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News

Want to ruin a good date? Bring up Israel.

By Louis Keene

The piece of sea bass was sort of shaped like the state of Israel, so Danna Shapiro, a Jewish millennial, texted a picture of it to the grad student she was sort of seeing, with the caption: “Zionist fish.”

Not long after they matched on Hinge, Shapiro, sensing the grad student’s politics leaned further to the left than hers, had warned him: “I’m not woke.” He had said he could take it.

But the fish was another matter.

“If you take out a little bit of the left and a little bit of the right,” he texted, in what Shapiro understood as an allusion to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, “is it still Zionist fish?”

Shapiro, 30, was navigating a new minefield for many American Jewish singles. More personal than partisan politics and more charged than religious observance, differing views on Israel can make for a potent emotional cocktail on a date.

Still texting, Shapiro and the grad student, who she declined to name, volleyed about the merits of Israel’s pre-1967 borders for a bit, and then she tried to lower the temperature. “Look, I don’t normally flirt by discussing Israeli geopolitics,” she wrote. But he wouldn’t let it go. So they plunged deeper into the simmering cauldron of history and identity. They traded jabs about terrorism, human rights and the Occupation. The phrase “morally reprehensible” was invoked.

“Honestly, I’d rather have these super intense conversations before getting serious with anybody,” Shapiro said in an interview several weeks later, “because I want to know how you deal with opinions that differ from your own.”

Israel has become a high-stakes litmus test in the American Jewish dating scene: what people say about the Jewish state in their dating app profiles or early encounters can make or break a fledgling relationship.



Illustration by Vicente Marti

Shared views on Israel can feel like shared values; disagreement can become a grudge. For many, a prospective partner’s stance on Israel becomes a proxy for, well, everything else.

While American Jews still report a strong emotional connection to Israel, criticism of its government has heightened over the dozen-year reign of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and intensified further during the Trump presidency. And where people with different politics might otherwise remain in separate echo chambers, Jews seeking to date other Jews often cross-pollinate – and run into conflicts.

Shapiro and the grad student texted for more than a month before their first FaceTime date around the New Year. After their second, she said, the fledgling relationship seemed promising. But after their exchange about Israel, he ghosted her.

What follows are three more perspectives of American Jews who find themselves navigating Israel in their dating lives. Shapiro is one of eight Jewish singles I interviewed over the past several weeks who described how Israel factored in their dating preferences. Their ages ranged from 23 to 36, their politics from Republican to leftist, their Halakhic commitment varying from kosher and Sabbath-observant to secular. Four of the eight had stories of Israel becoming an obstacle. In each case, the interview subject declined to share the name of the prospective partner.

“A fraught topic on a date.”

“If you’d asked me 10 years ago how important my partner’s views on Israel are in my relationship with them, I wouldn’t have the same answer,” Eli Shavalian told me. “It’s much more important today.”

Shavalian identifies as liberal; he’s also queer, Persian, and Modern Orthodox. “In the gay community there’s an idea of scarcity,” he said, adding that there are even fewer potential partners who also keep kosher. So when an accountant he’d gone on a few dates with last fall said he was a Republican, Shavalian’s reaction wasn’t to drop him, but to find out more.

“My whole point was to prove to him that we could have a conversation about this without it blowing up,” he recalled.

But when the two spoke about Israel, Shavalian said he found himself struggling to feel heard. It wasn’t simply the accountant’s view that Israel should be the prime factor in voting decisions of American Jews, even at the expense of women’s rights. Shavalian said talking about Israel had revealed something broader about the accountant, and more important. “It was how adamant he was about his view,” Shavalian said, “and how black and white he saw the world.” So he ended things.

Shavalian’s politics are fairly mainstream among American Jews. In [AJC’s 2019 Survey of American Jewish Opinion](#), 62% of respondents agreed that caring about Israel is an important aspect of their Jewish identity. Nearly two-thirds, like Shavalian, favored a two-state solution.

Shavalian wants a partner who has some emotional connection to Israel, even if it’s an ambivalent one, and draws the line at support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. “Israel succeeds in a lot of ways, and it has a lot of faults,” he said. “I would not feel comfortable being with someone who actively only sees the bad of Israel.”

Dov Waxman, director of the Nazarian Center for Israel Studies at UCLA, said that American Jewish political consensus around Israel evaporated gradually, beginning with Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

What’s new, Waxman said in an interview, is the polarization and toxicity of Israel discourse in the United States, where people with differing political opinions have split into warring tribes.

Over the past decade, some American rabbis have become wary of speaking about Israel from the pulpit, and many young people don’t want to talk to their parents about it. “The disagreement has fueled a rancor and antipathy,” said Waxman, author of the 2016 book “Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict Over Israel.” “It makes sense that it would be a fraught topic on a date.”

Meanwhile, emotional attachment to Israel – what Shavalian feels and is seeking in a partner – has remained steady across American political factions, according to Waxman. What’s changed is how it’s expressed.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Waxman said, American Jews expressed their interest by supporting Israeli government policies. Now growing numbers are expressing their interest by contesting those policies. “They argue about Israel because they care about Israel,” said Waxman.

“An immediate swipe left.”

Adam Rotstein has an Israeli parent, did a gap-year program in Israel before going to Wesleyan University, and won’t match with someone who puts “I love Israel” in her Hinge profile.

“It’s kind of a red flag,” said Rotstein, a 30-year-old copywriter who lives in Los Angeles.

Rotstein grew up Conservative in New Jersey and now describes himself as “pretty secular.” He admitted that he doesn’t know the intricacies of Israel’s history and that he wouldn’t be able to wax eloquent on its current political situation. But he said he knows enough to be resentful of the Israel education he got at Camp Tel Yehuda and the gap-year program Year Course, all of which he said reduced a murky quagmire to a simplistic narrative of good and evil.

When he sees “I love Israel” in a bio, Rotstein

envisions someone who received the same messaging he did but never challenged it.

Though Rotstein said his friends who know the most about the Middle East are fervent Zionists, he feels that when someone blares “I love Israel” they usually are not that interesting. He laughed as he ticked off what he imagined as a series of equally banal prompts: “Simple pleasures – a good sushi joint. Where to find me at the party – on the dance floor,” he said, for example. “And I’m like, immediate swipe left.”

At the same time, Rotstein said he probably wouldn’t match with someone who included “Free Palestine” in her bio, either. It’s not that dating someone who supports the Palestinian cause is problematic – on the contrary. But he’s suspicious of Israel-bashing, which he says has become trendy among younger Jews on social media.

Rotstein’s position on Israel – certainly open to its criticism, maybe even a touch cynical about it, but wary of extremes – is where Waxman, the professor, said most American Jewish millennials are now. It can be even more complicated if your views are less common.

“The worst breakup of my life.”

Jessica Tektas’ Hinge profile lays it all out there: Mizrahi. Leftist. Kosher. Grew up in the Middle East. Inked. Each of those details has factored in a previous relationship; at 36, she’s trying to preempt any problems by being transparent, down to her tattoos.

Identifying as both Zionist and leftist has narrowed Tektas’ dating pool. In her experience, Zionist Jews are often revolted by leftism; Jewish leftists, on the other hand, are frequently anti-Zionist. But as a Kurdish Jew whose family was smuggled into Israel by the Zionist underground in the late 1940s, Tektas said, “I owe my existence to the state of Israel.” Though she is critical of Israel’s government, anti-Zionism offends her.

In addition to four languages, Tektas, a 36-year-old schoolteacher who lives in Los Angeles, is fluent in American and Israeli politics, and she enjoys talking about them. But the situation she decries – Israel’s treatment of Palestinians in Gaza and what she sees as Netanyahu’s authoritarianism – can make her be less herself when she meets people.

When Israel comes up on a date, she tries to change the

subject. “Which ultimately doesn’t really work that well,” she said, “because if you can’t be authentic in a relationship, how long is the relationship going to survive, right?”

And when her opinions do come out, Tektas said, she has been burned. On the night Joe Biden clinched the presidency in November, she said, a film producer she dated on and off for a few years sent her a scathing email. He wrote that she was responsible for Israel’s destruction and that he doubted she was Jewish.

Then the man’s mother followed up with a text pouring it on, Tektas said, calling her a traitor to Israel and the Jewish people.

“All of it was completely predicated on undermining me as a Jew,” she recalled. “He compared me to the SS. He said, ‘I bet you would have loaded the Jews onto the train.’ It was the worst breakup of my life.”

Such vitriol is not uncommon in Jewish debates over Israel, Waxman said, as Israel is often seen as a referendum on a person’s Jewishness both among Orthodox and liberal or secular Jews. To many Orthodox Jews, he explained, Zionism is part of commitment to the faith and tribe. To others, it can be a litmus test around Jewish values like justice.

“It’s not just that they have a political disagreement over Israel,” Waxman said. “It’s that this political disagreement is a reflection of a deeper divide over who is a Jew and what it is to be a Jew in the modern world.”

Faced with a hypothetical choice between a Trump supporter and an anti-Zionist, Tektas said she would prefer an Israeli, whose attraction to conservative politics she can countenance.

“As a leftist Zionist Mizrahi Jew in America, I have to let that stuff go sometimes, because otherwise I have, like, five Jews to date,” she said, laughing. Of Israelis, she added: “They’ve lived it, and it directly affects their life and their families. I’m much more interested in hearing Israelis and Palestinians talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than Americans.”

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Culture

Kosher-for-Passover dog food? I wouldn't recommend it

By Benjamin Cohen

It gives me no pleasure to report that Passover food gave my dog diarrhea.

And I'm not talking about food like borscht or candied fruit or, God forbid, coconut macaroons. Even humans can't tolerate those confections. What got Tivo's stomach all in knots was the kosher-for-Passover dog food we were feeding him.

The truth is, observant Jews don't normally feed their dogs kosher kibble. On all other nights, Purina is just fine. But on this night, well, on this night, we need to steer clear of a few restrictions. Allow me to explain.

On Passover, Jews are technically not allowed to own *chametz* [leavened food] products or even benefit from them. So, while non-kosher chametz-filled dog food is perfectly fine the rest of the year, Jews who are looking to observe Passover to its fullest are left in a bind.

So where does one find such food? Is there a kosher-for-Passover aisle at Petco?

That's where Rabbi Avrohom Blumenkrantz steps into the picture. The New York rabbi, admired for his knowledge and kindness, was a disciple of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the preeminent Torah scholar of the 20th century. Starting in the 1970s, Blumenkrantz began compiling a list of off-the-beaten path items that were kosher-for-Passover. It started out as a newsletter he would give to friends and congregants, and he later compiled it into a must-have book. Walk into an Orthodox household during Passover preparations, and it's not uncommon to hear someone shout: "Hey, where's the Blumenkrantz book? I need to look something up."

The guide has been updated annually, with new products added each year – including which brands of dog food don't have any *chametz* in them.

Spend any longer with the beloved Blumenkrantz book

and you might find yourself peering through a looking glass of plague-filled proportions. In addition to pet products, the 600-page tome also includes information on toothpaste, tuna and Tums. Oh, and tin foil. Don't forget about the tin foil.

Even though non-edible items – like cotton swabs and Crockpot liners – don't require a kosher-for-Passover certification, some Orthodox Jews take the not "owning" any *chametz* to some intriguing extremes. For example, some perfumes or cosmetics may contain alcohol not approved for Passover. Other items delineated in the book include dryer sheets, floor wax and, for some reason, Mylar balloons. All dental floss is allowed, as long as it's not flavored. Hundreds of approved medicines – from Advil to Zantac – are listed across 30 pages of fine print.

Blumenkrantz even used the book to rail against the dangers of the internet. As the web became ubiquitous, pages were included listing websites that one should not visit – on Passover and, presumably, throughout the rest of the year.

Even snail mail became an issue. On page 310 of the 2007 edition, the last one I purchased, he wrote: "The glue that is in the back of stamps and envelopes should not be licked on *Pesach* because the glue might contain wheat starch."

For good measure, he added: "These products are not kosher for human consumption." Thanks, Rabbi Blumenkrantz.

The section on pet food spans four pages. The bottom line is this: Most dry dog food contains some sort of *chametz* – wheat, oats or grain – which makes the standard fare verboten. If a dog's main diet is dry food, and you suddenly switch him to canned meat, well you can kind of guess what happens next.

Tivo, our sweet Chow-Retriever mix with a heart of



Illustration by Mary Naimanbayeva/iStockphotos

gold, did not know how to process meals of mush. Which is why when we returned home from a friend's Seder late one Passover night, we found liquid poop projectiles all over our just-cleaned-for-Passover house.

That did not, surprisingly, mark the end of our experiment with kosher-for-Passover dog food. We fell prey to the mindset of out-of-sight, out-of-mind. You know, the [Ebbinghaus forgetting curve](#). And so we tried again the following year. Needless to say, we had the same results. Perhaps matzah, known for clogging up your innards, would have been a better approach.

We eventually made the decision that [Tivo was not Jewish](#) and should not have to suffer for the history of our people. His ancestors were not freed from Egypt thousands of years ago. Indeed, [rabbinic literature details](#) how the dogs in Egypt were so well-behaved on the night of Passover that their lack of barking aided the Jews' escape.

And so we made the inevitable decision to serve him regular food. Cursed be the wicked, blessed be the home of the righteous. I can only pray that we are the latter.

As for Rabbi Blumenkrantz, he passed away in 2007 of complications from diabetes. His family still publishes the annual guide. There's now even a Blumenkrantz app.

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Culture

Statues of men grace parks and town squares, so why does RBG get a shopping mall?

By Mira Fox

Grocery shopping in Brooklyn has been as hellish, if not more so, than everywhere else in the pandemic. Trader Joe's lines snaked fully around the block even during wintry weather. All year, the doors to City Point Brooklyn, where my closest TJ's is located, have represented the joys of indoor warmth, everything bagel seasoning and bountiful snack options. And now, they can represent something even more exciting – women's rights.

Or at least that was the gist of several stuffy speeches given by a selection of Brooklyn government officials at the unveiling of a life-sized bronze statue of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, newly installed just inside those hallowed doors.

This statue will help increase representation of women in public sculpture, they said, thus moving women's rights forward. It will spur important conversations about the Supreme Court justice, they asserted. It will inspire young girls. Over and over, officials such as Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams and Assemblywoman Rodneyse Bichotte Hermelyn affirmed that City Point, a privately-owned, mixed-use residential and commercial building, is the perfect location for the new statue because of the building's high traffic.

"In her lifetime, Justice Ginsburg championed countless crucial causes. This statue is just a small reminder that we all need to set the highest possible standards for ourselves and society," [said](#) Chris Conlon, EVP and Chief Operating Officer of Acadia Realty, on behalf of City Point. "From the people who work here, to the diverse shoppers and shopping at City Point, everyone feels welcome, equal and respected."

Perhaps the justice had always dreamed of making American consumers feel equally respected as they buy avocados and granola. Speeches noted how easy it would be for shoppers to take selfies with the statue. Certainly no one mentioned the idea that placing RBG in the midst of what is essentially a shopping mall might not benefit Ginsburg's causes.

It's not that the speeches were wrong about City Point's traffic. Placing the statue of Ginsburg in its hall does guarantee that thousands of people will walk past her (though City Point is currently booking reservations in 20 minute intervals to visit the statue).

However, public art is not just about traffic. And while the category encompasses murals, monuments, and abstract installations, all of which have different goals and effects, statues, particularly realistic ones such as RBG's bronze, function to enshrine history. They're didactic, made to impact their audience, to change and interact with their surroundings and history.

Statues of historical figures are meant to watch over and inspire; placing them in grandiose or beautiful public locations helps to solidify the legacy of whoever is depicted, enshrining them in the culture by enshrining them in the cultural landscape. Usually, they stand on plinths and gaze over parks, or proudly guard the doors to public buildings, gaining gravitas through their weighty materials and grand placement. You have to be important to become a public statue, but becoming a public statue also creates and solidifies importance.

Shopping malls are about the opposite – fast, disposable, almost ephemeral consumption. They are tawdry and shallow, not weighty and historical. Any art in a mall is something to be brushed by on the way to buy laundry detergent or kale, blending into the multitude of focus group-calibrated graphic design decisions that surround shoppers. Shut away in a regulated, private, branded space, a statue cannot meld into the life of the city, or become something to gaze at and wonder about as you dine al fresco with friends in Bryant Park, where Goethe and Gertrude Stein gaze over you. A statue that looks out over Target does not function to create the same grandeur and mythos.



Courtesy of Getty Images

“Public statues are made to inspire, celebrate success, and tell the most important stories of the community. By leaving out the women from this equation it is no wonder that women are still not seen as equals to men,” the artists who forged the Ginsburg statue [wrote in a statement](#); the married couple, Gillie and Marc, installed 10 other [statues of women](#), including Oprah Winfrey and P!nk, in New York City in 2019, raising the representation of women in public sculpture in the city from 3% to 10%, a fact the speeches at RBG's unveiling repeated often. [Several of the initial statues, including Winfrey, have since been relocated out of the city.]

Yet simply increasing the number of statues of women does not amount to equality. Columbus has an entire roundabout in the center of Manhattan topped with a bronze statue of him, so dominating that the whole neighborhood is known as Columbus Circle (this is not the only place he sits). A bronze of Horace Greeley has its own park in Manhattan, and another presides over City Hall Park. George Washington, Lincoln, FDR, Goethe are all embedded into public life. Ginsburg, as of now, presides over a hipster grocery store and a cafe; a circus arts studio is under construction behind her. Despite being made of the same durable bronze as most public statues, she is protected, locked away after hours in a piece of commercial real estate, separated from her native Brooklyn.

In October, Gov. Cuomo [promised](#) another Brooklyn statue of Ginsburg, this one with a whole commission to oversee its creation. Let's hope they find somewhere more fitting for the justice.

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Culture

An American remake of ‘Shtisel’ is coming – and it sounds nothing like ‘Shtisel’

By Mira Fox

Get ready – an American “Shtisel” remake has been announced. The show, set to be written by “Insatiable” creator Lauren Gussis and directed by Oscar winner Kenneth Lonergan, will be produced by CBS Studios, though it could end up streaming on any given network.

Like the original “Shtisel,” the American show [will be](#) “a modern-day Romeo and Juliet story about an ultra-progressive, over-achieving secular 18-year-old young woman on the verge of personal freedom, and the strictly observant Orthodox young man to whom she is powerfully drawn – so powerfully that she is willing to uproot her entire life to be with him.”

Wait, what?

Anyone who has seen, or even read about, “Shtisel” probably did a double-take at this show description, which bears little resemblance to the Israeli show. The “Shtisel” we know and love has several love stories, sure, but none of them cross over into the secular world. Instead, the show follows several branches of a Haredi family in Jerusalem as they navigate family, career and love within their community.

Therein lies the crux of what has endeared “Shtisel” to its viewers. The whole thing takes place almost completely *within* the Haredi community. Sure, Akiva sells his art through a secular gallery director, but that’s about it for crossover into the mainstream world. It depicts the Haredi world without feeling the need to define it by its contrast to secular life.

Most shows about the Haredi world center on a character trying to break free of the community, and paint Orthodox life as repressive and harsh. The Netflix hit “Unorthodox” certainly falls into this category, as does “A Touch Away,” a popular 2006 Israeli miniseries whose plot is much closer to the Romeo and Juliet plot of the “Shtisel” remake. Even “Fiddler on the Roof” has elements of this trope, with Chava running away to marry the non-Jewish Fyedka.

“Shtisel” does not pretend that Haredi life is easy, and acknowledges that it limits the people who follow its

prescriptions, but it also does not presume that any relatable character must be trying to escape it. Akiva, a painter, struggles with the expectations placed on Haredi men – but his family’s worry over his artistic career is one likely familiar to anyone trying to forge a path in the arts. Despite his boundary-pushing ways, Akiva never considers leaving the community or the religion; he still prays, he still keeps kosher, he still wears tzitzit. He wants to be able to follow his heart while remaining inside the community.

The struggles of the show’s characters are relatable without being removed from their religious context. And the series also shows the beauties of religious life – the devotion of Ruchami and Hanina to Torah and prayer; Shulem’s commitment to teaching Torah. It depicts practices viewers might find strange or oppressive as simple parts of daily routines.

The CBS adaptation does not say whether its secular and Haredi storyline will involve its Haredi Romeo considering leaving his community; in fact, the short description implies its secular Juliet might join it instead. But even if that’s the case, it’s hard to imagine that the remake won’t focus on the limiting aspects of the Haredi world as its “ultra-progressive, overachieving secular” heroine “on the verge of personal freedom” gives up her independence to be with a man who demands she limit herself – the perfectly anti-feminist storyline. If Haredi life is seen through the eyes of a secular, progressive woman, it is hard to imagine it being painted with a sympathetic brush.

Who knows, maybe the secular Juliet will discover beauty in the Haredi world she has joined. And none of this is to say that the CBS show won’t be good – its creators are both talented and lauded. But it won’t be “Shtisel.”

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Culture

Remembering Yaphet Kotto, charismatic actor and proud Jew

By Benjamin Ivry

Yaphet Kotto, who died on March 15 at age 81, used prolonged experience with Hebrew liturgy as a way to separate reality from dreams.

Born in New York to a Panamanian and West Indian mother who converted to Judaism to marry his father, a Cameroonian who was raised Jewish, Kotto had a sustained film and television career.

Highlights included the sci-fi/horror film “Alien” [1979], the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle [“The Running Man” \[1987\]](#), the James Bond film [“Live and Let Die” \[1973\]](#) and, alongside Robert De Niro, the comedy thriller “Midnight Run” [1988].

Yet arguably, some of Kotto’s unrealized projects were even more enticing, including a 1972 [plan](#) to film John Steinbeck’s [“Of Mice and Men”](#) co-starring his fellow African American Jew, Sammy Davis Jr.

Or a plan to play [Shakespeare’s Othello](#) on Broadway, produced by [David Merrick](#) (born Margulois), who died before the staging could occur.

Yiddishkeit was a means of coping with such disappointments, as well as violent prejudice against minorities in America.

In 1997, Kotto remembered, as cited in [Gene Bluestein’s “Anqlish/Yinglish”](#): “Going to shul, putting a yarmulke on, having to face people who were primarily Baptists in the Bronx meant that on Fridays, I was in some heavy fistfights.”

These early aggressors were primarily his fellow black schoolmates. There were, however, also some compensations, like one that occurred around the time he was studying for his bar mitzvah. As Kotto recalled last October on his [Facebook page](#) one day in the early 1950s, he encountered [Malcolm X](#) in Harlem, accompanied by [Louis Farrakhan](#).

According to Kotto, [Malcolm X](#) took a benevolent

interest in him, asking his name and religion. Upon hearing that the youngster was Jewish, Malcolm X exclaimed: “You are the original Jew! Remember that, the original Jew, Yaphet Kotto, now make your father proud...*As-salamu alaykum.*”

To the Arabic salutation meaning “Peace be upon you,” Kotto retorted: “Shalom,” at which Malcolm X and Farrakhan “laughed and walked away from [Kotto] smiling.”

A decidedly less jolly event was recounted in January 2020, again on his [Facebook page](#), about how one night in Philadelphia in 1964, after performing [“Blood Knot”](#) a play by the South African author [Athol Fugard](#), Kotto was brutalized by local policemen.

Arrested after a bus ticket misunderstanding and through no fault of his own, Kotto recalled saying “in a tense whisper in Hebrew, *‘Baruk shem kevod malkhuto le’olam va’ed’*- “Hear O Israel, the lord our God, the Lord is one!”

To which one of the arresting officers commented, “Jew, huh?”

Likewise, at moments of personal triumph, Kotto’s primary reaction was to utter words of Hebrew prayer.

When he learned by phone that he had been cast in the film “Alien,” Kotto [raised both hands above his head](#) and “shouted out the Birkat Hagomel. *‘Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam. Blessed are You, Lord our God. Blessed are You!,’* I cried aloud. *‘Blessed are You, ruler of the world, who rewards the undeserving with goodness, and who has rewarded me with goodness this very day!’* and then I bowed my head and whispered.. *amēn!*”

The Birkat Hagomel is, of course, often recited after recovering from illness, but can also express gratitude for safely completing a perilous journey. Kotto was in

such an exultant mood that he did not wait for the usual presence of a minyan in a synagogue to say it. Beyond prayers, Jewish friends and colleagues were essential to Kotto's career from the beginning. When he was 19, he performed in a production of "Othello" produced by the actress [Judy Holliday](#) (born Judith Tuvim, of Russian Jewish ancestry).

Kotto would also later [recall](#) the prediction he received in his youth from a "Jewish Kabbalistic Ethiopian woman inside the compound of a Manhattan synagogue: 'First an actor, then a Rabbi.'"

Although he never embraced rabbinical studies, his progress was accompanied by encouragement from more Jewish directors, actors, and writers.

Of the last-mentioned, he informed an [interviewer](#) his favorite was [Budd Schulberg](#), author of the film "[On the Waterfront](#)," the play "[What Makes Sammy Run?](#)" and the novel "[The Harder They Fall](#)."

Schulberg, a hard-nosed showbiz survivor, offered Kotto advice about screenwriting, which later proved useful during his appearances in Barry Levinson's long running TV series, "[Homicide: Life on the Street](#)."

Kotto wrote a number of scripts for the [show](#), mainly because he felt that other scriptwriters gave his character very little of interest to do.

In 1969, Budd Schulberg, a long-time boxing aficionado, was also useful as a fount of lore about pugilism when Kotto replaced James Earl Jones in the American Jewish playwright Howard Sackler's "[Great White Hope](#)" about a boxer pitted against society.

Before then, Kotto had received his first speaking role on film from the German Jewish-born filmmaker Michael Roemer, in "[Nothing But a Man](#)" [1964], about African Americans confronting racism in Alabama.

Another mentor, also of German Jewish origin, was [William Wyler](#), who chose Kotto to act in his 1970 film "The Liberation of LB Jones." [Wyler's film](#) featured Kotto's character shooting a white policeman in an act of revenge, a first such display of retaliation against police brutality for a major Hollywood production.

In 2008 Kotto would tell [The Daily News](#):

"[Wyler](#) didn't want me to cry. He said, 'Too many African-American men have done that on film...You are not suffering.' That was the first time I'd heard the term 'African-American.'"

On Facebook, no matter the subject, Kotto retained a Jewish frame of reference and vocabulary from his childhood.

In September 2020, Kotto, who was evidently experiencing problems with his Instagram and Facebook accounts, [cried down havoc](#) upon unnamed saboteurs in these terms:

"God sees you and our collective call to Jehovah will seek you out and bring down the judgement of the Beth Din that you deserve."

Braving the pandemic, he commented in March 2020:

"Brothers and sisters stand toe to toe and tough and strong before the Coronavirus...we are a strong people! Baruch Hashem!"

And in August and September of 2020, he revealed a new project, to play the role of Jesus in a film, since the protagonist was "black and an African born into the Hebrew faith, his entire name was Yeshua Ben Halachmee...It is more than just a role he is my leader, my Rabbi, my best friend, my brother."

Kotto's research into spirituality also extended as far as [Paramahansa Yogananda](#) an Indian monk, yogi and guru, whose example inspired him to take up daily meditation.

Yet as Kotto [revealed in 2019](#), the early imprint of his father's Hebrew lessons were such that he claimed to still open every book that he read "from the back page to the front."

The elder Kotto "instilled Judaism" in his son, who added: "Everything the Jewish religion stands for, from an African's point of view, he left those things in me—especially things that had to do with the New Testament, which he was thoroughly, totally against. He said it was BS. If it weren't for him, I would have probably gone to hatred or violence or drugs or alcohol. I escaped all of those things because of Judaism."

Culture

'Nomadland' and 'Borat 2' are the same movie – but only one deserves the Oscar

By Jackson Arn

Good and *bad* seem to be out of fashion; these days, it's all about *better* and *worse*. The new president is praised for being better than the Antichrist. Wage slavery is praised for existing at all, because any job is better than no job, and \$15 an hour is better than \$7.25. In a bizarre twist, the early 2010s are now remembered as a time far better than our own: a tenth of the country was out of work, but at least you could go home with a stranger you'd met at a bar without risking death by respiratory failure.

The Oscars (which air April 25, if you're into that kind of thing) are the quintessence of *better* and *worse*. An Oscarbait movie is a movie nobody thinks is good but which is generally considered better than others – thus, drama is better than comedy, period settings are better than contemporary ones, realism is better than avant-gardism, blunt political relevance is better than anything, etc. I was reminded of this a few days ago when a “For Your Consideration” ad crept into my phone. It's Oscar season 2021: not a good time, but a step up from a year ago.

The “For Your Consideration” ad was for “Nomadland,” a drama directed by Chloé Zhao that, for lack of any real competition, has become this year's Oscar frontrunner. It stars Frances McDormand, already twice-garlanded, with stolid support from the character actor David Strathairn, who has been famous for the last fifteen years for not being garlanded enough. McDormand, who co-produced the film with Zhao, plays Fern, a woman on the precipice of old age who chooses to buy a van and roam around the country in search of community and work.

The themes of “Nomadland” (capitalist decline, the precarity of employment, bourgeois shallowness, feminist liberation) are plenty weighty, and it pulls off the fine Oscars feat of being politically relevant and a period piece – it's set in 2011, in the thick of the Great Recession. It was filmed in 2018 but anticipates our

current, perverse wave of 2010s nostalgia: you watch and yearn for the days when it was safe to squeeze David Strathairn's hand without soaking your own in sanitizer afterwards.

COVID quarantiners have had an easy time projecting their longings onto Zhao's feature, I think, because the longing tone was there to begin with. There exists a whole tradition of films (off the top of my head: “Something Wild,” “They Live by Night,” “Gun Crazy,” “Kings of the Road,” “Five Easy Pieces,” “Badlands,” “American Honey”) that convey something of the romance of the open road without skimping on the tedium and terror that accompany it.

“Nomadland” is not one of these. The biggest spot of bother Fern finds herself in is changing a flat tire. When she gigs for Amazon, the warehouse is dressed in the same bokeh mist as everything else, and in general, scenes of work are snipped within half an inch of nothingness. On the other hand, Zhao never includes a nice shot of the desert without throwing in five more, usually ending on a closeup of McDormand looking exactly the way people are supposed to look when they're having a profound experience. The implication, intentional or not, is that nomadic gig-worker life mostly consists of squinting wisely at Mother Nature, the actual work an occasional necessity, when common sense and arithmetic suggest the opposite.

All the same, this is not a typical Oscar season, and “Nomadland” is not typical Oscarbait. If it wins the top prize, it will almost certainly be the first film with significant documentary elements to do so. Save for McDormand and Strathairn, the cast consists mostly of nomads playing unvarnished versions of themselves – the only analogue from a Best Picture winner that comes to mind is Harold Russell in “The Best Years of Our Lives,” but that was one role out of many. Here, real-life nomads outnumber the professionals. The two

standouts are Bob Wells, environmentalist and YouTube proselytizer for RV living, and Swankie, a woman in her mid-70s who tells Fern about her decision to hit the road after being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. She describes kayaking through Colorado as a younger woman and remembers thinking, “If I died right then, that moment, it’d be perfectly fine.” It’s a brazenly, gloriously amateurish speech – not a single wise squint or careful pause – and it leaves McDormand’s actorly refinement in the dust.

Years from now, historians will wonder how the same culture that made a cult of authenticity also paid to watch Amy Adams impersonate a hillbilly. The difference between Adams in “Hillbilly Elegy” and Swankie here isn’t inauthentic versus authentic so much as a default aesthetic (mop wigs, makeup, millionaires) versus one that’s been fitted to the needs of the story. When Swankie starts to speak, it doesn’t feel like an experiment or a directorial flourish – it feels like the right form for the content. We need more moments like this in our movies, not just our documentaries, and for that reason alone, I hope “Nomadland” nabs more awards.

Praising Zhao for using nonprofessional actors is like blowing on a little spark in the middle of a cold, dead firepit – I want it to grow into something but can’t deny it’s only a spark. “Nomadland” has been compared to John Ford’s “The Grapes of Wrath” (1940), insofar as it’s about migrant workers muddling through a nasty economy, but watching the two films back-to-back does Zhao no favors. Ford was a sentimental director telling a story for an audience trained to expect sentimentality, but when “The Man” comes to repossess the Okies’ farmland, Ford makes time for the following exchange (lifted, it’s worth noting, almost word-for-word from John Steinbeck’s novel):

MULEY: The chillun ain’t gettin’ enough to eat as it is, and they’re so ragged we’d be shamed if ever’body else’s chillun wasn’t the same way.

THE MAN: I can’t help that. All I know is I got my orders. They told me to tell you you got to get off, and that’s what I’m telling you.

MULEY: You mean get off my own land?

THE MAN: Now don’t go blaming me. It ain’t my fault.

SON: Whose fault is it?

THE MAN: You know who owns the land – the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company.

MULEY: Who’s the Shawnee Land and Cattle Comp’ny?

THE MAN: It ain’t nobody. It’s a company.

SON: They got a pres’dent, ain’t they? They got somebody that knows what a shotgun’s for, ain’t they?

THE MAN: But it ain’t his fault, because the bank tells him what to do.

There may be Hollywood films that do a better job of showing how capitalism turns people into monsters, but I really can’t think of any.

Zhao’s screenplay was also adapted from a book, “Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century,” by the journalist Jessica Bruder. Bruder devoted many pages to the injuries sustained by gig workers in Amazon warehouses and quoted one worker’s claim that Amazon was “the biggest slave owner in the world.” Mysteriously, none of this survived the long journey from page to screen, an omission I’m sure has absolutely nothing to do with the deal Zhao and McDormand struck with Amazon VP Jeff Blackburn allowing them to shoot on company property. Superficial authenticity made another, deeper form of authenticity impossible – not that the producers were sorry to bid the latter one adieu. “We are telling a story about a person who is benefiting from hard work,” McDormand told The Hollywood Reporter, “and working at the Amazon fulfillment center is hard work, but it pays a wage.”

This is all embarrassing and disturbing, especially for a movie that presents itself as sticking up for the little guy, but it doesn’t ipso facto make that movie bad. (On a similar note, Zhao has taken some flak for being the child of a steel tycoon, but if Luchino Visconti could make “La Terra Trema,” I’ll defend her right to make a film about the working class). What does make “Nomadland” bad, or at any rate forgettable, is its

disinterest in the grit and grain of nomadic life, of which the sparkling, well-paying Amazon fulfillment centers are merely a symptom. In one of Bob Wells' early scenes, he's teaching a group about "the ten commandments of stealth parking" – but, as Richard Brody complains in his review for *The New Yorker*, "the scene cuts out before he even delivers the first of them."

"Nomadland" has been praised for its "unflinching realism" – fair if the competition is "Sonic the Hedgehog," less so if you've seen Agnès Varda's chilling, wrenching "Vagabond." Where Varda pointedly refuses to reduce her nomadic heroine to a set of influences, Zhao does everything short of pinning Fern to a wall. As we find out near the film's end, the reason Fern became a nomad (her origin story, you could almost say) is that her husband died and she lost her job – no further questions! The film's view of human nature is as plastic-smooth as its view of itinerant work: every event has a clear-cut cause, every scene has a magic-hour shimmer, and any detail or lingering complexity is briskly sanded away. Swankie's monologue shouldn't be denied its solemn power, but the rest is sugar. Only fair, then, that "Nomadland" ends with a drippy dedication to "the ones who had to depart" – or that Zhao's next project is a Marvel movie. Hard work, no doubt, but it pays a wage.

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I believe I've made it clear I don't think *Nomadland* is the best movie of 2020. For that matter, it's not even the best hybrid fiction-documentary road movie about the decline of contemporary American society. "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm: Delivery of Prodigious Bribe to American Regime for Make Benefit Once Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan," directed by Jason Woliner – let's just call it "Borat 2" – is a country mile from perfect. But what filmmaker in A.D. 2020 would travel across Yoo-Ess-and-Ay and think of perfection?

Another way of putting this is that "Borat 2" and "Nomadland" set themselves pretty much the same challenge – use a combination of fiction and non-fiction storytelling techniques to say something worthwhile about an era in which fiction often melts into non-fiction – but only "Borat 2" succeeds. This is so, I think, because "Borat 2" understands three things "Nomadland" fundamentally does not get:

1) A movie that aims to provide a panoramic view of contemporary America is necessarily an *uncomfortable* movie – sick, embarrassing, weird, cringey, and so on.

2) Uncomfortable things naturally lend themselves to comedy (or horror – and there is plenty of horror in "Borat 2").

3) In present-day America, far, far away from the forest city of a major country, the strongest forms of comedy are observational (and *not* satirical).

Much as the most striking performer in "Nomadland" is an elderly woman who's never been in a movie and never will be again, the funniest people in *Borat 2* are non-comedians who believe that, oh I dunno, Hillary Clinton drinks the blood of babies, or women should date rich old men who've had at least one heart attack. The difference is that "Nomadland" is always interrupting its nonprofessionals in mid-sentence, whereas "Borat 2" seems reluctant to miss one freakish second. I'm not saying a speech about infant cannibalism is *more* representative of the American character than a speech about the ten commandments of stealth parking, but at least "Borat 2" lets me hear the whole speech.

If you've spent the last twenty years in a monastery, here's what you need to know. In the early 2000s, there was a very funny man named Sacha Baron Cohen who had an HBO show which involved him dressing up as a Kazakh journalist named Borat Sagdiyev and interviewing clueless Americans – mostly hicks and politicians. In 2006, this man turned his Borat routine into a feature film that certain people, particularly those who were in middle school at the time, experienced as something between a UFO-sighting and a religious epiphany. For the next decade and a half, this Mr. Baron Cohen would turn in various performances that were, in various ways, disappointments – but how else do you follow an epiphany? And last year, he came back with more Borat: vocal cords a little stiffer with age, ditto the physical comedy, but otherwise the same routines, held together by the flimsiest plot since ... the first Borat movie.

"Much had changed I was last in US&A," Borat informs us early on. Those hicks and politicians, who sometimes came off like sitting ducks on HBO, are

back and bigger than ever, whatever manners they had during the Bush years eroded by years of social media and Tea Partying. Writing for Slate in 2006, Christopher Hitchens thought Borat's interviews demonstrated that the American people were among the kindest and most tolerant in the world – probably the most egregiously wrong “take” the man ever had. Christopher Hitchens, you may recall, also believed that women aren't funny and the Iraq War was a terrific idea.

Kindness or tolerance are in short supply this time around. The Giuliani interview, with its back-pats and shirt-tucks, has gotten most of the attention; considerably worse is the preceding scene, in which Baron Cohen gets a pack of Washington-marchers to chant about beheading Fauci and giving Obama COVID-19. There were similar scenes in the Bush-era HBO show; the difference is *those* bigots seemed sedentarily harmless, while the Trump-era versions carry shotguns. “Borat 2” explores every level of American dim-wittedness – a Steinbeckian loop in which nobody's responsible and everybody's guilty. Thus, the anti-maskers just do what the Republicans tell them. But it ain't *their* fault, because QAnon tells them what to do ...

As always, it's shocking how little Baron Cohen does, how slight a nudge it takes to get his interviewees rolling downhill. It's terrifying to watch and – not but – funnier than anything I've seen in a movie in some time, and as such, it has absolutely no chance of winning the Oscar. Not that that means much: if we're to trust the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the defining American film of 2004 was something called “Million Dollar Baby.” Another film from the same year, “Team America: World Police,” wasn't even nominated, but I know which one people will still be watching twenty-five years from now. I was going to finish by thanking Baron Cohen for making an audacious movie for an audacious year, but I'll go a step further: if Academy voters are thinking of awarding “Nomadland” the top prize, they should say no, for once, to phony liberal politesse and give the damn thing to “Borat 2.”

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Jackson Arn is the Forward's contributing art critic.

News

How ranked-choice voting might affect the historic influence of NYC's Orthodox voting bloc

By Jacob Kornbluh

Andrew Yang [promised he would not take action](#) on secular education in yeshivas. Eric Adams [visited a Brooklyn yeshiva](#) to learn about how it teaches science, math and English. Ray McGuire [hosted a roundtable with rabbis](#) in which he boasted about his comfort level praying at the Western Wall.

These are just a few examples of the pointed outreach that leading candidates in the race for mayor of New York have been making to court the city's Orthodox Jews, which historically have been an influential voting bloc in local elections.

Experts estimate that New York's 1.1 million Jews make up about 20% of the voters in the city's Democratic primaries. Historically, they have proved a powerful and even decisive factor in mayoral elections, particularly the approximately 80,000 voters in Brooklyn's Haredi, or ultra-Orthodox communities, where rabbinic dictates about ballot choices can lead to a reliable bloc of votes.

David Dinkins's [1989 victory over incumbent mayor, Ed Koch](#), who was Jewish, was attributed in part to cutting Koch' share of the Jewish vote down to two-thirds. Mayor Bill de Blasio barely avoided a run-off in the crowded Democratic primary in 2013 by winning more Jewish voters than his competitors. And in the 1993 general election, when Rudy Giuliani beat Dinkins by a little more than 40,000 votes, exit polls showed that [Giuliani received close to 70% of the Jewish vote](#), including nearly 100% of the Orthodox community.

Prof. Ester Fuchs, director of the urban and social policy program at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, explained that it has worked well for candidates to reach out to leaders of Orthodox communities.

“Their clout came from their numbers and their ability to organize and ensure that their communities would go to the polls and vote for the person that their leadership did a deal with,” she said in a recent interview.

This year’s June 22 primaries, which have attracted 30-some mayoral candidates and involve a new system of ranked-choice voting, present a critical test of the bloc’s power. On the one hand, the opportunity to secure even the second- or third-choice spot on a large number of ballots could prove pivotal for candidates. On the other, an increase in Orthodox support for the Republican Party during the Trump years could dilute the community’s power in the primaries.

(About two-thirds of New York’s voters are registered Democrats, making the party’s primary all-but determinative of the November election; Six candidates are running in the GOP primary)

The ranked-choice experiment, which was implemented to eliminate the need for run-off elections, asks voters to delineate up to five choices on their ballots. If no single candidate wins 50% of the first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated and those ballots reallocated to their voters’ second choices. That process continues, with third-, fourth- and fifth-choices used when second-choice candidates have already been eliminated, until one candidate wins more than 50%.

Sid Davidoff, a former top aide to Mayor John Lindsay, suggested that rank-choice voting gives voting blocs “a step up” because they now have the ability to recommend multiple candidates and thus not burn bridges with a number of potential victors. “They now get a couple of bites at the apple that they didn’t have before,” he explained.

Jerry Skurnik, a political consultant who worked for Koch, said that rank-choice voting “probably does make it even more important” to court the Orthodox because 15,000 votes could be the difference in making sure you are not eliminated early. Even the difference in being voters’ third versus fourth choice could affect the outcome, he said, “so it’s worth going after these votes.”

While the primary is still three months away, the candidates haven’t lost time courting the Jewish voting blocs. In recent weeks, most of the leading candidates participated in private Zoom calls with leaders of the Orthodox and other faith-based communities. They have also publicly expressed their views on hot-button

issues, such as how City Hall should engage with [yeshiva curriculums](#) and combat antisemitism. And they have [touted their support for Israel](#) and opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement in a recent Forward survey.

Negotiating with several candidates and educating voters about rank-choice voting will be key in the community’s ability to enhance its influence, Professor Fuchs said. “Coalition formation during the election process is going to be really important for rank-choice voting,” she explained, “and if you can offer a block of votes, even as a No. 2, that will enhance your power in the political process.”

Several leaders in the Orthodox community, who spoke on the condition of anonymity not to reveal internal discussions, said that there’s concern that people will only pay attention to the one candidate who seems to be most appealing. “There’s a natural inclination in the community to be set in its own ways and not always recognize the change that’s coming, and it’s to their disadvantage,” one leader said.

Davidoff, who is chair of Davidoff Hutcher & Citron, a government-relations firm, predicted that most people will focus on figuring out their first choice and not bother checking the entire list – especially if it appears that there’s a particular candidate that seems to support their agenda. So far, he said, Yang has distinguished himself by taking a bold stance on yeshiva education, an issue that has for years had many leading Haredi figures concerned about city and state intervention.

And while for decades the Orthodox community’s power in local elections has been its leadership’s ability to deliver a homogenous bloc of votes, that could prove more difficult now, because of the increased polarization over Israel and religious freedom.

“The extent to which individuals stop listening to the leadership and decide that they have learned something from their experience in national politics, when they may have paid more attention to the news and social media and they decided to make up their own mind,” Fuchs said. “That will weaken the ability of the leadership to have influence by controlling the community’s vote.”

Hank Sheinkopf, a Democratic campaign consultant, agreed. “This election is a test of the frum and observant communities’ ability to turn out to vote,” he said. “This is an important moment for Jews in New York and their influence. They need to prove they have power

to force outcomes.”

In past elections, the candidates would meet with leaders of major Jewish organizations and rabbis of the prominent Hasidic sects in the final weeks of the campaign. Pictures of the visits would serve as an indication of who the favorite candidate was. That was followed by newspaper ads and street posters announcing the list of candidates to vote on Election Day. In recent years, community members have become more engaged on social media, especially WhatsApp, leading to fierce debates and elevating independent voices.

In the 2020 presidential election, turnout in the Orthodox neighborhoods was between 55 to 62%, according to recent data accumulated by the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York and reviewed by the Forward. Turnout was significantly higher when compared to the 21% in the 2013 Democratic mayoral primary.

“A lot of people will only come out and vote in the primary if there is a candidate they really feel strongly in favor of or strongly against,” Skurnik said.

But in this year’s election, in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic and given the confusion over the voting system, turnout may be lower than in previous elections, predicted David Pollock, JCRC’s associate executive director. “That will strengthen the power of groups that can make their constituents turn out to vote,” he said. “For example, unions with sophisticated political operations are important. So, too, are Orthodox leaders.”

Yeruchim Silber, the New York director of government relations for Agudath Israel of America, expressed confidence that members of the Orthodox community will become more engaged and turn out to vote to defend their interests at a time of urgency.

He pointed out that Giuliani received nearly 100% of the Orthodox vote in protest of Dinkins’ handling of the violent protests in Crown Heights in 1991. Similarly, Brooklyn’s Orthodox Jews who were outraged at the way Mayor de Blasio dealt with their neighborhoods around the coronavirus pandemic and are concerned about the rise in antisemitism and the resurgence of the Democratic Socialists of America will be looking to have their voices heard this year.

Silber said that Agudath Israel, which as a 501(c)(3)

cannot endorse candidates, has already launched a campaign to educate voters about the ranked-choice voting system.

Some experts caution that focusing their outreach on one or two key issues could be a risky move for the candidates. By locking up a certain voting bloc in Brooklyn, candidates are potentially alienating some Orthodox voters in neighborhoods like Riverdale and Kew Garden Hills or the broader Jewish vote, which tends to be focused on social-justice issues. The New York Jewish Agenda, a progressive group, for example, is focused on bail reform, anti-racism and healthcare

Taking the open-door approach that [most of the candidates have pledged to do](#) may be more valuable than a commitment on specific issues that will be decided on the state level and be a safer bet for community leaders ahead of the primary.

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