

Forward

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Culture

The Jewish Netflix show you haven't heard about yet

By Irene Katz Connelly

"Family Business," Netflix's latest and most valiant stab at the Jewish sitcom, is many things. It's a sort-of-kind-of compelling portrait of a family in crisis. It's a confused comment on the current state of French Jewry. It is, depending on how you look at it, an argument for or against the legalization of marijuana.

But mostly – and this is probably the most important thing you need to know about the show – it's a six-hour advertisement for Carhartt outerwear.

While watching the show, which follows a family of Parisian Jews as they try to convert their kosher butcher shop into an underground marijuana operation, I tried to keep track of the number of Carhartt garments appearing on the screen. But 15 minutes into the first episode, I had already lost track. Whether they are disowning their children, procuring marijuana cuttings from their erstwhile lovers, or banging down the doors of their estranged-but-secretly pregnant girlfriends, every single character in this show is clad in a hardy barn jacket or a hardy indoor-outdoor fleece. There are also, it goes without saying, a number of beanies in circulation.

The sophomore effort of French screenwriter Igor Gotesman (known for a previous French series "Castings"), "Family Business" may be most notable for its reflection of Carhartt's evolving cultural status: once the purview of non-toxically masculine dads who always have extra flashlights on hand to the hallmark of hipsters who wouldn't know an allen wrench from an adjustable spanner.

But alongside all this sponcon, there's something like a plot unfolding as well. The show revolves around the Hazan family, who can't decide what to do with their ailing kosher butcher shop. Gérard (played by Gérard Darmon, himself of Algerian-Jewish origin), the family's stubborn and toxically masculine patriarch (seriously, this man does all Carhartt wearers a disservice) lives in financial denial and refuses to change a thing. Aure (Julia Piaton), the daughter whose rebellious nature is

signified by a) her queerness, which is never explored in any meaningful way, and b) the fact that she sometimes wears a North Face parka, wants to get out of the business altogether. Meanwhile, prodigal son Joseph (Jonathan Cohen), a fount of get-rich-quick schemes who spends 80% of his time saying "Let me explain," argues that with rumors of cannabis legalization flying about, the family should transform the butchery into a marijuana cafe.

Every sitcom needs its plucky sidekicks, and the Hazans have Enrico Macias, a real-life Algerian singer and legendary figure among French Jewry who plays himself, and Clémentine (Louise Coldefy) a crazy-influencer-with-a-heart-of-gold. (Yes, this is a trope now and we all have to live with it.) Together, this unlikely team embarks on a vexed quest to turn "Hazan's Meats" into "Hazan's Weeds."

"Family Business" is studded with casual Jewish references and symbols, which feel like little gifts in a cinematic world that rarely features workaday Jewish life onscreen. In the Hazans' delivery truck, a hamsa hangs from the rearview mirror. The Hazans eat kishke made by their Ashkenazi grandmother but also mloukhiya, a North African vegetable inherited from their Sephardic ancestors. They name their strain of marijuana "Pastraweed." Pretty much every interior shot contains a tray of kiddush cups and a menorah. (Oddly, the show's creators chose six-branched menorahs, which are more common as early Israeli memorabilia than ritual objects in modern Jewish homes.) As the show ramps up, the Yiddishkeit only gets weirder: In one scene, the mourner's kaddish is recited over several garbage bags of waterlogged marijuana, a moment that is supposed to convey catharsis and familial unity but in fact resembles a stress nightmare I might have had while preparing for my bat mitzvah.

But while the show delights in Jewish culture, it never goes beyond gesturing at the problems facing French Jewry today. It doesn't explain why a kosher butcher

shop that once flourished in Le Marais is no longer viable. It doesn't contextualize the powerful old-country nostalgia that Macias induces in immigrant Jews like Gérard. The Hazans' oldest friends are a family of French Arabs including the accomplished lawyer Aïda, whose on-again-off-again relationship with Joseph is a prominent subplot. But "Family Business" has nothing to say about what it means for Jews and Arabs to form families at a time of [increased antisemitism](#) and hostility towards religious Muslims. (The show's first season takes place in 2019, but this question feels especially relevant now, when the French government is weighing legislation that would [bar Muslim minors from wearing hijabs](#).)

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Culture

Once the staple of New York politics, whatever became of the knish?

By Andrew Silverstein

All ten leading New York mayoral candidates seem to agree on one thing: New York bagels are better than California bagels (no matter what The New York Times says). Food is an easy way for politicians to win points and present themselves as relatable. Besides, being asked your bagel order is a softball question compared to defending your affordable housing plan. That is, unless you toast your bagel (like Mayor De Blasio) or think lox and raisins go together (like past gubernatorial candidate Cynthia Nixon). This year's candidates have tweeted out pics of their lunch to prove that they are real New Yorkers, but missing is the once staple of New York politics: the knish.

"No New York politician in the last 50 years has been elected to office without having at least one photograph showing him on the Lower East Side with a knish in his face," Milton Glaser and Jerome Snyder wrote in the "Underground Gourmet" in 1968.

"It became part of what was almost a ritual," said Chris McNickle, author of "To Be Mayor of New York: Ethnic Politics in the City." "Each candidate would eat a knish, eat Italian food, and march in the St. Patrick's Day parade," thus checking off the boxes for what were once the city's largest ethnic groups.

"The knish was symbolic," McNickle said. "It was a way for, in particular, a non-Jewish candidate to acknowledge the traditions and rituals and significance of the Jewish voting group."

For the most part, it worked. In the 1940s, just the prospect of the esteemed Eleanor Roosevelt noshing on a humble knish drew crowds of curious Jews. At other times, these photo ops backfired and were deemed pandering. In 1971, Jewish protesters pelted Mayor Lindsay with rocks and declared, "It will not be enough for him this year to put a yarmulke on his head and eat a knish."

This year's mayoral candidates Andrew Yang and Scott Stringer need not fear being stoned if they walk into Yonah Schimmel's Knish Bakery, the city's preeminent knishery, open since 1910. "All candidates are welcome," owner Ellen Anistratov said. Even Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, a vegan, can chow down on a parve knish in good conscience. New York mayors dating back to Jimmy Walker in the 1920s have stopped in for softball-size round-baked knishes. Anistratov believes the potato pies bring politicians good luck thanks to their connection to Yonah Schimmel. Schimmel arrived in New York in the 1880s as a Torah teacher. "His desire was to share the energy of the bible," she said. "This energy he transformed into the knish." She believes their kasha or jalapeño-cheddar knish is a Jewish talisman. But the number one reason Anistratov thinks her bakery should be a campaign stop is that "It represents New York."

She's right. In a sense, knish politics, like the knish itself is a New York thing as much as a Jewish thing. Knishes were invented centuries ago in Eastern Europe. Still, whoever on the shtetl thought to encase potato, kasha, cabbage, or even liver in an easy-to-hold pastry dough must have anticipated the New York street corner. The hot dog had to be dressed up in a bun, and pizza needed to be sliced in eighths to be handled by a New Yorker on the go. The knish arrived at Ellis Island ready-made for a baseball stadium or Delancey Street. Later, would come its cousins, the empanada, the samosa and the Jamaican patty, but first, there was the knish. "It was the quintessential 19th-century New York food," Suzanne Wasserman, New York food historian, told *The New York Times* in 2003.

In the 20th Century, the knish was Americanized: squared, fried, frozen, and mass-produced. However, unlike the bagel or the pizza, neither the round or square Coney Island-style knish would be adopted by airport food courts or fast-food chains. It would remain an almost exclusively New York cuisine. For barnstorming politicians, even correctly ordering a knish signaled "you're one of us." Laura Silver wrote in her book *Knish: In search of the Jewish Soul Food*, "So ingrained was the knish in New York life that its name

doubled as a litmus test for authentic New Yorker status." Insider tip for any would-be carpetbagger: the "k" is pronounced.

New Englander Robert F. Kennedy's visit to Yonah Schimmel in 1964 not only allowed him to court Jewish voters; it also won him street cred. "The knish was every person's food," says Silver. They were sold from knisherries, delis, and especially pushcarts. Until 1967, New York food carts had to keep moving. The simple three-wheeled operations mainly offered hotdogs, salted pretzels, and potato knishes. Of the three options, the knish was the most filling and the most identifiably New York. Before halal carts or dollar slices, the dense potato-filled pastry smothered in mustard was the snack of real New Yorkers in a rush and on a budget.

The proletariat potato turnover became a political hot potato when Nelson Rockefeller, one of the nation's richest men, ran for governor. In 1962, the Democrats distributed a cartoon poking fun at the phoniness of a Rockefeller trying to play off like a regular knish-eating New Yorker. Rockefeller still beat out the Democrat Robert Morgenthau, a Jew. How? McNickle recalls that after the election, "he [Morgenthau] bumped into black civil rights activist Bayard Rustin standing on a street corner eating a knish. 'What's that you're eating?' Morgenthau asked. Rustin responded, 'I'm eating the reason you're not governor.'"

The elite Morgenthau had failed to connect with the average Jewish voter. Eight years later, in the 1970 Governor's race, the savory pastry was again weaponized. Rockefeller's opponent was Arthur J. Goldberg, the son of a street peddler. From a Brighton Beach knishery, he asked, "What does Rockefeller know from a knish?" In the end, Rockefeller won, proving himself by voraciously downing knishes, pizza, kielbasa, and egg rolls on the campaign trail. Four years later, *The New York Times* wrote approvingly of his 1974 nomination as Vice President: "He can work a crowd, eat a knish."

To be a "knish-eating politician" became a shorthand. It meant to be able to campaign in working-class ethnic neighborhoods of New York and not just the

halls of a country club. Silver points to the 1980 novel “Close Relations,” by Susan Isaacs. In it, a campaigning governor described as “the ultimate WASP” chokes to death on a lowly knish at a Queens rally. The message, “their Beloved Non-Ethnic” couldn’t cut the mustard. Later in 1996, it was said of the Republican Vice Presidential candidate Jack Kemp, “He’s not your hot-dog-eating, knish-munching street politician.” In other words, he may have represented upstate New York in Congress, but don’t expect him to pull in New York City voters.

By then, the potato pastry was in decline – done in by its biggest beneficiaries: New York politicians. In his war on street food, Mayor Giuliani, perhaps sick of potato pie eating on the campaign trail, effectively banned knishes from the smaller hot dog carts. Previous regulations from the Koch administration had already forced most vendors to switch from fresh to inferior frozen knishes. The knish, once almost on every corner, receded from public life. Newer street carts can handle knishes, but these days, it’s easier to find a Tibetan momo or taco at a midtown food vendor than the old reliable knish.

It’s tempting to pin the knish’s downfall on the political class, but there are as many Jews as gentiles on line at the dosa cart and empanada trucks. A century ago, a knish was the lunch of striving Jewish garment workers. Silver compares it to the tamales of today’s Latino immigrants. As more Jews entered the middle class and moved out to the suburbs, the knish became more a food of comfort than a food of subsistence.

Nostalgia alone can’t keep the knish industry afloat. Knishes are still found in delis, the occasional street food cart, and in the religious Jewish strongholds of the outer-boroughs, but the pillowy stuffed pastry has become rarer and more expensive. No New York politician has taken on the cause of the dying sidewalk knish. They moved on to show their New York bona fides by expertly folding slices of pizza, not toasting a bagel, or visiting a bodega. But still, I must ask, “What do they know from a knish?”

–
Andrew Silverstein

News

A synagogue in your home? Zoom camera lighting? Pandemic offered rabbis some unusual tax deductions

By Stewart Ain

A suggestion to rabbis: don’t do your own tax return this year.

The pandemic forced most people to move their office to their home and rabbis were no exception. Rabbis found themselves setting up a room in their house from which to work, buying office supplies and camera lighting to Zoom with congregants and participate in minyans. But is any of that deductible when filling out their 2020 tax returns?

“Every rabbi I know is working from home and I don’t know of any rabbi who thought about that,” confessed Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. “I already did my taxes and this is something we should have looked at. I will encourage others to do so.”

“People spent so much time and energy making it work as they worked from home,” she added, “doing Zoom services, pastoral care visits on Zoom and some through porch visits wearing masks – I counseled someone as we sat in our cars six feet apart with our windows rolled down and wearing masks – that I don’t think we had thought about how it would affect our taxes.”

Jonathan Medows is both a Conservative rabbi and CPA in New York. “Most rabbis are lovely people, but they don’t have a Masters in Business Administration,” he said.

The unusual nature of rabbinic work during a global pandemic could certainly complicate the typical clergy tax return. “Even if he or she has always done their own tax returns, this might be a good year to seek

assistance from someone who does this on a full-time basis,” said Henry Grzes, lead manager for Tax Practice & Ethics for the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. “Just as 40 years ago you might have been able to change your car’s oil and spark plugs but can’t do that today, a CPA can assist you with your 2020 tax return and give you tips on how to save taxes in 2021, tips that would offset the fee you pay.”

Pandemics and the parsonage



Illustration by Nuthawut Somsuk / iStockPhotos
The pandemic has had an impact on tax deductions.

Gil Nusbaum, the general counsel for the National Philanthropic Trust, said that the COVID-19 outbreak created some odd circumstances for spiritual leaders. Asked about rabbis who conducted services in their home during the pandemic, he said it may be possible to deduct expenses such as buying chairs for congregants.

In addition, rabbis should also remember to take a parsonage allowance.

“That is part of a larger tradition that deals with ministerial exemptions,” explained Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass. “That came from a double sense that religion is good and that the government should encourage it without giving special privileges to any one religion. There was a sense that

clergy were historically underpaid.

“The parsonage allowance goes back to the way many rabbis and ministers were compensated in the 18th 19th and 20th centuries and still today – the synagogue would own some kind of residence and the rabbi would live there and not pay taxes on it. As parsonages became less common, rabbis would live in their own home and get the equivalent tax benefit.”

Sarna noted that the parsonage allowance has been repeatedly challenged in the courts but that the courts “have generally felt it passes legal muster for a variety of reasons, including the fact that it has gone on for a very long time and the tax laws have all sorts of benefits for different groups.”

Can a dining room table be deducted?

Although rabbis employed by a synagogue or other organization such as a Jewish community center or day school worked from home during the pandemic because their office was closed, “there isn’t anything an employee has the right to deduct [from their regular income tax] for reimbursement of out-of-pocket employment expenses,” according to Grzes.

That had been possible prior to the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, which eliminated such deductions in return for providing a higher standard deduction in the tax code, Grzes noted.

“For anyone incurring expenses on their own while working at home, the best way to recover that cost is to have your employer reimburse you directly,” he said. “If there is a reimbursement policy, rabbis should get it. If not, they should have one put in place. The rabbi should not pay for these things out of his own pocket.”

And should they not be able to get reimbursed, there is another avenue rabbis can pursue when filling out their taxes. “Most rabbis are subject to self-employment tax in addition to income tax,” said Medows, the rabbi-slash-accountant. “This was deliberately done. All ministers are treated as dual status, as also self-employed.”

Medows said he has employees working for him and

that he splits with them their Social Security and Medicare payments taxes – each pays 7.65 percent of the employee’s salary. “But when you are a rabbi or a cantor, you pay both ends – the full 15.3 percent,” he said, noting that some synagogues may reimburse their rabbi and cantor.

“However, the money the rabbi spends towards housing is exempt from income tax but is still subject to the self-employment tax. Although rabbis can no longer take home office deductions from their income tax for working from home, they can deduct it from their self-employment tax – the 15.3 percent they pay. So if a rabbi spends \$5,000 for his home office, he is able to save about \$755 through self-employment.”

Prior to the change in the tax law in 2017, rabbis were able to take the deduction from both the self-employment tax and the federal income tax they paid. Assuming their tax rate was 25 percent, they could deduct another \$1,250 from their federal income tax.

Even rabbis employed by a synagogue may occasionally officiate at weddings and funerals of non-synagogue members. Gil Nusbaum, general counsel for the National Philanthropic Trust, said home office expenses can be deducted from such self-employment income on [Form 8829](#).

Similarly, freelance cantors and rabbis who are hired by a synagogue to officiate on special occasions like the High Holy Days may deduct their home office expenses from that income.

“But your home office has to be used regularly and exclusively for that business,” Nusbaum stressed. “So if you use your dining room as your desk, it would not qualify because you also use it to eat on. And if it is only used once a twice a year, it does not qualify. And the rabbi’s home must be his principle base of business. A rabbi could perform weddings at a wedding venue, but his home should be the principle place where he does business, which could make it challenging for a rabbi.”

–
Stewart Ain, an award-winning veteran journalist, covers the Jewish community.

Opinion

Arkansas banned gender-affirming care for teens. That same care saved my life.

By Sawyer Goldsmith

Last week, the Arkansas legislature overrode the governor’s veto to implement a heinous law that would ban gender-affirming healthcare for transgender and non-binary youth in that state.

I want to share my own gender story so you can hear how access to trans-affirming health care has allowed me to live my own authentic truth.

Five years ago, I was miserable. I was falling behind in school and lacking motivation to do things I once loved. I didn’t want to keep living.

I didn’t understand why I felt the way I did until I discovered the word transgender.

Knowing that there was a word for how I felt let me know I was not alone. That discovery helped me understand that I was living life as a person that I knew I wasn’t.

Afraid that I wouldn’t be accepted or that I would have my feelings dismissed, I struggled to come out. It took a while for me to fully express to others what I felt on the inside, but once I had the language, it became easier.

At 15, I began my social transition. I cut my hair, changed my wardrobe and name, and asked those around me to use the pronouns that felt best to me. I was no longer miserable, but something was still off. I knew that in order to feel fully comfortable, I needed not only to socially transition, but to transition medically, as well.

It took some time for my parents to process, but once they understood that it wasn’t something that I just wanted but what I needed in order to be happy, they were fully on board.

So, when I was 16, my parents and I went to Howard Brown Health in Chicago to begin discussing my medical transition with doctors, a process the clinic describes as “a collaboration between youth, their parents, and their medical and mental health providers.” On April 21, 2017, around five days after my initial consultation, I began testosterone, often referred to as T. A little over a year later, I underwent top surgery, alleviating most, if not all, of my dysphoria. I was finally able to take my shirt off in public and shower without cringing inside from discomfort.

Going on T not only masculinized my voice and redistributed muscles and fat around my body, but most importantly, allowed others to perceive me in the way that I saw myself. In just two weeks, it'll be my four-year anniversary of being on T and starting my path to happiness.

If I hadn't medically transitioned, I don't think that I would be here today. This is the life-saving treatment that the Arkansas law would prevent other teens from accessing.

Medically transitioning saved my life, and it has saved the lives of countless other trans kids. Preventing trans youth from pursuing a medical transition is not only unjust and inequitable, it actively undermines trans lives and will ultimately end in more lives being lost.

This is why the American Society for Pediatrics and so many other medical organizations oppose this and other anti-trans legislation. With anti-trans bills on the rise – by early April, according to the ACLU, 28 states were considering [anti-trans legislation](#) – and one already passed, it is incredibly important to understand the effect this has on trans youth, regardless of where they live.

The Arkansas bill, HB 1570, goes by the name of the “Save Adolescents from Experimentation,” or SAFE, Act.

The bill prevents healthcare providers from prescribing puberty blocking and hormone altering medication to those under age 18. The bill also prevents transgender youth from accessing gender affirming surgeries. In short, it makes it illegal for trans kids in Arkansas to

medically transition.

This, to me, sounds like the inverse of a bill focused on “saving children.” According to supporters, the reason for this drastic measure, which runs counter to all accepted medical advice, is because “Arkansas has a compelling government interest in protecting the health and safety of its citizens, especially vulnerable children.”

The bill will do exactly the opposite – not protect the health and safety of trans youth, but rather put them in further danger.

Even if the bill had not passed, the mere act of debating trans youths' rights to be themselves deteriorates the health and safety of trans kids. It is traumatizing to have your rights and the validity of your existence disputed. Preventing them from pursuing medical transitions will make things worse; the Arkansas organizer [Willow Breshears told Time](#) “I heard from the mom of a trans kid that if this bill passed, that her child was going to kill themselves.”

Whether or not they are in Arkansas; whether or not they plan to medically transition; trans youth around the country are in pain. It hurts all of us to see politicians push an agenda that could ultimately cost us our lives.

Preventing individuals from expressing who they are clearly leads to psychological problems. A recent, [detailed review](#) of more than 70 studies found that transgender individuals denied access to treatment for dysphoria face increased risk of health consequences, including higher risk of depression and anxiety. “The health and well-being of transgender people can be harmed by stigmatizing and discriminatory treatment,” the review concluded.

There is a value in Judaism that is concerned with both physical and emotional wellbeing: *Briyut*, or health. The mitzvah of *briyut* is not limited to health professionals, but incumbent upon every Jew. *Briyut* is one of the only Jewish values that takes precedence over any other, emphasizing its importance in our lives.

Supporting transgender people in their identities, and

specifically transgender youth, is encompassed by that mitzvah. Trans youth need our support now more than ever. We need to know that there are people out there for us.

I am fortunate to be an intern at Keshet, a national organization working for LGBTQ equality in Jewish life. In response to the more than 100 anti-trans bills pending in state legislatures across the country, Keshet has launched a bi-weekly open processing space for trans and non-binary teens, which I facilitate. In the most recent session, a 17-year old nonbinary participant said “it’s like they’re choosing cis bodies over trans lives... is what it feels like.”

It hit me then that those teens are being forced to grapple with losing their rights rather than just getting to be kids. Kids who are in middle school and high school should be focusing on their lessons, not legislation.

How can those in the Jewish community fulfill the mitzvah of *briyut*, and be allies to trans youth?

Check to see what [anti-trans legislation](#) is being [voted on near you](#), and call the appropriate political officials to share your opposition to those bills. Strengthen your understanding of the complexities of gender identity and challenge your assumptions. Even proactively asking someone what their pronouns are rather than assuming – and offering your own – can make a significant impact. Consider how the schools, community centers, synagogues and camps your family attends do or do not affirm transgender people, and seek out workshops and trainings, like those offered by Keshet, to make a clear plan of action to elevate LGBTQ equality and inclusion in your community. Follow and learn from transgender and Jewish activists on social media, and back organizations that support trans youth

And if there are trans people that you know and love, be there for them and let them know that you are there to listen if they need support.

For any trans and non-binary Jewish youth who may be reading this, and are feeling scared or in need of support: you are not alone. Please join me at Keshet’s trans and nonbinary processing space every other

Thursday. Trans and non-binary youth ages 13-18 can register [here](#) to talk with and support other teens like them.

–
Sawyer Goldsmith, (they/them) a second year at JTS/Columbia, is currently serving as the Youth Programs Intern at Keshet, a national organization working for LGBTQ equality in Jewish life. Find more information at [keshetonline.org](#).

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



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News

Robin Washington joins the Forward as Editor-at-Large

By Forward Staff

Robin Washington, an acclaimed veteran journalist and early organizer of Jews of color, is the Forward's new Editor-at-Large, a flagship position aimed at elevating and expanding diverse voices.

Washington, a longtime senior editor, columnist, radio host and TV/film documentarian across mainstream and ethnic media, was one of the founders of the Alliance of Black Jews back in 1995, and among the first to use the term "Jew of color," in an [1997 essay](#). He has mentored scores of young journalists, served as a board member on the National Association of Black Journalists and Unity Journalists of Color, and lectured at numerous universities.

At the Forward, the nation's oldest and leading Jewish journalism outlet, Washington will write an opinion column, develop and host an interview show, help recruit diverse contributors, interns and staff, and consult across the organization's leadership on addressing systemic racism.

"There is no stronger Black Jewish voice in journalism than Robin's, and having him in our pages is a huge boon for our audience," said Jodi Rudoren, the Forward's Editor-in-Chief. "He knows the community, he knows the history, he asks tough questions, he has a sharp eye, a keen ear, a big heart and a real sense of humor. I am so proud to have him on our masthead."

Washington's role is part of a broad commitment by the Forward to diversity, equity and inclusion, led by CEO/publisher Rachel Fishman Feddersen and a task force of board, association members and staff. The Forward has increased targeted recruitment efforts at all levels, made race and other identity issues a core focus of coverage, scheduled anti-racism workshops for employees, and prioritized diversity in vendor relationships, among other initiatives.

"The Forward is focused on making sure that our workplace, governance, and especially our coverage,



Robin Washington

are fully inclusive, reflecting our multiracial and multicultural Jewish communities," Feddersen said. "Robin's input will be of huge value as we work on these critical issues and I'm so pleased and proud that he's joining us."

Washington, 64, grew up in Chicago, attending civil rights protests from the age of 3, and has a rich and varied career that includes stints as the top editor of the *Duluth News Tribune*, managing editor of the *Bay State Banner*, an African American weekly in Boston; and writing the "Roads Scholar," a transportation column for the *Boston Herald*. He won an Emmy Award in 1989 for the documentary, "Vermont: The Whitest State in the Union" and numerous national honors for his landmark PBS documentary on the origins of the Civil Rights Movement, "You Don't Have to Ride Jim Crow."

Currently, Washington hosts a weekly news and public-affairs show, "Simply Superior," on Wisconsin

Public Radio, and remains a contributing reporter to WGBH Boston and an editor and mentor for American City Business Journals. He has also served on the editorial board of the Boston Globe and as interim commentary editor of The Marshall Project.

Last year, he published an [important study](#) finding that 2% of the boards of directors of the member-groups of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations were Jews of color, a fraction of their portion of the community.

“As one who has been immersed in and fascinated by history, I’m thrilled to be part of a journalistic enterprise with such a storied, and fearless, past in chronicling the Jewish experience in America,” Washington said. “What’s equally important is its present and future, and helping to guide it toward accurately depicting and advocating for inclusion and equity – not as catchwords but as core Jewish values.”

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Culture

In the heart of whiskey country, this rabbi puts the bourbon into suburban

By Dan Friedman

There are moments when you expect the rabbi to be watching you: As you lift the Torah, as you blow the shofar, as you enter the chuppah. There are also moments when you don’t expect a rabbi to be watching you – like when you take your first sip of bourbon on a Sunday evening. But that’s exactly when the Bourbon Rabbi is going to be watching – from the label of the bottle of his surprisingly tasty whiskey.

In 2017, when the Wall Street Journal referred to Rabbi Chaim Litvin as the Bourbon Rabbi, it was not referring to the whiskey that he was responsible for producing. At that point, Litvin and his family were not making or even selling bourbon – his involvement with that spirit was only as a kosher certifier. But a seed had been planted.

The Litvin family had arrived in Louisville, Kentucky, as Chabad shluchim in 1985. At that time, the kosher certification business seemed like a good way for the Litvins to make money. Instead of flying rabbis in from New York or Chicago, different certification boards like the Orthodox Union could hire his father – and later Chaim and his brothers – to inspect local food producing facilities to check they were kosher.

The facilities under the Litvins’ scrutiny were mainly plants that processed solid foods, but the Litvins also dealt with a couple of whiskey makers like Heaven Hill [owned by the Shapira family]. With the bourbon boom of the teens, though, Chaim found himself visiting an increasing number of distilleries. As that earlier Wall Street Journal article noted, bourbon – made from grain and water – is as kosher “as mountain spring water” but the boom led to a diversification into products that were less reliably kosher. Flavorings and wine products that were processed in the same facilities had to be checked

and, if they were not kosher, kept away from the kosher products.

After years of working with distillers, mixers and bottlers, Chaim became ensconced in the bourbon community. When I spoke to him on the phone before Passover, he told me how he came to move from behind the scenes inspecting pipes and stills to selling bourbon with his moniker and icon on the label.

He had been in attendance at an event and had to fill in when the keynote speaker was delayed. Chaim ended up speaking about bourbon for 40 minutes, realizing that he and the crowd enjoyed it. Gradually, he set up more talks, with planned tastings, lectures and seminars for synagogues, men's clubs and Chabad groups.

He conducted tastings with bourbon from various storied Louisville distillers, but he thought it would be fun – and informative – to not only choose specific barrels of his clients' whiskey but to have his very own barrels in his very own bottles. So, after tasting 14 different barrels, he chose a couple of barrels from an undisclosed distillery in Louisville and bottled them with his distinctive bearded logo on the label.

The barrels, he said, were between 119 and 121 proof at tasting, but he cut it down slightly from cask strength to 115 proof for bottling. Sometimes cask strength liquor can be rough but diluting it can lead to a watery flavor. Bourbon Rabbi, as diluted, is still powerful, but doesn't have any "abrasive mouth feel" that can come at higher proofs. 115, Litvin also pointed out cheerfully, is gematria for "Chazak" [strength].

Bourbon Rabbi [the whiskey] has the typical thick sweet bourbon flavor, with the slight medicinal touch that makes it less beloved than Scotch. But, at only 2 years old, it also has a lovely wooden flavor. Litvin tried to convince me that the woodiness was oaken, but I thought it felt more herbal, like a young cedar. It has a satisfying, broad profile that is actually rare for such a young spirit.

I asked him whether it was odd for him to be branding some of the spirits that he was usually certifying – whether there wasn't a conflict of interest in him certifying his own whiskey as kosher on the one hand

and, on the other, buying his clients' barrels, bottling bourbon and then selling – perhaps in direct competition with differently branded bottles of that same distiller's bourbon.

He smiled. "I'm not looking to compete with them," he said. "I'm not looking to distill. I just want to have enough to sell in a few places and to have at tastings." If he sold out of the first bottling, though, he was going to keep bottling and selling, so I pushed him a bit further.

"Look," he said, "The bourbon is going to be sold, whether it has my name on it or not. I don't see bourbon getting clearanced out very often. The market is incredible." And, anecdotally, he's not wrong.

He sold his first batch to a distributor just before Passover. The vagaries of the calendar and transport meant that neither he, nor his Jewish customer in West Kentucky – a liquor store in West Kentucky – owned the non-Kosher for Passover liquor during Passover. But now that the holiday is over, it is available for the discerning palates of Nicholasville and, soon, once the interstate distribution is organized, nationwide. Why shouldn't a rabbi have a piece of the bourbon market himself?

COVID meant Litvin had to cancel a Canadian tour in March 2020 but he still hopes to visit once it's safe to travel again. Now that the Bourbon rabbi has his Bourbon Rabbi whiskey, his tastings will have the piece that he felt that was missing. Depending on when the Canadian tour is rearranged, it may be that our luck neighbors to the north will be the first to try the Bourbon Rabbi's first bottled expression under the watchful gaze of the rabbi himself.

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Courtesy of Chaim Litvin