lead over President Trump, Booker told viewers that he was worried about complacency, as well as the effects of voter suppression and the coronavirus pandemic on electoral turnout. "I don't know if Blacks and Jews have a corner on this, but we worry," he quipped.

Booker declined to be drawn on who he supported to be named as Biden's vice president, noting that he serves in the Senate with several people reported to be on the former veep's shortlist. But he made clear that he was not interested in serving in Biden's cabinet: "Leave me where I am," he said.

Booker, who served as the president of a Jewish society at Oxford University when he was there as a Rhodes Scholar, frequently peppered his Forward interview with Hebrew and Yiddish phrases. Rudoren ended the interview by asking Booker to share a text that he had recently read and found meaningful.

Booker selected a verse in Genesis that is inscribed outside the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, the site of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination: "Behold, here cometh the dreamer, let us slay him and see what becomes of his dream." The line is a quote from Joseph's brothers, who were jealous of him and threw him in a pit to die.

Booker said that the verse came to mind after Floyd's killing.

"I think about that all the time in the wake of tragic deaths of people that believed in this country, who dreamed of better days, who were willing as King was to die for that," he said. "It's up to us, the survivors, to decide whether we will perish in the pit as a nation, or rise as Joseph did to lead the nation through a crisis. That question - what will become of the dream - is something our generation will have to answer."

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Life

## How late is too late to say something?

By Abby Sher

*Dear Bintel,*

*I volunteer helping to run a Jewish group that has been unable to meet or do anything for months because of the virus. We've been trying to put out an email in support of Black Lives Matters in the wake of all the protests, which I'm in support of. But everyone is very stressed about the phrasing, making actionable commitments and not being just another empty statement. But we're not even able to perform our main function - how much can we really commit to doing?! We've rewritten the email about a thousand times, someone has a major issue with every draft, and now it's been weeks and I feel like it's too late to say anything. Doesn't it look just as bad that we're this late saying anything? Can we just fly under the radar this time?*

- Too Late

Dear Too Late,

Buckle your seatbelt and get to writing.

You're right, it is very late for your organization to be still drafting your message, but you are not allowed to "fly under the radar." None of us can.

Remember Moses and all of his grand excuses when God asked him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt? First, he told God, "They won't believe me, and they won't listen to me." [Exodus 4:1]. God taught him how to turn a rod into a snake and the waters of the Nile into blood, so the Israelites would give Moses some cred. Still, Moses came back with, "Please, my Lord, I have never been good with words... not in the past and also not now... I'm slow of speech and tongue." [Exodus 4:10] So God promised to give Moses the right words to say.

oses's excuses kept coming, but God's answer remained firm: you can and you must.

I'll admit, I'm a grand excuse maker. I've lost out on friendships, job prospects and trust by being late

or unresponsive. I've stayed quiet about racial inequality and assumed somebody smarter and more charismatic would say what needed to be said. In the past few months, even when I did go to protests, I stood in the back; I echoed chants at half-volume.

But I read this quote from Maya Angelou just this morning: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

Too Late, you and I know better. We know that silence equals violence. When we say nothing, we leave our audience guessing whether we agree or disagree; whether we're apathetic or ignorant or counting on someone else to do the talking for us. When we spend all of our time trying to craft the perfect something to say, we're not making the situation any better – we might even be doing active harm. If your organization

never says anything for fear of making an empty statement, you might inadvertently make the opposite statement instead.

Plus, spoiler alert: there is no perfect way to phrase your message. There will be someone offended or taken aback by your words no matter how many times you change it. And that's scary – but not nearly as scary as facing racism and violence daily.

So urge your organization to get over themselves and hit send. Today. It's far better to make these mistakes than to say nothing at all.

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*Abby Sher is a writer in Maplewood, New Jersey. Got a question? Send it to [bintel@forward.com](mailto:bintel@forward.com)*



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