

# The Best of the *Forward*

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## News

# Nick Cannon and Public Enemy's Professor Griff were both called antisemitic. Only one recovered.

By Ari Feldman

In 1989, the rapper known as Professor Griff made anti-Jewish comments that derailed his career.

More than 30 years later, when Griff appeared on the actor Nick Cannon's podcast in July, their conversation about that moment nearly derailed Cannon's career – until it didn't.

The divergent paths these two men traveled offer a kind of test case of celebrity *teshuvah*, or repentance – the broad theme of the Jewish High Holidays, which begin this weekend – and show the role that Jewish leaders can play in legitimizing, or not, the *teshuvah* of Black entertainers who have offended Jews.

Cannon, after issuing two public apologies for referencing antisemitic ideas, was embraced by rabbis and leaders of Jewish organizations who saw the podcast as a teachable moment. They spent hours with Cannon on private phone calls and public Zoom conversations to show him why his comments had been unacceptable.

"Teach me, fix me, lead me," he told Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

The process may have saved Cannon's place in Hollywood, with ViacomCBS recently opening the door to working with him after announcing in July that they were severing their decades-long relationship.

But Professor Griff, 60, whose antisemitic remarks almost put an end to the seminal hip-hop group Public Enemy, has mostly failed in his efforts at rehabilitation. Where his bandmates became cultural fixtures, Professor Griff – whose real name is Richard Griffin – is a notorious footnote.

Griff's professional life has been bookended by two close encounters with the Jewish world: What

happened to him in 1989 when he was truly canceled, and a 2019 conversation with a Philadelphia rabbi, during which he began to articulate his frustrations over living as a cultural pariah – and finally felt heard.

Ambassadors from Jewish organizations said in recent interviews that they simply do not think Griff has made the proper admission of guilt required for public forgiveness and re-entry into the world of mass culture. But in a series of conversations over the last several weeks, Griff told me that he is still seeking that cultural passport, and vindication for having his life "destroyed" by being labeled a Jew-hater.

He said he would do whatever it takes – but that the Jewish world won't let him.

"I'll go to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Black Power movement center, the Black Lives Matter, the White House, and I'll apologize everywhere I need to apologize," Griff told me.

"Come show me the error of my ways. Come show me what I said that was wrong, because Professor Griff needs to be educated. But no one calls, Ari."

## The Minister of Information

Griff grew up in Roosevelt, New York, on Long Island, alongside Carlton Ridenhour, who is known by his rap moniker, Chuck D.

Chuck D was the eventual frontman for Public Enemy, but Griff played a key role in imbuing the group with its famously militant Black Power approach to rap. Before Richard became Professor Griff, he had learned it from an Islamic study group he was part of while Ridenhour was honing his musical skills at Adelphi University, and through his admiration for Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam.

Public Enemy blended proto-Black Lives Matter politics with hip-hop showboating: William Drayton Jr. – Flava Flav, the hype man – was known for his outlandish outfits and enormous clock-necklaces. But Chuck D’s stone-faced persona grounded the group, and its production team, the “Bomb Squad,” provided the industrial, controlled-chaos beats that channeled his righteous fury.

Griff, who traveled with suitcases full of books that he handed out to Chuck and the band’s entourage, was the “Minister of Information.” He mimicked the structure and community outreach of the Nation of Islam, modeling the group’s backup dancers, who were also security guards, on the Fruit of Islam, the Nation’s security force.

In the spring of 1989, Public Enemy’s second studio album, “It Takes a Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back,” was headed for platinum, and the group’s next single, “Fight the Power,” played in the opening credits of the most talked-about movie of the year, Spike Lee’s “Do the Right Thing.”

Then, in May, Griff filled in for a press-weary Chuck D and was interviewed by the late reporter David Mills. Speaking at a Comfort Inn in the nation’s capital, Griff and Mills, who was also Black, spoke poolside, and after about 40 minutes the conversation turned to who controlled the music industry. Griff parroted canards and historical misunderstandings popularized in the Black community by Farrakhan.

Mills’ article in the conservative Washington Times is not available online, nor in digital archives, but other news accounts from 1989 said Griff was quoted saying things about Jews including “They have a history of killing black men.”

“The Jews can come against me. They can send the IRS after me,” he said. Using an anti-gay slur, he suggested that Jews would send hit men after him. “Listen, they have a history of doing this.”

In Mills’ chronicle of the conversation, which focused almost entirely on Griff’s anti-Jewish comments, Griff fingered “the Jews” for control of the international drug trade and the historical slave trade, and said that Jews “have a grip on America.”

The sound bite that has dogged Griff ever since – though he insists he never said – was that Jews are responsible “for the majority of wickedness that goes on across the globe.” In “Analytiz,” the book of collected interviews Griff published in 2009, he suggests he could not have said that because it would require him to “know about the majority of wickedness that went on around the globe, which is impossible.”

The backlash was swift after Mills’ interview was published and picked up by New York newspapers, with Jewish groups like the ADL condemning Griff.

Bill Adler, then the publicist for Def Jam, Public Enemy’s label, recalled in a recent interview that Griff told him that he was just repeating facts from books in his suitcase, some of which he’d received from the Nation of Islam’s research center.

They included a manuscript version of “The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews,” which would be published in 1991 and falsely claimed Jews played a major role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and in slave-owning in the antebellum South; “The Octopus: Documented Details of Many Tentacles of the Jewish World Conspiracy;” and “The International Jew,” Henry Ford’s infamous work of anti-Jewish propaganda that inspired Hitler.

“Just to hammer home the point I said, ‘Griff, look, Henry Ford would have readily upholstered the seats of his cars with your Black skin as with my Jewish skin,’” Adler said. “He looked at me and said, ‘Bill, I can’t help it, it’s in the book.’”

Chuck D didn’t endorse what Griff said, but neither did he condemn it, because of the pressure he felt to demonstrate Black solidarity, Adler said. [A representative for Chuck D did not respond to a request for comment.]

“It wasn’t terribly satisfying for me to talk to him,” Adler said of Chuck.

### **Apology made to whoever pleases**

Executives at CBS Records, which distributed Def Jam’s work, threatened to cut the band off unless they defused the situation.

Public Enemy's manager, Lyor Cohen, who like Adler is Jewish, as well as other Def Jam officials, pushed Chuck D to fire Griff publicly. Hank Shocklee, a member of the group's production team, and Bill Stephney, the Def Jam executive who had given Public Enemy its name, told Chuck that without firing Griff, the group would never get another major record deal.

So he did.

"We are not anti-Jewish," Chuck said at a news conference announcing Griff's ouster a month after Mills' May 9 article. "We are not anti-anyone. We are pro-Black."

Afterward, Adler recalled in our interview, Chuck D went to the room backstage and began throwing things around and cursing. [Shocklee and Stephney did not respond to requests for comment. A representative for Cohen did not comment.]

Griff told me that around the time of the firing, Farrakhan spoke to the band privately in his stately Chicago home and said Public Enemy should let Chuck D lead through the storm. Griff complied by stepping back while Chuck D met with Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center several times, and appeared on radio and TV to talk about racism in the music industry.

Griff told me he now feels Chuck D threw him under the bus, and regrets ceding control of the situation.

On Public Enemy's first single after the episode, "Welcome to the Terrordome," Chuck D exorcised his frustrations, drawing more criticism from the ADL, which deemed the lyrics antisemitic.

*Crucifixion ain't no fiction*

*So-called chosen frozen*

*Apology made to whoever pleases*

*Still they got me like Jesus.*

## **Fear of antisemitism**

That August, Chuck quietly allowed Griff to return to Public Enemy, but forced him to stay in the background; he received no writing credits on most of the group's subsequent albums.

But Griff's return and new title, "Supreme Allied Chief of Community Relations," rankled Cooper, who said he told Chuck D at the time, "we weren't satisfied." Abe Foxman, then director of the ADL, accused Public Enemy of a "repugnant charade characterized by cynicism and disdain for the public."

The group continued to offend Jewish groups – by releasing a track called "Swindler's Lust" in 1999 and by forming "Confrontation Camp," a short-lived spinoff project that put Griff in a starring role. Chuck D eventually became an elder statesman of rap, and Flava Flav grew a reality TV show brand.

Griff started his own band, The Last Asiatic Disciples, which never had a hit single. He moved to Atlanta, started a family and a business called Sirius Mindz, through which he sells books he's written, gives online classes on Black history and Hermetic philosophy, and sells a "brain tonic" of herbal extracts.

He is a silent partner in some other ventures, he said, because his name is too toxic to make his involvement public. He continued to make some concert appearances with Public Enemy, and was inducted, with the group, into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2013. This year, he and Public Enemy are receiving Grammy Lifetime Achievement Awards.

Yet Griff remains bitter about what he sees as disproportionate repercussions from comments that he says were largely taken out of context, in particular the idea that Griff said Jews were generally "wicked."

What Mills quoted him saying was: "I deal with Jews every day... I'm trying not to get affected by their wickedness."

What Griff told me is that he was talking about individuals he knew, not the whole Jewish people.

"Individuals, and I stated that in my interview, but the way David Mills wrote it, it was like, 'the Jews,'" he said. "'Wickedness' because of their dealings with Black people in the music industry. Not because they're Jews. I don't hate Jews because they're Jews – I don't hate Jews, period."

Yet Mills, who went on to write for HBO's "The Wire,"

and win two Emmy awards for TV writing before dying in 2010, never stopped believing that Griff had espoused “Jew-hatred,” as he termed it in a 2007 blog post.

“The tragedy is that Professor Griff is a young man who sincerely wants to help his people,” Mills wrote in a July 1989, recap of the summer’s events. “Perhaps the most depressing revelation of the Professor Griff affair is that young Black minds are being poisoned with white-supremacist hate literature, in the name of Black empowerment. It is a stupefying irony.”

Griff said that in the aftermath of his 1989 comments he was ostracized by the Black community, too, though he has remained a part of the Nation of Islam. He said he still faces threats against his life stemming from that time. When he leaves his home, he said, he brings multiple loaded guns and sometimes bodyguards, even to visit local parks. [He declined to specify who the threats come from.]

“That’s what antisemitism has done to my life,” he said. “I hate the word, the phrase, ‘antisemitism,’ because it destroyed my life.”

## Vulnerable ourselves

So when the Professor got an invitation to speak at a synagogue last year, he thought it was a joke.

It came via Khalid el-Hakim, a teacher and historian Griff met in 2003 at a talk in Detroit, Michigan. El-Hakim operates the Black History 101 Mobile Museum, which showcases more than 10,000 artifacts from the slave-trade period through the advent of hip-hop culture.

The two shared a passion for teaching – el-Hakim has a doctorate in education – and admiration for Farrakhan: El-Hakim has said that Farrakhan’s exhortation to improve conditions in Black communities at the Million Man March in 1991 inspired the creation of the mobile museum. Shortly after they met, Griff began traveling with el-Hakim and the museum around the country, speaking to students, churches and community groups about American racism and Black resistance.

“He’s not this figure that people have in their minds,” el-Hakim said of the antisemitism allegations that

always follow his friend. “If he was that guy, I would never invite somebody like that out on the road with me.”

In 2019, Rabbi Jeremy Gerber asked El-Hakim to bring the museum to Cong. Ohev Shalom, his Conservative synagogue of about 270 families in the Philadelphia suburb of Wallingford. Gerber was running a series of interfaith programs with local Christian and Muslim leaders called “courageous conversations” around racial inequality, white privilege, Israel and other difficult subjects.

When el-Hakim asked if Griff could join, Gerber said yes.

Gerber, 40, told me that he looked back at Griff’s 1989 comments, and that he felt like he understood what Griff was trying to say – that the Jewish community is not free from sin in the history of American racism – and that that message still needed to be heard.

He said he received no pushback from his community in inviting Griff, because he has slowly “built up their tolerance” for conversations about race.

Jews are justifiably proud of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other Jewish involvement in civil rights, Gerber noted.

“But there were Jews on the other side, and I think we don’t want to talk about it, and we don’t want to confront it,” he said. “But it is very difficult to be in a relationship and ask somebody else for the vulnerability of being open and honest about things that they said and apologize, if we’re not willing to be open and honest and vulnerable ourselves.”

Gerber said that he noticed that Griff was clearly guarded when he walked into Ohev Shalom.

In a panel discussion following a viewing of the mobile museum, Griff talked about his feelings around the word “antisemitism:” He said he did not understand how he could be considered “antisemitic” when the Semitic languages to which the word refers to, in addition to Hebrew and Aramaic, were and are spoken by African and dark-skinned people from the Middle East and East Africa – an idea he shared with The New York Times in 1990. [Arabic and Amharic, the language

spoken by much of Ethiopia, are Semitic languages.]

But since the 1870s, the term has been associated with prejudice against Jewish people, not some broader Semitic people. [Academics increasingly prefer stylizing the phrase “antisemitism” instead of “anti-Semitism” to avoid that confusion; the Forward recently adopted this spelling in its style guide partially for this reason.]

Gerber said even so, it was still important for Griff to be able to express his misgivings about the subtle linguistic irony of labeling a Black person with a term that seems to refer to a nonwhite people, and that word having the power it does over famous Black people.

“Jewish people are very, very, very, very sensitive and have every right to be, every right to be,” Griff said, referring to the Holocaust and the history of Jewish persecution, “but Black people have every right to be equally as sensitive when it comes to all the things that have happened to us and that is happening to us right now, as we speak.”

## Who wants to talk to Professor Griff about “the Jews”?

Griff, Gerber and el-Hakim thought they had made some progress. They planned to have more public talks together, but the pandemic put that on hold.

Then the podcast happened, and Griff felt both unfairly maligned and sidelined all over again: Instead of Chuck D answering for him in 1989, now it was Nick Cannon. Same meetings with Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, same cultural reinstatement. Griff says he received another round of death threats over the interview.

The lack of Jewish outreach to Griff was notable given that two other Black cultural figures who made antisemitic social media posts around the same time – the rapper Ice Cube and NFL player DeSean Jackson – received well-publicized overtures from prominent Jews. Jackson was invited to tour Auschwitz with the leader of a Holocaust commemoration group; Ice Cube had a friendly conversation with the head of the Zionist Organization of America.

Yet Cannon’s comeback began with an extended apology – which Cannon later said was motivated by conversations with Black Jews who explained the significance of his remarks – something Griff has never given publicly.

Cannon wrote on Twitter that his comments “reinforced the worst stereotypes of a proud and magnificent people and I feel ashamed of the uninformed and naïve place that these words came from.”

The apology convinced Cooper to meet one-on-one with Cannon. During the meeting, Cooper said that Cannon, a doctoral student in theology at Howard University, quoted the rabbinic sage Maimonides on repentance: That if a person wrongs you, they only need sincerely ask for forgiveness three times. If you refuse them on the last time, they can be considered to have atoned.

As for Griff, Cooper said, “I have no idea if he wants to apologize, or feels he has nothing to apologize for.” He added that Griff was welcome to visit the Wiesenthal Center’s Museum of Tolerance when it reopens.

Rabbi Noam Marans, the American Jewish Committee’s director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations, also said it was Cannon’s apology made him seem worth the investment of the group’s time and reputation.

Cannon “has enormous reach, and if a person with enormous reach allows themselves to be reachable by the forces of good and truth, then we need to help in that process,” Marans said.

He and other AJC officials spoke with Cannon privately, and then hosted him for a Zoom conversation that received more than 57,000 views. The only friction came when Cannon declined to denounce Farrakhan, saying that he can “condemn the message, but I can never condemn the messenger.”

“We appreciate the honesty of the answer, Nick,” Marans said, “and I know it won’t surprise you that that still remains for us not fully satisfactory.” The comment reminded me of what Cooper said about Chuck D reinstating Griff, and Adler about his conversation with Chuck.

The AJC didn't make a similar effort with Griff, Marans said, because Griff hadn't demonstrated a willingness to learn, and had not "apologized both credibly and substantively," as Cannon had.

Indeed, Griff had continued defending his conversation with Cannon, denying in a July 16 video that Cannon had spread "crazy antisemitic conspiracy theories" and insisting, "There's nothing antisemitic about what we said on that interview."

Marans of the AJC said he saw "little comparison between these two cases at the moment," referring to Cannon's repentance and Griff's resistance.

"We don't forgive on behalf of the Jewish people," he noted. But he also said his group's outreach in such a situation can't risk conferring legitimacy on the wrong person, because "the credibility and good name of either a Jewish organization or the Jewish community is at stake. And that's not an unimportant matter."

But Griff feels that Jewish groups, by only bringing certain Black public figures onto their platforms, effectively choose who gets the stamp of cultural approval and who doesn't.

He said that Marans, Cooper and others involved in these public rehabilitations represent a cultural reality in which people have to "bow down and submit themselves to making sure Jewish people are safe and happy at the end of the day – not the entire Jewish people, but these particular individuals that position themselves to speak for the vast majority of Jews."

"This is what's being said among Black people outside of the earshot of white Jewish guys like you," he told me, responding to the idea that Chuck D, Nick Cannon and himself had not "satisfied" the white Jewish men they were talking to. "They will never be fucking satisfied... You can go fucking do back flips, apologize to until the fucking cows come home. You will always be antisemitic."

Lewis Gordon, a professor of philosophy at the University of Connecticut, agreed that these very public exchanges can inadvertently fall into a familiar racial power dynamic: The Black man has to jump through hoops held by white people in order to regain access to

money and platforms controlled by white people, even when those white people are Jews who may have faced their own discrimination and prejudice.

"It's patronizing. They're treated as children," said Gordon, who is both Black and Jewish. "There are white entertainers who spew a lot of antisemitic garbage, and we don't see them being brought to school."

What can get lost in asking Black entertainers to have these conversations on Jewish terms, Gordon said, is nuance around the deeply complicated and contradictory history of Black-Jewish relations. That spans the historical reality of white Jewish racism and involvement in the slave trade as well as the influential community of Black Jews. [Jews participated in and profited from the slave trade in the U.S. and South and Central America, but scholars agree that overall, they did not own slaves or financially contribute to or benefit from slavery at a higher rate than the general population.]

These are "communities of people trying to educate each other in real time, and it's gonna happen in a sloppy way," he said.

Griff has never disavowed what he said in 1989, but he says now that the broad brushstrokes came out of ignorance.

"I was 29 years old and my information about Jewish people came through the lens that other white people have set up," he said, referring to Henry Ford's book. "I should have handled the information that I received and put it under the microscope and done some deeper cross-referencing before I started running my mouth in interviews."

He still wants to talk with Jews about Jews and racism, Jews and slavery, Jews and the music industry. Who wants to have that conversation with him?

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## Life

# 5781's first trend: High Holiday care packages help Jews create shul at home

By Irene Connelly

Amy Cohen knew the package was coming. Her synagogue, New York City's B'nai Jeshurun, had told her to expect some materials to guide her through this year's slate of virtual High Holiday offerings. Still, when a stylish linen tote bag bearing the synagogue's logo arrived at her door, she was "moved to tears."

Inside was a booklet of holiday blessings, a jar of honey, holiday cards designed by a member of the congregation and a template for building "conversation starter dice." The package even included tea lights reminiscent of the synagogue's traditional Neilah "parade," in which children carry tiny candles to the *bima* before the shofar's final blast.

"To call it a care package would be an understatement," Cohen said.

After months of exile from their physical buildings, most Conservative and Reform synagogues have become accustomed to hosting services online. But as the High Holidays approach, rabbis are looking for ways to differentiate at-home observance from an ordinary Zoom Shabbat. B'nai Jeshurun is one of many synagogues distributing gift baskets or "kits" to remind congregants of familiar traditions and equip them for a High Holiday season like no other. It's a pandemic-era innovation that, rabbis say, just might become a new tradition.

"I wanted something that would put people in the holiday spirit, [let them] know they're being thought about, and give them the tools they need to create small sanctuaries in their homes," said Rabbi Ellie Miller of MAKOM, a non-denominational congregation in Morristown, N.J.

The practice of giving small gifts or treats around the High Holidays is hardly new. In normal years, Miller usually hands out seasonal goodies like honey sticks.

But this year is different: Months before the High Holidays, rabbis and synagogue staff began asking themselves what their congregants would need to celebrate at home. Momentum grew on a private Facebook group for clergy, where members swapped photos and tips as they bought materials and assembled packages.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz, a senior fellow at Hazon and the project leader of the Clergy Leadership Initiative, said the new practice is widespread among his peers, with synagogues sending home everything from "the standard challah and honey" to objects that will help congregants curate an sanctuary-like "aesthetic and mood" in their homes.

Of course, tote bags and honey jars cost money, and they're gaining popularity in a year when many synagogues are experiencing tremendous economic insecurity.

"Every synagogue is weighing this," said Schwarz of the financial burdens gift baskets entail. But at a time when congregants may be feeling distanced from their synagogue, he sees them as a smart allocation of resources. "You have to make some extra efforts, at this point in time, to make people think that it's worth being part of your synagogue," he said. "These little touches might be a good investment."

Miller, who runs MAKOM on what she calls a "shoestring budget," was able to produce her kits for about five dollars apiece thanks to one "phenomenal helper:" her 13-year-old son, who packaged the candles, wrapped up the honey sticks and assembled the kits.

Rabbi Ariana Katz of Hinenu: The Baltimore Justice Shtiebl, a non-denominational congregation in Baltimore, Md., said the kits' cost was offset by the

money the synagogue is saving by not hosting in-person events, like its traditional *oneg* on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. “We didn’t have to get a million tiny brownies,” she pointed out.

The kit Miller of MAKOM created combines playful and practical elements: besides honey candy and apple chips, her congregants will receive holiday candles [tall ones for those who own candlesticks, and votives for those who don’t], *yahrzeit* candles and a troubleshooting guide to Zoom services. Kids will get crayons and craft projects to mimic the in-person youth programming they’re missing this year.

For synagogues with large congregations, assembling High Holiday kits can involve complicated logistical planning. In May, staff at Park Avenue Synagogue, a Conservative congregation in New York City, started working with an outside contractor to source and ship the gift baskets making their way to members’ homes. Among the items each package includes an embroidered challah cover, a citron-scented candle and special stationary that congregants will use to complete writing prompts to be assigned during services.

Smaller synagogues have tasked talented congregants with designing High Holiday kits that reflect their particular character. At Hinenu, Katz turned to her congregation of “teachers and punks and artists” for help curating a quirky array of offerings. One congregant designed a floral motif to accompany a printed letter from the synagogue. Another wrote a guide for “respectfully foraging” one’s own *lulav*. A third contributed an original painting for each box – 135 in total.

Meanwhile, homemade apple cakes make tasty centerpieces to the gift bags distributed by Temple Beth Israel, a Reform congregation in Plattsburgh, N.Y. Rabbi David Kominsky said that a single capable congregant baked 75 of them, one for each family.

Cohen said the box she received from B’nai Jeshurun gave her hope during “during a really dark time,” and other congregants echoed those sentiments. For Sam Klein, who attends Temple Rodef Shalom in Falls Church, Va., picking up a High Holiday gift basket from

the synagogue was a chance to reconnect with clergy.

“You couldn’t see their smiling faces behind the masks, but you could read their engaging eyes,” he said.

Most rabbis are unsure whether High Holiday kits will stick around. If congregations are able to meet in person next year, they may be less necessary.

But Katz said the exercise has given her a new appreciation for the way physical objects can heighten the experience of Jewish rituals. She’s already brainstorming new ways to commemorate milestone events in her congregation, from sparkling grape juice for new members to candles on *yahrzeit* anniversaries.

“I think there is something about receiving gifts from the community,” she said. “The stuff of life, the artifacts, make [Judaism] feel realer.”

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## Opinion

# Call it what it is: Normalization of men. The women stayed home.

By Noa Balf

On Tuesday, on the White House lawn, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain celebrated the signing of the Abraham Accords peace deal between the three countries. The spouses of the U.S. President and the Israeli Prime Minister were the only women participants in the normalization signing ceremony. This is not a coincidence.

Women have been entirely absent from recent negotiations in the Middle East. Even Sara Netanyahu and Melania Trump's walk across the lawn seemed performative, symbolic of their supportive roles to the men of action.

Historic action remains the purview of men, while women observe from the sidelines.

In this regard, the agreement between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain is not historic or transformative at all; rather, it continues a longstanding reality of diplomacy and international relations: It is created by and for elite men.

With some notable exceptions, most negotiations between Israel, Arab states, and Palestinians have been conducted by men. To this day, the number of women at the table in an official and unofficial capacity (formal negotiations & track II) is in the single digits. Representing Israel, you have Prime Minister Golda Meir, Justice Minister Tzippi Livni, and a few mid-ranking women who have been largely erased from historical accounts of negotiations.

And this is par for the course. My research on gender equality, political representation, and political leadership in Israel shows that women remain absent from decision making centers and are prevented from implementing social change.

Netanyahu is not known for promoting women. Senior women in his party are "rewarded" with positions like

the Minister of Gender Equality, a ministry without a clear budget or ability to enforce existing gender legislation. The Social Equality Ministry was not even able to guarantee women were properly represented in the negotiations. All this despite Israel being the first country to adopt UNSC Resolution 1325 when it added section 6c1 to the Women's Equal Rights Law. The landmark UN Resolution 1325 adopted in 2000 calls for the equal representation and full involvement of women, and the consideration of gendered perspectives, in all peace and security efforts.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's practice reflects common political patterns in Israel. My research shows that as women gain seniority in Israeli politics, they become increasingly marginalized within their parties and the legislature. They are forced to focus almost exclusively on gender issues without support from colleagues.

And the new Abraham Accords agreement is likely to exacerbate the disadvantages women in Israel face due to a lack of representation and growing wealth gaps.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's messaging in support of normalization focuses on the agreement with the UAE and Bahrain as a catalyst for economic opportunity. But it's crucial that we ask who is likely to benefit from the expansion of economic relations and trade between these countries?

Over the next few weeks and months we will hopefully learn more about the details of this agreement. However, it is fair to assume that the UAE and Bahrain are particularly interested in gaining access to Israel's specialized industries – military and security production, high tech and surveillance, and pharmaceuticals.

So why are women in Israel unlikely to benefit economically from expanded trade? The work force in Israel is deeply segregated by gender. Women are

underrepresented in the industries and corporations that stand to increase their revenue and are concentrated in low wage work.

According to the Adva Center, “The most prevalent professions among women are teachers, administrative workers and caregivers, in which salary levels are relatively low, even for employees with college degrees. Men are concentrated in high-pay technical and managerial professions [managers, computer programming], as well as in driving and security occupations.”

Furthermore, the gender pay gap in Israel grows as the educational level increases. This is in part due to women’s caretaking and differences in work hours.

In other words, women are already excluded from the industries that benefit from normalization. The wealthy in Israel will get richer, and the wealth gap will increase.

Moreover, Netanyahu’s policy priorities reflect his belief that political success in Israel depends on a commitment to a hyper-masculine approach. By branding himself as a leader on security, the economy, and international relations, he is rewarded with electoral support from a significant number of men. There is a gender voting gap in Israel that resembles global trends, women are more likely to support leftist parties. Netanyahu has no electoral incentive to include women or consider women, because his base of support is mostly men.

So let’s call the Abraham Accords what they are: Normalization for men. The women stayed home.

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

## Culture

# After WWI, Jewish Warsaw crumbled; in my father’s memories, it lived on

By Deborah Tannen

I’ve always been proud that my parents were born in Europe – my father in Poland, my mother in Russia. When I was a child, I thought it exotic. As I got older, I liked that it gave me a closer connection to my European roots, compared to most American Jews of my generation whose parents were born here; it was their grandparents who came from Europe. But it wasn’t until I began writing a book about my father’s life that I understood the reason for the difference – and its significance.

My parents came to the United States at the tail end of the massive influx that brought more than 2 million East European Jews to this country between 1880 and 1924. The year my father came, 1920, was the last year there were no limits on immigration from Europe. The very next year the Statue of Liberty lowered her torch: in 1921, Congress imposed quotas. And that explains something about my mother’s immigration: 1921 was the year she left Minsk with her mother and three older siblings to join their father and two more siblings who had gone to America the year before. Because of that one-year delay, when they made it over the border to Poland, they had to wait two years before they were allowed to enter the US in 1923 – in under the wire. With the draconian immigration act of 1924, the door to America slammed shut to East European Jews.

“Daddy,” I asked my father when he was 97, “do you feel more American or more Polish?”

He said, “I feel like a Jew.

I feel like a Jew too. I feel Jewish in the same way that I feel I’m American and a woman. They’re all part of

what I guess would be called my identity: immutable, fundamental, defining. For my father, being Jewish was immutable, fundamental, and defining in a way that nationality couldn't. Though his fealty to the U.S. was deep and unwavering – he said often that this is the best country in the world – he never felt American because he lived the first dozen years of his life in Warsaw. Yet when he talked about Poland, he used “Pole” to refer to Christian citizens of Poland. Jews were not regarded as, or treated as, full citizens. They were seen, first and foremost, as Jews. They didn't have the rights or opportunities that Christians had. Their participation in government and civil service, in business and civil society, was restricted or forbidden.

My father, Eli Tannen, was raised in a Hasidic household in Warsaw and came to the United States with his mother and sister just before he turned 12. In 1934, when he was 25 and married, he wrote to an aunt still living in Poland, “My memories of Warsaw and the large part of my life which I spent there are very sharp and sentimental. I have always felt myself part of that life and not of the life which I have led since I am in this country.” I think he never stopped feeling that way, though he lived in the U.S. for 72 more years. Finding that letter among my father's papers – he saved not only letters he received but copies of many he wrote – I began to understand why he'd held on to such astonishingly detailed memories of the Warsaw of his childhood, why he never tired of talking about them, and why I never tired of listening.

The Warsaw my father recalled and described was centered in the family he lived with until he was seven: he and his sister shared a room with their mother in her parents' large apartment on *Twarda Ulica*, one of the main streets in the Hasidic community of Warsaw. [His father lived there until he came down with tuberculosis and moved out, so as not to infect the children, when my father was two; he died when my father was six.] My father was the youngest member of his mother's large extended family – and it was very large: nine of her younger siblings lived there when my father was small. “That was what I loved most,” he told me, “the liveliness, the warmth, of so many aunts and uncles.”

My father's earliest memories are of life in that

household: “During the day, especially in preparation for the Sabbath, there was fearful activity in the kitchen. Tremendous *challahs* had to be baked at home: long, braided, shiny white loaves of bread. I've never seen anything like them in this country. Live chickens, sometimes a duck or two, were running around the kitchen. They were kept at home until they were taken for kosher slaughtering and brought back home to be plucked and prepared, cooked in tremendous pots on a very large stove. Goose too. For Jewish holidays, the activity was even more elaborate, everything done according to strict rituals.”

What my father described as “fearful activity” went on in the neighborhood, too: “When I was growing up there was so much life, so much commotion, on the street. Friday was an especially busy, festive day. People were rushing about to get home in time to prepare for the Sabbath. They took baths in the public bathhouses and put on their holiday clothes. At dusk you saw men dressed in their finest: silk caftans, newer-looking black hats and shiny black boots. They carried their prayer books and folded prayer shawls. But it wasn't only Friday. Both sides of the street were lined with stores, and the sidewalks were always teeming with people – working men, women shopping, men going to and from the synagogue. People loudly haggled about prices. There were tragers – carriers – men hired by people too poor to hire a wagon. They walked about with ropes around their waist, which they used to tie amazing loads on their backs – a desk, a bed. Rarely did an automobile come through, but there were quite a few droshkis, horse-drawn carriages that took passengers, and open wagons for trade. The drivers were beating and yelling at their horses, and yelling at pedestrians to get out of the way. Occasionally a *kareta* drove by – a fancy carriage that rich people rode in. That caused a stir, as people wondered whether a rich person might get out, and what he might be after.”

When I first conceived the idea of writing about my father's life, I assumed it would focus on these memories, and help to preserve the Jewish community of Warsaw that was wiped out by the Nazis in WWII. I was still thinking of it that way when I began writing. Then I read, in an essay by the Polish historian Piotr Wróbel, that the First World War, not the second,

brought “the twilight of Jewish Warsaw,” because it was followed by a rise in Polish anti-Semitism and a decline in political and economic opportunity for Jews. I can see this decline in my father’s account of his family’s experiences during and after WWI, including many stories he told about his grandfather, whom he revered: “At one time, my grandfather had a furniture store. He sold his share to his partner so he would have more time to study Talmud, and made his living lending money. All payments were suspended during the war. When it ended in 1918, he made efforts to collect debts owed him. Of the few people he located, none agreed to pay. All his investments were a total loss. He took me with him on one of his attempts, to the home of an ex-Polish general. What remains in my memory is that he removed his hat in the man’s home, leaving on his head only the *yarmulke* resting beneath it. What shocked me is that my grandfather would doff his hat to a mere mortal.”

I suspect the grandfather brought along his grandson – a blue-eyed, tow-headed little boy – hoping that might soften the general’s heart and encourage him to repay even a fraction of the money he’d borrowed. Though my father remembers the encounter because of his grandfather’s deference, I see a man who no longer has a way to earn a living and support his family. The grandfather, who had supported his large family before the war, came to depend on what his oldest son could send from America.

There is another way that I see the lights going out on Hasidic Warsaw in my father’s recollections: nearly all his mother’s siblings – his aunts and uncles – were abandoning Hasidism. All but one of the brothers gave up religious study and traditional Hasidic garb when they reached their teens; they left for America one after the other. Most of the sisters received secular higher education – women weren’t required to study Talmud – and also emigrated. Two were swept up in the idealism of the Bolshevik revolution. One went to Russia to help build the just society communism promised, and died there. The youngest, Magda, who was only six years older than my father and more like an older sister to him than an aunt, became a devoted communist as a teenager, spent eight years in prison for her activism, survived the war in Russia, and after the war became a

high-ranking official in the Polish communist government.

I knew Magda. She reconnected with her siblings in the U.S. after the war, and, in 1959 when the cold war began to thaw, visited us in the U.S. several times, and we visited her in Poland. I should have connected her devotion to communism with my father’s, and to the crumbling of Hasidism, but I didn’t – until I began interviewing my father.

It’s 1999. I turn on my tape recorder and begin, “Today you’re going to tell me about your political life.”

“At the risk of arrest and deportation,” my father quips.

I laugh. “By the time I write my book, no one’s going to care.”

How naïve and thoughtless I was to laugh. During the McCarthy era, arrest wasn’t as common as blacklisting and firing, but it wasn’t uncommon either. Nor was deportation of suspected “subversives” born abroad. At 91, having been in this country nearly 80 years, my father still thought of himself as an immigrant, aware that he could, in theory at least, be sent back where he came from.

“When did you become a Communist?” I ask.

He answers the same way he answered my question about when he became an atheist: “When I was six, listening to my aunt Magda talking with her friends.” The confluence isn’t coincidental. Atheism is fundamental to communist ideology, which sees religion as keeping the oppressed from rising up against their oppressors, and separates people who should join together for the good of all. In the ideal communist world, all workers will unite: there will be no racism and no anti-Semitism. So the idealistic fervor that swept up Magda and her friends, as it did many young Warsaw Jews at the time, lured them not only toward communism but also away from their parents’ religion.

I once heard a rabbi say that atheism is the fourth denomination of modern Judaism. My father’s life shows a way this is true. Though he turned against religion, he never turned against Judaism; in Warsaw he

became both communist and Zionist. He felt proud of being Jewish, and taught us to be proud of it, too. His atheism, like his communism, was rooted in a wish to make the world, and the lives of the people in it, better – and that, too, is deeply Jewish: *tikkun olam*, the classic rabbinic injunction to repair the world. From this perspective, my father hewed to the Jewish religion even as he rejected his grandfather's Hasidism. In a way, he hewed to that, too. The word *hasid* derives from the Hebrew word for "kindness," reflecting the focus on actions that help others, which is fundamental to Judaism. When I asked relatives and friends about their impressions of my father, almost every one of them, in describing him, used the word "kind."

When my father was 11, and about to leave for America, his grandfather took him on his lap. "Tears streamed from beneath his gold-rimmed glasses, down his cheeks, and into his long white beard," my father recalled. "He knew he would never see me again. With his arm around my shoulders, he said, 'Never forget that you are a Jew.' He believed that when Jews went to America, they ceased to be Jews, because they stopped being Hasidic. Those were my grandfather's last words to me: 'Never forget that you are a Jew.' Sometimes I wonder, Did I betray him?"

"You didn't," I think. "You remember you're a Jew by remembering him. I remember I'm a Jew by remembering you."

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*Deborah Tannen is the author of "You Just Don't Understand," "You're Wearing THAT?" and, most recently, the memoir "Finding My Father," from which this essay has been adapted.*

## Culture

# 'Stretch one and paint it red' – Tales from the life of a Bronx soda jerk

By Len Berk

It was a very unusual experience – sitting in a wire mesh cage surrounded by dead chickens that were waiting to have their feathers removed. Aside from babysitting, it was my job: "Chicken Plucker." What was required was a quick jerky movement of the fingers and hand to sever the chicken feathers from the chicken. Before my time, this job had been performed by old Jewish ladies sitting outside a butcher shop. The introduction of the wire mesh cage took the plucking off the street. By the time I entered the profession, the cage room was the Cadillac in chicken plucking. It kept the floating and flying feathers within the confines of the cage, but unfortunately did not bode well for the pluckers, whose eyes, nose, ears and mouth were flooded with feathers and dust.

Bernie Weiner was the owner and only employee of this business except, of course for us kid Chicken Pluckers, also known as "Chicken Flickers." He would stand behind the counter where the chickens were displayed after their feathers had been plucked. Jewish housewives would enter the store, stand in front of the counter and feel the chickens, paying special attention to the breast in order to determine which chicken to buy. Very unscientific, I thought.

"Lady! Why are you feeling the breast so hard? It's a chicken, not Mae West," Bernie would always say. I thought those were the only words he knew.

I didn't last too long at that job; too much sneezing.

There were other places to get a job in the neighborhood. My allowance was insufficient for my needs as a teenager, so I always had to work, so I

decided to try my hand at soda jerking. Soda jerk! That's a term from the 40s and 50s that describes a person who dispenses carbonated soft drinks at a soda fountain. The way I saw it, there were three choices for me; Winkleman's Candy Store, located at the foot of the stairs of the Pelham Parkway & White Plains Road train station in the Bronx; Ruby's Ice Cream Parlor, 15 stores south of Winkleman's; and Smitty's Luncheonette, around the corner from Ruby's on Lydig Avenue. In the next few years, I worked as waiter, counterman and soda jerk at all of them.

Winkleman's was my first choice. There I met people who were either going to or returning from work as they ascended or descended the stairs of the elevated train station. They would stop in for a Coke, some chewing gum, a pack of cigarettes or an egg cream. Cigarettes were hard to come by in those days. Most were sent to the armed forces even though World War II had been over since 1945. Packs and cartons of cigarettes were hidden under the counter and available only for regular customers and I was their guardian. Mrs. Winkleman was mean and always had a snarl on her face. Mr. Winkleman was much easier to work with. After a few months, the job got really boring, so I left and moved on to Smithy's – a luncheonette and ice cream parlor. It was a lively place with a younger crowd than Winkleman's.

The owner was Jerry Smith. He was in his early twenties and pleasant to work for. Basically there were two positions there; the counterman prepared the food and ice cream dishes and the waiters served the people at the store's ten tables. I liked doing both jobs but preferred to work behind the counter.

To be successful at Smitty's, you had to learn the luncheonette lingo. When you took a customer's order you would either write it down or call it in, or both, depending on the circumstances. If two people were sitting in one of the booths and they ordered one "Bacon, lettuce and tomato on toast with mayonnaise," one "Grilled American Cheese & Bacon," "2 Coffees, one black, one with milk," you would write down or yell the following: "One BLT down, Mayo, one GABC, draw 2, one with cow juice." "Stretch one, paint it red" meant a Cherry Coke and "86" was code for "we're out of it."

"Wreck'em" meant an order of scrambled eggs; a "houseboat" was a banana split; a "dead eye" meant a poached egg; if you wanted something on the side, you

got it "in the alley; if you wanted your steak rare, it was "on the hoof." "On wheels" meant you were getting something to go; "Adams ale" was a glass of water and "lumber" was a toothpick.

I enjoyed working at Smitty's, but after a while, I felt the urge to move on, so I applied for a job at Ruby's.

Near the front of the store, there was a showcase displaying a vast array of racks of chocolate-covered candy and nuts, like you would find in a box of Barton's or Barricini chocolates. The boxes said "Ruby's Candies." Then, there was the soda fountain. Behind the counter, there were malted milk machines, a sandwich board, Silex coffee pots filled with fresh coffee, the griddle for making sandwiches and pancakes, and the carbonated water levers; when you jerked them down, they dispensed soda or just plain seltzer. That's where the name soda-jerk came from – the sudden jerk of the levers. "Jerk" was also a play on the word "clerk."

The back third of Ruby's was the seating area of the luncheonette. It had about 14 booths, each of which could accommodate four people.

Armed with my knowledge of the candy store and luncheonette business, I was first greeted by Herby Rubin, son of Pop Rubin, who owned Ruby's. Everybody called him Pop and, although I got to know him well during my time there, I never did find out his first name; he was always Pop.

Herby was the store manager and ran the luncheonette and ice cream part of the business. He asked me if I knew anything about candy making.

"No, but I'm a fast learner," I said.

He told me a little about the back room, where the candy was made; one of the job requirements, in addition to food preparation and service, was to assist Pop with making candy in the back room.

One of the functions I performed as a soda jerk was making whipped cream. We had a special machine that made the whipped cream without whipping. How could you make whipped cream without whipping the cream? The answer was a special machine that had two parts; a motor part on the bottom and a receptacle for the heavy cream on top. It seemed like a contradiction in terms, but as Ruby's official taster – and I must say that I was very very efficient at tasting the whipped

cream – the whipped cream turned out perfect.

The back room was the heart of the candy-making operation. To the left was a stove. On top of it was a large brass kettle used to make candy centers such as caramel, nougat, jelly and marzipan. Toward the middle of the room was a table with a marble top where the hot, viscous candy centers would be poured to cool and thicken, after which they would be cut and shaped, then later, covered with chocolate. Then, there was a room within the room in which a special stove heated a bath for the chocolate. Racks of candy centers, cut to appropriate sizes and shapes, would be placed in front of the heater where Helen sat. She would come in once a week to dip the centers.

Occasionally, when I was working in the back room while she was dipping, I would engage her in conversation and at the same time watch her dipping the candy centers in the melted chocolate and placing them on a marble table giving each piece the right curlicue swirl that would identify what lay inside the chocolate.

One day, Helen was called away for some emergency, and she had to leave. I was in the back room at the time. When I entered the chocolate dipping room, I noticed that the chocolate receptacle contained some warm and luscious-looking melted milk chocolate. There we were, the two of us – the vat of warm chocolate and me. What would any red-blooded chocolate lover do in this situation? It was obvious.

I took my index finger and immersed it in the vat of chocolate as far as it would go. After I removed it, I realized that what I had was a chocolate-covered index finger. Had I invented a new kind of candy? I put it in my mouth, pursed my lips and removed the finger, now free of most of the chocolate. I concentrated on the sensation of the chocolate in my mouth – that was a moment to remember.

During my several years at Ruby's, Pop called on me often to help him with the candy making. It was a lot like chemistry class in high school and I loved working with Pop. Three operations remain in my mind to this day. One was making Christmas candy canes:

*Heat sugar, corn syrup, water and cream of tartar in a saucepan to hard-ball stage. Add peppermint extract. When cool enough to handle, divide in two parts; 80% and 20%. Add red coloring to the smaller part. Form*

*larger part into thumb shape and small part into four thin strips. Put red strips on top of the larger part and start pulling lengthwise. Pull and shape until you get the candy cane.*

Then there was deep-frying whole cashew nuts, and the third was making the “Cordial Cherry.”

That had always intrigued me even before I worked at Ruby's. A Cordial Cherry is a cherry encased in chocolate with a liquid center. How did the liquid get inside the chocolate? Was a hypodermic needle inserted into the chocolate? No! That is not how it's done. I found the answer in two places. One was in chemistry class; the second was when Pop showed me how to do it:

*Surround a dry Maraschino Cherry with a kneaded, thick, mixture of sugar, salt butter and corn syrup to form soft, pliable dough. Fully encase the cherry in the dough and let it stand to harden. Then dip in melted chocolate and let stand. In a few days, the acid from the cherry will react with the sugary dough to liquefy it; and that's how the liquid center is encased in chocolate.*

Pop called on me to prepare cashew nuts quite often and to this day I deep-fry them at home in my wok, at least once a month. My family is always happy when they come to visit and I bring out the cashews.

Things changed considerably after Pop died. The store closed for several days and when it reopened, Herby took over. The candy in the showcase was either sold or otherwise disposed of. Unfortunately, Herby did not have his father's skills and the candy-making part of the business came to a halt. Ruby's was never the same after Pop died, but I worked there until I moved on to my next world: college.

And who would have thought that the very hand that spread the mayo on the BLT, that had the index finger immersed in a vat of warm milk chocolate, that held the pencil that prepared a thousand balance sheets would hold the knife that sliced the Lox that made my world go round.

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*Len Berk is The Forward's lox columnist. He worked behind the counter at Zabars for 26 years.*

## Life

# My wife rejects our faith around her family. Can I make her stop?

By Shira Telushkin

Dear Bintel,

*I grew up in an Orthodox community where I went to day school and Jewish summer camps. Having always wanted to experiment outside the confines of my strict upbringings, I immediately made non-Jewish friends once I could go out on weekends. Many long Shabbos walks were secretly trips to concerts. I also exclusively dated non-Jewish women, maybe intentionally or maybe not.*

*This continued into college, where my tenth relationship began as usual. She was very involved in her church and though I was not observant, I introduced her to shuls and holidays like Purim. It was more of a flirtation than a sincere invitation for her to explore Judaism.*

*Unlike every previous girlfriend however, she immediately fell in love with Judaism. Of course Purim seemed like a cheating way to start but once she committed to Shabbos and fasted on her first Yom Kippur, I knew she really meant it. She immediately began conversion. I wanted it to validate the relationship but her commitment made it clear she wanted the pious lifestyle as well as being allowed to date me.*

*We married and continued living an Orthodox lifestyle. I was surprised how much I enjoyed keeping the rules and how little tempted I was anymore to break them. Her family is very religious and Christian but seemed more than welcoming about her conversion and showed great respect the first year of marriage when visiting our homes and synagogues.*

*After a year or so, her family began staying with us for much longer periods and this changed everyone's attitude towards Judaism for the worse. My mother-in-law at first gently raised concerns about the sexism and racism of Orthodox Jewish people regarding*

*specific instances. Now, she makes very exaggerated accusations with baseless proof.*

*My wife at first defended both the Jewish people and me. However, the last few months, I've seen her agree with her mother when she makes mean-spirited descriptions of Orthodox Jews. Even worse, against our neighbors repeated requests to stop, my wife allows her mother to break Shabbos in a neighborhood where this goes very noticed, staining our reputation. My wife now blatantly eats non-kosher food with her family, goes on outings during Shabbos and so on.*

*I warned my wife five years ago when she began conversion that this process was not something you can opt out of if it no longer fits your lifestyle. She promised it was what she wanted. I told her she would be doing nothing wrong if she didn't convert or considered a more liberal conversion option.*

*This would not matter if we were just friends. However, I changed my life dramatically, including making professional decisions based on the need to be Orthodox, because I felt we were in this together. She represented the end of my youthful rebellious streak and we consciously agreed on many ideas that conformed to Orthodoxy. I can't just switch back. I also feel I adequately warned her that once we reached this exact type of situation, it would be too late to call it quits. Worst of all, her family's initial respect has disintegrated into dismissal, mockery and insults both against Judaism and Jewish people. I'm ashamed to say I no longer call it out.*

*My wife privately says she still loves Judaism, wants to remain in a Jewish neighborhood, and promises she will resume a fully Orthodox lifestyle when her family is not around. I probably would have agreed to her recent liberal interpretation of law when we first met. But it's been several years and I can't continue to arbitrarily zig*

*zag through various Jewish identities, especially in light of us trying to create a future for ourselves that, as of now, seems lost in our confusing attitude towards Judaism in our lives.*

*Yours Truly,*

*Up and Down Piety*

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Dear Up and Down,

Sometimes people change, even when they promise not to. Sometimes our Jewish communities don't live up to the ideals of acceptance and warmth that they promise. None of that is the fault of your wife. None of that makes your wife's commitment to Judaism any less real, God forbid, or her concerns about your particular Jewish community any less valid.

You ask for advice on how to communicate to your wife that her actions are not okay, and need to stop. That is not the advice I am going to give you.

You need to speak with your wife. You need to listen to her, deeply and without making the conversation first and foremost about your sense of betrayal. Your wife is agreeing with her mother about issues of racism and sexism in your community!

The problem is not how to get her to stop; the problem is that she seems to be encountering racism and sexism in your community! The problem is that your wife is unhappy. The problem is that something is not working in your care for each other. Those are big problems, and ones which cut across all denominations of Judaism, and all sorts of Jews.

Her mother's outright mockery of Jews and Judaism is not okay, but I don't think you can address the concerns with your mother-in-law until we've addressed why your wife is no longer on your side. It's hard to feel like our partner in life has turned against us. I don't know if it feels different because her mother is not Jewish, which seems like a potential element in all of this – though I imagine her comments would sting just as much if she was simply from a different Jewish community. Either way, you are forced to listen to insults about your way of life and your identity, and

that would be intolerable for anyone.

Still, the key thing now is to reconnect with your wife. Don't discount the reality of her struggle just because you doubt its source.

You twice mention that you "warned" your wife that her religious decisions, once made, would be irrevocable. But that's not a mindset that will bring you any peace.

Life is not a signed document of promises whose consequences we must bear silently, no matter how ill-fitting they become. What a sad fate to wish on a loved one. Sometimes we have to change a commitment we once made in good faith.

Even the Talmud teaches that a woman who commits to a husband with a difficult profession is not held to her promise if it turns out that she cannot handle it (like, say, if he is a tanner and she thought she could live with the stench of the business, but she finds it unbearable after marriage). Such a woman is freed from her obligation, and the courts can compel her husband to divorce her.

I get that you feel betrayed. It sounds like you have made real sacrifices to commit to the Orthodox lifestyle that was important to her, and you feel like the rug is being pulled out from under you. But nobody is served by acting as if religious community can never be renegotiated. No amount of communicating your displeasure will make your wife's concerns suddenly vanish, as if they were never real. If her concerns are deep-rooted, you want to know that as soon as possible. Or if she really is just unable to confront a strong-willed mother, then you want to support her in that too.

For whatever reason, your wife is not sharing her concerns with you; you both need to communicate more openly. It might be that your wife worries that you won't listen to her. You need to listen to her with compassion and openness, not anger that she is making your life difficult. As much as you can, ignore her mother's offensive comments until you better understand what's motivating your wife.

Your letter comes off as troublingly controlling and unfeeling towards your wife's situation. We don't know

your mother-in-law, or how difficult the situation might be at home. Perhaps you are even afraid that this doubt about your lifestyle reflects a doubt about your marriage, and you worry your wife moving away from Orthodoxy signals a rejection of you too. This sounds like a painful and confusing situation. But your pain might be leading you astray.

You say that you can no longer “continue to arbitrarily zig zag through various Jewish identities.” You also describe your marriage as the welcomed end to your youthful rebellious streak. In some ways, it sounds like you’ve outsourced your faith to your wife, and turned her into a pillar of piety on which you can hang your hat, so to speak. You sound resentful about the ways that her wavering is causing you to waver, and to newly imagine other lives which you thought were no longer possible. I see why that would cause resentment! You chose your wife, and she chose Orthodoxy, and you took up the cause, leaving behind other worlds. But just as she has a voice in how she leads her life, you also have a voice.

In other words, do you want to be Orthodox?

That can mean so many things to so many people, from a firm conviction in the binding nature of Jewish law to a particular theological commitment to a desire to live within a certain type of community. But that is not a decision that you can leave to somebody else.

I don’t think this is an issue you can tackle alone or resolve with one stern conversation. You need to make your wife your partner in this struggle. That means listening to her, thinking about what she says, and potentially realizing that your commitments might not be as stable as you thought. If prayer has been a part of your religious life, now might be the time to ask God to guide you in how you approach this topic.

But figure out what is going on with your wife’s change in behavior, and figure out where you yourself stand on some of these big religious issues. If you seek out a religious authority or a marriage counselor, make sure it is a person that both you and your wife feel comfortable being entirely open and truthful with.

No warnings given, nor promises made, can change the

reality of your lives today. However you proceed, you must let go of past commitments and proceed from where you are today.

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*Shira Telushkin lives in Brooklyn, where she writes on religion, fashion, and culture for a variety of publications. She is currently finishing a book on monastic intrigue in modern America. Got a question? Send it to [bintel@forward.com](mailto:bintel@forward.com).*



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## Life

# Is God felt more easily through music?

By Abigail Pogrebin

Obviously music can move people. But can it make us feel God is in the room?

I'd argue that the role of a synagogue's cantor or song leader is as crucial as that of its rabbi – sometimes more so. The words of the prayer book, absent melody, can lie flat on the page. A sermon can rouse, but rarely as viscerally. We experience a non-cognitive, often emotional response to a song and can't always describe why.

I've watched people weep in synagogue when "*Hashkiveinu*" – the prayer that asks God to shelter us – is sung.

I've also observed how people enter a different emotional zone during the chanting of *Kol Nidre* – the traditional, haunting musical phrases repeated on the eve of Yom Kippur.

I approached Elizabeth Sacks, senior cantor of Temple Emanuel Denver, the largest and oldest Reform congregation in the Rocky Mountain region, to ask if she would help me understand how music is intertwined with the divine in our tradition – as part of our series of interviews, *Still Small Voice: 18 Questions about God*.

Sacks, 39, is the only cantor among my interview subjects because I started out talking mainly to rabbis because they're so frequently called upon to *explain* God in a pastoral context.

But the truth is that cantors have switched on the spiritual light for me – and for people I know – more often than I can recount.

I first met Sacks in 2007, when she was associate cantor at Central Synagogue in Manhattan, where I am an involved member. She made an impact then, not just for her ethereal voice, but for her Talmud scholarship.

Sacks, who holds a B.A. in Jewish Studies and Music from Harvard University where she was a student

leader at the Hillel, has been a faculty member at Mechon Hadar and a past chair of the alumni association of Hebrew Union College Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music.

When I asked her ahead of time which text might illuminate her thinking, she sent me this simple, gorgeous line from Talmud:

*"Where there is music, there is prayer."* [B'rachot 6a]

Our conversation is below, edited for clarity and length.

## 'You could simply say, "God is song.''

**Cantor Elizabeth Sacks:** Sometimes in the Talmud, you find these nuggets that just encapsulate pages of conversation in a few words: "*Bimkom rinah sham tehay tefilah*": "Where there is song, there is prayer."

**Abigail Pogrebin:** My first response to that sentence on its face is, "Amen." Because a song does so often feel like prayer or makes us feel prayerful.

**ES:** Look at those first two words, "*Bimkom rinah*." "*Makom*" does mean "place," so you can translate the phrase: "Where song is placed, there is prayer."

"*Makom*" is also another word that we use for God. And so if you just looked at those first two words, you could simply say, "God is song."

**AP:** I'm sure many Jews would say that rings true.

**ES:** This line envisioned the freedom of expression that wherever there is song, there is prayer that gives us the ability to pray at any time, God is always there for us, with us, near us. And music can be that portal at any moment that we need it.

But the context of that statement within the Talmud is actually a conversation about the importance of community prayer. And you can read "*bimkom rinah*" this way: "In a place of song – i.e. the synagogue – that's where prayer should be."

**AP:** So this lean phrase could endorse both the freedom to pray anywhere you are and also the need to pray in shul with others.

**ES:** Exactly. You have freedom AND you need community around you in order to have an ultimate prayer experience.

**AP:** In your experience as a cantor, does the “ultimate prayer experience” usually involve music?

**ES:** When people tell me how music can affect them, they use words like “warmth,” “light,” or “connection.” There is an opening that allows people to transcend their very rational experience of the world.

### **‘For everybody else, we need music’**

**AP:** I’ve often assumed that one needs to start with an intellectual grasp of liturgy in order to get to the spiritual response.

**ES:** That’s interesting because in the past, many people walked away from Judaism because it was so hyper-intellectual. The modern – or postmodern – Jew didn’t understand that there was a non-rational pathway to God within the Jewish faith, or that Judaism had elements that they admired from Buddhism and other religions which divorce your brain from the very rational.

**AP:** I’ve often heard that stereotype: Christians feel and Jews think.

**ES:** There is a Kabbalistic text – *Avodat HaKodesh* – that very explicitly states that Moses and his prophecy was entirely intellectual and rational. Moses connected to God through pure intellect – there was always great connection between them. But the Zohar says Moses was the first *and the last person* to have that experience. For everybody else, we need music.

**AP:** So if Moses had a direct line to God, the rest of us require a vehicle.

**ES:** *Avodat HaKodesh* asks why the prophets often used music to communicate with God. And comes to the conclusion that rational connection to God is almost impossible and extraordinarily rare.

We have more success reaching into this realm of the

divine through music, or non-rational experience.

**AP:** What would you say to those who fear that if their spirituality hinges on songs, that might suggest their Judaism is lightweight?

**ES:** There’s such an apprehension that you need to know all of the answers about God in order to just have a stirring moment. But in reality, you can’t be expected to understand divinity in order to be able to have the transcendent experience. Some of what holds us back from really diving into a powerful musical experience is the fear of it.

**AP:** What do you think we’re afraid of?

**ES:** Encounter with God can and should be unpredictable and scary. We may not be able to understand the experience or control it. You don’t know exactly where it’s going to take you – in terms of reflection on your own life, what your body will feel like, what you’re going to be moved to do as a result of it, when it might happen again if you want to repeat it.

**AP:** Do you see your congregants looking to repeat a feeling by hearing the same song?

**ES:** People’s expectations of what “*Kol Nidre*” is going to feel like is very heavy for me. There is a great expectation of what I am going to be able to create in that moment, because in their past, they felt something strong, and they want that feeling again.

That’s my job, for sure – to create a musical experience that transports people into the past, into a vision of a better self. But it’s hard when I know that, no matter what I do, even if I put my entire body and soul into that moment, it won’t necessarily work for everyone.

**AP:** Do you feel that same pressure when you sing “*Avinu Malkeinu*”? I’m curious because it feels like it’s supposed to be a peak moment. Does that give you shpilkes?

### **‘God-as-King is a hurdle’**

**ES:** Not as much. “*Avinu Malkeinu*” exposes a really fascinating divide, denominationally, because it plays a very different role in the Reform movement than it does in the traditional liturgy, at least in my experience.

**AP:** How does the Reform movement treat it differently?

**ES:** There are aspects of both texts – *Kol Nidre* and *Avinu Malkeinu* – that are difficult, and that highlight the tension between the thinking and feeling parts of you.

**AP:** What are the challenging “thinking” aspects of *Avinu Malkeinu*?

**ES:** The first two words: “Our Father, our King.” Concepts of God as masculine can be difficult for people – especially in the world that we inhabit right now. It’s a very narrow concept of God.

God-as-King is a hurdle – the fact that power is equated with a male sovereign, the question of omnipotence – if God is the King of this world, what does that say about our God? All of that is wrapped up in those two words.

But like the *Kol Nidre* (“All vows”), the music of *Avinu Malkeinu* – the Max Janowski arrangement especially, for the Reform movement – has created such a sense-memory, that people need it. They really want to hear it, and they’ll put whatever meaning they want on top of it.

**AP:** Are you comfortable with the prayer’s language after the first two words?

‘The power of the way those words feel in our mouths’

**ES:** Every other sentence moves me: “Hear our prayer. Renew our year. Pardon our misdeeds. Make a good life for our children.” All of the pieces of that prayer cut to the core of the human experience. But getting past the first two words in our relationship with God is difficult.

Hopefully what the music allows us to do is just move past that for a moment. Take away our obsession with the very real problems of, “Our Father, our King,” in terms of our conceptualization of God, and allow yourself to linger on the other side of it.

**AP:** You told me the Reform movement tried to update the prayer book to accommodate the challenges of this liturgy.

**ES:** Yes, but the liturgy remains. The power of the way

those words feel in our mouths – because we’ve said them for so many years – is alluring. Even when we don’t like it, it’s really hard to change it.

**AP:** There was an attempt in the Reform movement to grapple with the *Kol Nidre* text as well, correct?

**ES:** Yes, the early reformers tried to take out the *Kol Nidre* from one of the earliest Union Prayer Books because they were offended by the message.

They subsequently put it back into the service, but they could not bring themselves to print the words, so they included a line that just instructs: “The cantor intones the *Kol Nidre* prayer.” No text.

**AP:** And the discomfort around *Kol Nidre* is that it basically says we’re about to make promises we’re sure to break? Or that we are already absolved of sins we haven’t yet committed?

**ES:** Both. People are uncomfortable that we would want that kind of absolution before sinning – it was an insurance contract that wasn’t in line with the true spirit of Yom Kippur.

In addition, it unfortunately emphasized or confirmed some of the nastier antisemitic accusations that were out there – about the trickery of the Jewish people, that they don’t really mean what they say.

**AP:** The Jewish liturgy “proved” to antisemites that Jews renege; their word can’t be trusted.

**ES:** Correct.

**AP:** Putting aside problematic songs, what is the music that kind of breaks you emotionally?

### ‘Just that little crack into our souls is good’

**ES:** The Great Aleinu carries tremendous power for me. I still chant the version that my cantor, Jack Mendelson, taught me when I was a teenager learning how to lead services. And I still prostrate completely on the floor.

**AP:** You’re referring to that moment on Yom Kippur when we’re supposed to drop to our knees and then to our bellies in front of the ark.

**ES:** Yes, there is this unbelievable juxtaposition

between the going-up in the melody, which climbs higher, while you are lowering your body to the ground.

That moment of soaring a note into the sky while also bending your knees to fall on the ground – that makes the high holidays for me. It represents so powerfully that we are reaching high – to be our best selves, while also admitting how low we have fallen at the same time.

**AP:** I've always wanted to try prostration, but I'm too shy to get on my stomach in the synagogue.

**ES:** I think that the ability to give ourselves permission to not be perfect in public is very hard. But even just that little crack into our souls is good. Hopefully there's a piece of that that can penetrate us on the High Holy days – that it's OK to be emotional, even if we're not going to let go completely. The music helps us get there.

**'Find the music that transports you'**

**AP:** I want to circle back to when you talked about fear of losing control. Most of our worship services today – at least in the Reform and Conservative movements – are pretty composed; there's a sense of formality, and keeping your body still.

**ES:** Yes, that is absolutely a burden of the more progressive strains of Judaism; there isn't as much allowance for typical physical movement as part of prayer. We're getting better at it, but it was not something that was easily allowable for a long time.

**AP:** Why not?

**ES:** For early reformers, decorum in worship was so important. There was a major divide between Jews and their Christian neighbors, and a lot of embarrassment on the part of the Jewish community, that their worship spaces were not organized or quiet, they didn't have an exact start time and end time.

There was a stigma around that. So a lot of the early reforms were in reaction to that idea – that we're not dignified in prayer, and that what God wanted was decorum.

I think we have moved into a different understanding now. The ability to lose control is often where we feel God most acutely. It's a sadness that we fenced ourselves off to that for so long because of embarrassment.

**AP:** So what's your advice to those of us who hesitate to make fools of ourselves when the music moves us?

**ES:** I would say, don't be afraid. Use it. Find the music that transports you and let yourself let go. See what happens.

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*Abigail Pogrebin, author of My Jewish Year; 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew, is a Forward contributing writer. Follow her on Twitter. @apogrebin. Elizabeth Sacks is senior cantor at Temple Emanuel Denver. Follow her on Twitter @CantorSacks.*



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