

The Best of the *Forward*

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Stories for you to savor over Shabbat and Sunday



NEWS

Hats off to David Schoen who, like me, makes a statement with a yarmulke

By Benyamin Cohen

David Schoen and I used to live in the same Atlanta neighborhood and we bumped into each other plenty of times – at the grocery store, at the airport, at synagogue. Each of those times, we were both wearing yarmulkes. For modern-Orthodox men like me and Schoen, one of President Donald Trump’s [impeachment lawyers](#), covering our head is as natural as putting on a shirt. The yarmulke is always there.

So it was with a mixture of amusement and confusion that I watched as something Schoen did during his opening argument on Tuesday made national headlines. Google “David Schoen” and you’ll find the world seems less interested in his defense strategy than in why he reflexively [put his hand on top of head](#) each time he took a sip of water.

taken off for a whole host of reasons, it is especially important to wear it while eating and praying.

As many modern-Orthodox Jews do when in public, secular, professional settings, Schoen had decided to leave his yarmulke in his pocket while speaking on the Senate floor. I can relate. I often take off my yarmulke, or cover it with a baseball cap, when I’m running errands around town. After all, I now live in the mountains of Appalachia. People here in Morgantown, West Virginia, are more likely to have seen a bear than a Jew.

Schoen explained his decision to CNN: “It’s just an awkward thing and people stare at it.” Irony of ironies, his *not* wearing the yarmulke is what caught the public’s attention.



When Schoen grabbed his bottle of water, he instinctively made sure that his head was covered. The internet was all aflutter: Was he trying to use his hand – or even the bottle cap itself – as a makeshift yarmulke? Would wearing an actual yarmulke have been less conspicuous?

As someone who has worn a yarmulke all of my life, I might imagine there was a third option: When you wear a head covering the majority of the time, you just assume it’s on. So when a thirsty Schoen was leaning back to take a swig, I think he might have been reaching for his head to ensure the phantom yarmulke didn’t fall off.

On Wednesday, Schoen simply chose to don his yarmulke during the trial.

For a [book project](#) about faith in the Bible Belt, I spent a year visiti in an observant Jewish household, with a father who is a rabbi, I was taught that it was verboten to visit ng Chri stian houses of worship. Growing up churches – especially during Sunday prayer services.

When a Jewish person wears a yarmulke, it serves as a physical reminder that God is above watching over every action we take. While the head covering can be

And so, before I set forth on that church-hopping adventure, I asked a rabbi for permission.

And here's what he told me: You can go on one condition – wear your yarmulke (and your press pass).

If you're wearing both, he said, people will know that you are Jewish and there to observe and not to participate in prayer. He wanted me to stand out like a sore thumb.

I'm a 5-foot-2, bespectacled, bearded, nerdy-looking guy; I'm about as Jewish-looking as they come. Like Tevye eating [bagels and lox ... while reading the Forward](#). But a yarmulke, the rabbi said, would be the proverbial cherry atop my head.

I entered my first Sunday service nervous, trepidatious, anxious – like the way of my people. It was a megachurch with 15,000 congregants, mostly African American, in Lithonia, Ga. Me and my yarmulke were the most conspicuous religious items on display that Sunday, and that's including the 20-foot cross that hovered above the stage holding a band and 100-person choir.

An usher noticed me, grabbed my hand, and rushed me, unwittingly, to the front of the sanctuary. He whispered into the ear of someone on stage and, before I knew it, the pastor was telling the band to stop playing, the choir to stop singing and the throng of thousands to stop dancing. He had a special announcement to make.

He grabbed the microphone so the crowds on the balcony could hear: "We'd like to welcome our Jewish friend to services today!"

The video camera operators zoomed in and there was my shocked face, underneath the yarmulke, up there on Jesus' Jumbotron for all to see.

Suddenly, a sea of people surrounded me, bridging the gap between our two religions. They were poking and prodding at me like I was an alien from outer space. I had come to learn about Christianity but, to my surprise, all they wanted to talk about was Judaism.

The first question they asked: Why do you wear that beanie on your head?

I had been in church for less than five minutes, and I was already outed as The Jew. My rabbi, with his prescription to don a yarmulke in a Black Baptist Bible Belt megachurch, couldn't have planned this better.

But the experience left me a little traumatized. I saw, firsthand, what happens when everyone spots you as the Jewish guy, when your skullcap becomes a homing beacon. It's one thing to wear it while going about your normal daily activities (it's barely visible on Zoom calls!), but to put it on and walk into such a public setting is another matter entirely.

Sometimes, it's easier to just remove it beforehand. At least that's what Schoen likely thought before Tuesday's water-sipping situation. I'll have to ask him the next time I bump into him.

–

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CULTURE

Bald or Jewish – the Internet’s newest parlor game

By Mira Fox

During Tuesday’s impeachment trial, our Slack channels exploded. First, of course, it was David Schoen, Trump’s lawyer, covering his head with each sip of water he took. Was it a reflex? An Orthodox Jew trying to hold onto a phantom kippah? Or was it an attempt to cover his head, in lieu of a yarmulke?

Then, Rep. Jamie Raskin, leading the House Managers arguing to impeach Trump, returned to the podium for his closing remarks. “Is Raskin wearing a kippah?!” we asked. “He doesn’t usually do that, does he?”

As it turned out, Raskin was not wearing a skullcap; he is just balding, with that particular kind of male-pattern baldness that leaves the appearance of a full head of hair from the front, but a surprisingly shiny pate from the back. As he turned his head slightly to gesticulate, the edge of his bald spot looked like a kippah.

This mistake reminded me of a game played widely in my Jewish circle when I was in graduate school and living in Somerville, Massachusetts. There is a sizable observant community there, but while it is close-knit, there is a constantly rotating cast of characters due to the stream of graduate students passing through Boston’s many universities at any given time. This means there’s always space for a rousing round of “Jewish or just bald?” (There are also variations, such as “frum or bald?”)

Especially among the younger community of 20- and 30-somethings living in the scholarly climes of Cambridge, it was a fine line – when moving about largely secular spaces, whether that be campus or the climbing gym, the game could so easily go either way. Sometimes, it seems unlikely that a younger guy is bald enough to have a kippah-sized patch, so it must be a yarmulke, we’d think. But a bald pate was more common than you’d expect, at least among Harvard and MIT’s doctoral candidates. Plus male-pattern baldness seems to come on young among those with

Jewish genes, so bald *and* Jewish is always an option.

My friends would watch from afar, trying to guess if a certain individual was a newcomer to the community, someone we’d see at synagogue that weekend or should be inviting to Shabbat dinner. And, of course, if he was cute, new blood for the small community, the gossip would begin to flow – only for him to get close enough for us to see the light shine on a bare skull. Tricked again.

But Tuesday, all of Twitter – primed with newfound expertise in headcoverings gained a mere hour before – joined, unknowingly in our game. And they discovered, just like we did, that it’s actually pretty challenging to discern between Jewish and bald. Especially when, like Raskin, they’re both. In any case, he’s married.

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NEWS

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, new head of CDC, got her start at Jewish summer camp

By Linda Matchan

Dr. Kenneth Freedberg was standing at his wife's bedside in a Boston hospital's intensive care unit when an unexpected visitor entered: Dr. Rochelle Walensky.

"We were there for no more than 45 minutes when Rochelle walks in," said Freedberg, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School.

"She didn't work there," he said, recalling his friend Walensky's visit after his wife had suddenly taken ill 10 years ago. "She is always there for people she is committed to, and she is committed to a lot of people."

As the newly-appointed director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Walensky's list of commitments has grown exponentially, a task friends and family of the Newton, Massachusetts resident agree she is uniquely prepared to handle.

Walensky is "a tireless champion of the core Jewish value of *pikuach nefesh*, saving life," said Rabbi Michelle Robinson of Temple Emanuel in Newton, a Conservative congregation where Walensky and her family are members.

An influential scholar and clinician, Walensky had been Chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), and Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. This alone is a colossal accomplishment. She was only the third head of the division in its 65-year-history at MGH, which insiders like to say stands for "Man's Greatest Hospital." [It was recognized as the #1 hospital in America by U.S. News & World Report in 2015 and in 2019 it was #2].

Now her job description includes leading the CDC's response to the pandemic, improving the nation's public health system, addressing vast health inequities and tackling collateral damage from the coronavirus in areas like suicide and substance use disorder.

"She may be at the CDC now, but we like to say she got her start at Camp Yavneh," said Bil Zarch, executive director of Camp Yavneh, a Jewish overnight camp in New Hampshire where for many summers Walensky and her physician husband spent a week volunteering as camp doctors while their three sons were campers.

Actually, Walensky got her start at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, where she received her MD, followed by a Master of Public Health degree from the Harvard School of Public Health.

Boston has remained her home, and Temple Emanuel is her "spiritual home." It was so supportive of her during the time MGH was deluged by COVID-19 patients that she'd sometimes come home on a Friday night to find a challah delivered to her house.

"There have been times when an order from the Butcherie has just shown up," she said, referring to a local kosher market in a talk she gave about her career to the Temple's Sisterhood not long before she was tapped for the CDC job.

She also spoke about how she's been mesmerized by the field of infectious disease since her first year of medical school in 1991, the year basketball Hall of Famer Magic Johnson announced he had HIV. Back in 1995, during her first year of training after medical school, Baltimore had a lot of injection drug users and there wasn't much that could be done for them. "We pronounced a lot of people dead of AIDS," she said.

Yet that same year the first antiretroviral cocktail was approved by the FDA. "It was remarkable," she said in her talk. "For the first time ever, we could tell people, 'you might not die of this.'"

She carried this passion, optimism and conviction about the power of science back to Boston where her

pioneering research with colleagues helped advance the national and global response to HIV/AIDS. Much of her work has been policy-oriented – using mathematical models, for example, to study how to best implement limited resources in HIV testing. Her work helped to change U.S. guidelines to promote more HIV testing.

When COVID-19 swept the country, she was ready for it, leading her hospital's response to the pandemic, and authoring or co-authoring a slew of pandemic-related publications. [Her CV runs to 45 pages.] She served on Governor Charlie Baker's Advisory Board for COVID-19. She appeared on CNN several times a week as a medical analyst and commentator.

Throughout all this, she told the Forward, she's been guided by her belief that "science will lead us out of the pandemic."

And Judaism has been her support. She told the Forward: "I'm motivated by the Jewish teachings of *tikkun olam* – literally 'repair the world.'" "I have worked hard to teach this to my children – change for good, give to others and act socially and responsibly to make the world a better place. Tikkun Olam for me has been giving at the individual patient level – not to judge, not to react, but to give, to heal and to repair."

Now she's charged with healing and repairing at the federal level. She told the Forward about some of the multiple challenges she's facing: "We must vaccinate hundreds of millions of people. We must get the public to wear a mask, practice social distancing, and avoid crowds and poorly-ventilated areas. We must improve our public health system to detect threats." Still, she said, she is hopeful. "CDC science is the gold standard for our nation's public health."

Walensky's former MGH colleagues are thrilled for her and not surprised she got the job. Dr. Stephen Calderwood – her mentor at MGH and the previous chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases – described her as highly organized and very caring, deeply committed to fixing things that are wrong in the world, and an excellent motivator. When COVID-19 struck and the hospital at one point had more than 350 COVID-19 patients, with 167 in ICU and most of them on



Dr. Rochelle Walensky. Image by JIM WATSON/AFP via Getty

ventilators, she found a way to support her staff with frequent Zoom meetings "for people to just share. What are your stresses? How is this impacting your family, your children?"

"She's very human and very humble," said Dr. Ingrid Bassett, Walensky's first research mentee who has known her for nearly 20 years. "She'll share in the same conversation that she's testifying before Congress and having to pack up her kids for overnight camp."

"She is someone who lives the essence of Judaism," said Harvard Medical School's Freedberg.

Her husband Loren Walensky is a physician at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Boston Children's Hospital. The two met in medical school and have two sons in college, and one in high school.

"She has always been guided by, 'What can I do today to help other people?'" her husband said. As a physician, her instinct is to determine "what do we need to do to make it better, and who will help me make a difference?"

"I've been watching her for 30 years," he continued. "She views the mitzvah of Tikkun Olam as a guiding light in her career. This – her work at CDC – is that on a grand scale. There is lots of healing that needs to be done here."

News

She was a Jewish QAnon supporter. And she thinks it could happen to you.

By Molly Boigon

The meme that sent Melissa Rein Lively fully into the universe of QAnon was about the Holocaust.

“I’ll never forget the image,” she said in a recent interview. “The meme that I saw that changed everything for me was a picture of Jews basically being put on a boxcar with masks, saying, ‘First they put you in the masks, and then they put you in the boxcars.’” To Rein Lively, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, it instantly connected the mask mandates meant to prevent the spread of coronavirus to the scariest chapter in history, as the first step in a plan of wider government control.

That was in May, 2020. For the next two months, Rein Lively, a 35-year-old publicist from Scottsdale, Arizona, was in what she now describes as “freefall” inside the wild conspiracy theories of QAnon, the vast online movement that centers on a belief that a secret cabal of elites is controlling the government and running a child sex-trafficking ring.

By July, Rein Lively found herself having a very public meltdown over a mask display at her local Target, and posted a video of the episode that led to her being taken by police to a psychiatric hospital. That was followed by eight weeks of intensive therapy, which led to her disavowing QAnon in an equally public apology tour that has included extensive interviews about the dangers of the movement with the [Washington Post](#) and, just on Monday, [CNN](#).

Before her turnaround, Rein Lively was one of a relatively small group of Jewish acolytes of QAnon, which is undergirded by antisemitic tropes including the ideas that the far-right’s favorite Jewish bogeyman, George Soros, orchestrated and paid for the Black Lives Matter movement, sexual assault allegations against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh and Mexican immigration to the United States. In many parts of the QAnon universe,

“Christian patriots” fight for the soul of Western democracy and the nation is part of a [long-term plan](#) controlled by the God of Christianity.

Experts who track QAnon said that they are unaware of any studies estimating Jewish involvement, but that they believed it was likely tiny.

Jacob Davey, a researcher at the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue, which tracks hate online, noted that, “a well-established trope” within the movement “is the preparation for mass population control and ultimately genocide.”

Most QAnon supporters also see former President Donald Trump, a vocal and unambiguous supporter of Israel, as a hero saving America from pedophilic elites committed to worshipping Satan.

So it is not impossible to imagine that, for a Republican or Libertarian Jew, ardent Zionism and fears of a second Holocaust might make QAnon appealing. And that’s part of how it worked for Melissa Rein Lively.

Hers was an idyllic early childhood. Rein Lively recalled herself as a lita purple sweatshirt and Adidas Sambas shoes as she biked around her Aurora, Colorado neighborhood, attended a Conservative synagogue and spent summers at Jewish ranch camp, where she and her bunkmates would put on skits that made them laugh to the point of tears.

“I felt like I could really be more myself,” she said of the camp. “You could just be sillier and be funnier.”

Her father, Solomon, was a residential developer who changed his surname from Reinstein to Rein in the 1970s out of concern that he was losing business due to antisemitism. He wore a flashy gold Star of David necklace, Rein Lively said, but was haunted by the past.

Both of Solomon's parents were Holocaust survivors, and sometimes, after telling his wife, Randee, about an antisemitic comment lobbed at him at work, he would sit young Melissa and her little brother down and teach them about the family's history.

He told them about the many family members on his mother's side who had been killed in concentration camps, and about his father, who escaped and jumped on the back of a train to safety. Rein Lively heard about how her paternal grandmother kissed the Soviet tanks that came to liberate Birkenau as the war ended.

She said she can now see "what he was going through, digesting his experiences growing up with his parents who survived the Holocaust."

When Melissa was in sixth grade, her father had a burst of financial success, and the family moved to a larger house in a different neighborhood. But business conflicts with her mother's side of the family and resentment over their new wealth started to rot the family's core.

"As time went on, it got progressively worse – my mom developed a very serious addiction to alcohol and prescription pills when I was in middle school," she said. "She was a shell of herself."

One Saturday morning, Rein Lively discovered her mother dead in the bathroom, having overdosed on alcohol and pills. Told the news as he returned home from the deli, her father passed out in the driveway. Rein Lively said she remembered seeing bagels fall from her father's arms and roll into the gutter.

In the following months, Rein Lively's grades tanked. Her father and a new girlfriend sent her to a now-shuttered and [chronically underregulated](#) behavioral-modification school in Montana called Spring Creek Lodge Academy. There, Rein Lively said, she was subjected to a rigid system of discipline that kept participants in military-style lines when walking around the compound; allocated food like butter and sugar based on a system of points; and relied on an autodidact system for which students had to teach themselves using subject-matter textbooks.

Rein Lively also described "development seminars"



Courtesy of Melissa Rein Lively

meant to "brainwash" participants.

"They scream at you, break you down, talk about things that would humiliate you and incriminate you in front of a group of people," she said.

This series of events formed the roots of a mental-health crisis that, Rein Lively said, led to her radicalization years later. Her contention, which she also argues in a forthcoming book, is that there is a straight line from the Holocaust to her mother's death to the "treatment" she endured at Spring Creek Lodge and, finally, to her latching on to QAnon.

Watching the minute-long video of Rein Lively destroying a Target mask display last summer is very strange after interviewing her multiple times over the last few weeks.

In one of our conversations, over Zoom, her makeup was flawless, the decor surrounding her tasteful and serene. She spoke with confidence and measure. She was funny.

In the video – which her public-relations firm says has been seen 100 million times – she used one hand to pull face masks off of a display while filming via cell phone with the other hand, shouting the phrase, "This shit's over." Later, as she filmed herself being apprehended by police in her garage, she insisted to officers that she "was hired to be the Qanon spokesperson" and accused them of cuffing her because she is Jewish. In an earlier video posted on Instagram, she said the n-word.

Rein Lively said her entry points to QAnon were through interests in wellness and in spirituality – both heightened by the pandemic. She said she was introduced to the movement through content on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and on blogs.

At first, the stuff she was seeing was optimistic and uplifting. She liked being told that the patriots within the government would save the public from danger. Later, she tapped into a darker stream of QAnon content about the coming of the second Holocaust.

“Looking back at it now and just how perfectly it fit into my interests, my curiosities, my fears – I feel like I was almost typecast for the type of person who would become immersed in this,” she said.

Rein Lively said she was never exposed to outright antisemitic content in QAnon forums. But she also said that, while part of the movement, she was convinced that Soros, a Hungarian philanthropist who escaped the German occupation, was secretly a Nazi.

“When you start looking at it, it’s just so shocking and upsetting,” she said of the claims she was reading. “They don’t call it a rabbit hole for nothing.”

Rein Lively said she was “isolated” within the movement and was not engaging much with other adherents, and did not knowingly encounter other Jews in online forums.

But she is not entirely alone. In one online forum for Q supporters, a user who identified as Jewish asked fellow members of the movement on Jan. 28 to lighten up on antisemitic comments.

“I have seen some broad language against all Jewish people which is grossly unfair,” he said in the post.

One commenter responded:

“I am more than disgusted to share my DNA with many evil subhuman forms, and I also suggested not to use the wide paint brush against us all,” he said of fellow Jews. “Trump has a few on his team, for a reason: we are well aware of communist hell and we are more than loyal.”

Rein Lively said Jews may be more vulnerable to this

type of messaging than most people think.

“I think people have this idea of these QAnon people being weirdo neo-Nazis in a basement somewhere,” she said. “I know other people feel this way, especially other Jews that have kind of joined – not even necessarily QAnon but even the Patriot movement – and there’s more and more right-wing Jews.”

On Monday, after Rein Lively likened QAnon to a cult [in an interview with CNN’s Alisyn Camerota](#), some Twitter commenters were deeply skeptical.

They accused her of trying to do a “rebrand,” and the various news outlets where she has been featured as being “hoodwinked.” A [VICE video](#) about her was deemed “embarrassing.”

Rein Lively is undeterred. She sent along, via text, a sampling of the hateful voicemails she said she receives on a daily basis.

“I’ve experienced that snap judgment already,” she said. “There’s nothing I can really say to that, except my story has been incredibly challenging and I know that by sharing it, it’s helping other people.”

After the Target meltdown, the police took Rein Lively to a facility for a psychiatric evaluation, and she stayed more than a week. Her husband had filed for divorce and kicked her out of the house after her tirades went viral, so she crashed at a friend’s second home, and continued therapy. Eventually, she appealed to her husband, a real estate broker, for a second chance, moved back home and has begun to rebuild her life.

Rein Lively was emphatic that this could happen to nearly anyone. The uncertainty, the fear, the trauma and the lies can spin out of control, and isn’t everyone looking for some explanation?

“The message just hits the right person at the right time like it did for me,” she said, “and everything changes.”

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LETTER FROM CHICAGO

A viral video inspires a Jewish neighborhood's former residents to help revitalize it

By Barbara Brotman

Myra Friedman clicked on the video, and there it was: the old neighborhood, the high school clubs, the gray jackets with pink lettering, the shopping trips to Woolworth's and Kresge's, the multiple synagogues.

The 1950s and '60s in Jewish Chicago were back, in a documentary playing on her computer in L.A., and on laptops, tablets, and smart phones across the country.

The documentary, "Driving West Rogers Park: Chicago's Once and Future Jewish Neighborhood," has been ricocheting around the internet, igniting a delighted wave of nostalgia among the retirees who were once teenagers there.

"Oh, my god, it brought back a lot of memories," said Friedman, 76, who lives in Los Angeles and forwarded the link to another friend. "It was a great time."

The film is the work of Chicago documentary filmmaker Beverly Siegel. She lived in West Rogers Park, a neighborhood on Chicago's far North Side, as a teenager and lives there today. Siegel made the documentary to draw attention to the work of the Jewish Neighborhood Development Council of Chicago (JNDCC), where she is president, revitalizing the community's business districts – and to tell the area's remarkable Jewish story.

"Driving West Rogers Park" traces the neighborhood's evolution from the bustling center of Chicago Jewish life in the 1950s and '60s, to that world's disappearance as Jews moved to the suburbs, to the neighborhood's modern-day rebirth as a largely Orthodox Jewish residential community with a busy Indian and Pakistani business strip.

Siegel posted the 25-minute film on the JNDCC's website via YouTube, and moved on to other tasks.

Then the emails started pouring in.

"All of a sudden, my video is going wild on YouTube," she recalled.

The burst of attention came courtesy of Jerrold Dolins. Dolins, who was in the first graduating class of the much-loved neighborhood high school, Mather High School, maintains three separate directories of the first 1,350 people to graduate from much-loved Mather High School, which opened in 1959. He has another list of former Mather teachers, and contact information for hundreds of other onetime West Rogers Park residents.

He sent a link to the JNDCC website to nearly 2,000 people in his directories living everywhere from the Chicago suburbs to Florida, Arizona, California, Montana, and Texas. They in turn sent it to their friends. Someone posted it on Facebook groups for people who grew up in West Rogers Park.

The film has now garnered more than 14,600 views.

"It really exploded in terms of people sharing it and enjoying it," said Dolins, 75, who today lives in suburban Buffalo Grove.

The documentary captures a neighborhood that was an idyllic world for Jewish teenagers. Jews from Eastern Europe had first settled on Chicago's West Side, then moved away—some to the South Side, most to the North Side.

Jews started moving into West Rogers Park, which is at the northernmost tip of the city, in the 1930s. It was still largely prairie. Builders began erecting single-family houses. By the '50s, fueled by the post-war hunger for home ownership, West Rogers Park was the fastest-growing area in Chicago—and an overwhelmingly Jewish one. The Jewish population soared to more than 47,000 in 1963. Jews made up 75 per cent of the neighborhood.

“Come Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the synagogues would fill up. Entire blocks would totally be quiet,” said Burton Paris, 77, another member of the first graduating class of Mather High School, who now lives outside Dallas. “It was filled with Jewish families. It was just wonderful.”

Shoppers thronged Devon Avenue, the main shopping strip. Teenagers met at corner restaurants for fries and a Coke. The first students at brand-new Mather High School started clubs, choirs, and drama groups.

It was a great time to be young and Jewish in America, says Rabbi Zev Eleff, provost of Hebrew Theological College in Skokie and an associate professor of Jewish history for the Touro College and University System. “It was a post-Holocaust, post-war period of economic prosperity,” he said. “Jews felt like they were rightfully here. There was a sense that anti-Semitism was at a nadir. The establishment of the state of Israel and the Six-Day war led to an explosion of Jewish pride and identity.”

West Rogers Park exemplified mid-century Jewish life, says Kevin M. Schultz, chair of the history department at the University of Illinois at Chicago and author of “Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise.”

“There were neighborhoods like that in almost every major American city,” he said. “For American Jews who had come out of the anti-Semitism of 1930s and early 1940s, there definitely was an appeal to moving to a neighborhood where you could have more square footage, and also have a large number of Jews—where you felt safe and you wouldn’t be worried about your son or daughter finding a partner and potentially leaving the faith.”

But by the ‘70s and ‘80s, he said, most Jews were largely assimilated into American life and comfortable living anywhere. They moved to the suburbs or to farther-out suburbs.

And so it went in West Rogers Park. The close Jewish community of West Rogers Park dispersed. Between the loss of customers and the rise of malls, Devon Avenue withered.

On the side streets, however, a new Jewish world was emerging.

There were small numbers of Orthodox Jews already living there. More began moving in. They didn’t want to live in spread-out, car-centered suburbs, said Rabbi Leonard Matanky, who grew up here and is rabbi of the now-Orthodox synagogue Congregation K.I.N.S. of West Rogers Park. Orthodox families needed to be walking distance from synagogues and friends to visit on Shabbat.

With its dense housing and plethora of synagogues, Rogers Park was perfect for Orthodox Jews. And community and civic leaders instituted changes to make it even more attractive. An eruv was erected, enabling young families to carry their children on Shabbat. A zoning change permitted residents to expand their homes with large additions, accommodating large families. The business districts, however, have not thrived. That part of the story is personal for Siegel. When her husband, Howard Rieger, a Chicago native, retired as the New York-based president and CEO of the Jewish Federations of North America, he began spending more time at their West Rogers Park high-rise condo. He was taken aback at the difference between the residential areas and the business sections.

“I was totally struck by what I saw as a complete disconnect,” he said. “The commercial streets had all the markers of a declining neighborhood.”

A veteran community organizer, Rieger worked with residents, public officials, and community leaders to reinvigorate the public spaces of West Rogers Park. Siegel’s film showcases one of its successes: that abandoned corner is now a new park.

“It’s beautiful,” Siegel said. “And we had other projects like that. We created a multi-ethnic coalition and helped to get the neighborhood a gorgeous new library.” With Sunday hours, she added, to make it accessible to Jews who observe the Sabbath.

Today Devon Avenue is a bustling strip Indian and Pakistani groceries, sari stores and restaurants that draws customers from across the city and suburbs.

The residential areas are about one-third Jewish, mostly Orthodox, teeming with young families, some 25 synagogues—one egalitarian, the rest Orthodox—and day schools and other institutions, many supported by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

What makes West Rogers Park unique, Siegel says, is not just what it was, but what it is—namely, still Jewish.

“The traditional trajectory of Jewish neighborhoods in Chicago is that they rise, they reach their heyday—and then people start to leave. Eventually, all the Jews leave. And once it’s not Jewish any more, it never comes back.

“West Rogers Park defies that pattern. It’s growing again as a Jewish neighborhood.” Many of the former West Rogers Parkers who saw Siegel’s documentary were intrigued by their former neighborhood’s current iteration. Among the emails and Facebook comments:

I’ve been away from Chicago since 1965 and I am amazed at the transformation of West Rogers Park.

Glad to see the old hood is making a comeback.

Nice to see it’s bouncing back.

Which opens up new possibilities for the community’s continued revitalization, says Rieger. The JNDCC would love the old crowd to join the organization to support the new crowd. “It’s nostalgia that can be more,” he said.

Siegel is thrilled at the pleasure the film is bringing. “It’s this lovefest,” she said. “I’m getting emails from Texas, Florida, California. It’s such a treat to read them.”

Some former West Rogers Parkers write that they are so impressed at their old neighborhood’s new life that they are tempted to move back.

The JNDCC would be glad to welcome them.

You can watch “Driving West Rogers Park” at the JNDCC’s website, <https://jndcchicago.org/>.

CULTURE

Is Serbia using a Holocaust film as nationalist propaganda?

By PJ Grisar

Serbia’s submission for the Academy Awards, a Holocaust film called “Dara of Jasenovac,” has nearly 500 rave reviews on IMDB. All are from the last seven days and presumably from Serbia, where the film won’t be released until April. It’s safe to assume that most of the reviewers, part of a push in the Balkan state to boost the film, haven’t seen it.

The reason for the chorus of coordinated acclaim – with subject lines like “The real story,” “The biggest genocide” and “The truth will defeat the devil!” – is one of the few people who has: A critic for Variety named Jay Weissberg. Since publishing his Jan. 25 [review](#), which called the film “an undisguised piece of Serbian nationalist propaganda,” Weissberg has been flooded with abuse.

First came the broadsides from the Serbian state media. After that came the right-wing bots on the website of his film festival, which hurled antisemitic invective his way while also tarring him as a Holocaust denier paid by the Croatian government. Weissberg says he’s received death threats for his reviews of international films in the past, but has never been directly in the crosshairs of a government minister. He noted a sad irony: The Minister of the Interior, the man he says directed the campaign against him, was close with the widow of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević, a man indicted on charges of genocide in the Yugoslav Wars.

“This is a man who has certainly condoned a genocide who is turning around and calling me a Holocaust denier,” Weissberg said.

Weissberg believes that “Dara of Jasenovac” is part of a long Serbian trend of exploiting the memory of the Jasenovac, the infamous death camp operated by the Croatian fascist Ustaše government from 1941 to

1945, to advance contemporary political ends. It's a pattern that in the not so distant past was even used to justify aggression and war crimes.

"For me, the film is very much using the Holocaust to reinforce current Serbian nationalism," Weissberg said.

For decades, the Serbian government has been trying to show the wider world the awful reality of the Holocaust in the Nazi puppet regime, the Independent State of Croatia. The story of Dara, a 10-year-old Serb who witnesses horrific acts of murder and indoctrination perpetrated by the Catholic-Croat state at the Jasenovac subcamps, where [tens of thousands](#) of Serbs, Roma and Jews were killed, appears to be the first feature-length fiction film to depict these events. Its terms are often grisly and sentimental and not often historically illuminating or character-driven. But the film's tropes, and the reaction to bad press, is nothing new from Serbia, which [continues to have a troubled relationship with Croatia](#), marred by a backward-looking view of atrocities on both sides.

"It's part of the narrative that the world is indifferent to Serbian suffering," said Jovan Byford, author of the book "Picturing Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia," published by Bloomsbury Academic. "It's this idea that Serbs have created a film that finally shows their suffering to the world. Immediately, when there is a silencing of any Serbian voice out there by critics and by the media, it feeds into this very familiar narrative. And obviously the reaction is resentment."

Byford, who was born in Serbia to a Serbian mother and British father and left for the United Kingdom in 1991 when the Yugoslav Wars broke out, is cited in Weissberg's review. Seeing his name, a producer on the film reached out to him for his comment. He demurred, having, like most who have weighed in, not seen the film himself. Byford said that Weissberg must have read his work on Serbian propaganda and recognized its patterns – of focusing atrocity, leveraging victimhood and using it to justify prejudice and expansionist goals – in the film.

Propaganda that exploits the Holocaust to fuel fear and nationalism has long been a feature of Serbian culture, present in some fashion since the 1940s. A more globally- and PR-minded form emerged in the early 1990s during the breakup of Yugoslavia, as Serbians attempted to share the horrors of Jasenovac

beyond their borders, including at the UN. The dream was to make a Serbian "Schindler's List" with the help of Steven Spielberg himself. According to Byford's work, the efforts to shed light on Jasenovac on the world stage continued well into the 21st century as Serbia tried to shame Croatia amid diplomatic breakdowns and, most importantly, to repair its own reputation for its role in the Bosnian genocide. Byford believes that "Dara of Jasenovac" is probably in the same vein as these efforts.

"The way that it's framed in the media, it fits entirely into this view of the priority being to showcase suffering to the international audience," Byford said. "People in Serbia know what happened, they don't need to see the film, but it is those in the West who finally need to see the film and correct their views of the Serbs and realize that Serbs are not the bad guys of history. That they are the victims rather than the perpetrators."

The charge of propaganda rankles the film's executive producer and historical consultant, Michael Berenbaum, the eminent Holocaust historian and director of the Sigi Ziering Institute at American Jewish University. Berenbaum emphasized that this was the first such movie Serbs would see about this period. He says the film is a corrective to a contested history, often challenged by Croatia, and that Weissberg's charge that the film is nakedly anti-Catholic or anti-Croat is "nonsense."

Berenbaum stressed the film's fidelity to facts, following his advice to director Predrag Antonijevic not to manufacture drama but rely on testimony, which itself is dramatic enough.

Early in the film, an Ustaše officer, entertaining a visiting Nazi officer, oversees a game of "musical chairs" where the inmate left standing has his throat slashed by an odd-looking bladed glove. Berenbaum says that this incident was based on survivor testimony and that it was actually much worse in real life – the victims were children.

Byford was unfamiliar with the musical chairs slaughter, but well acquainted with the glove, which he called a popular showpiece of Jasenovac's "iconography of horror."

"They called it the 'Serb cutter,'" Byford said, noting a legendary provenance: That it was made from the

specifications of Croat dictator Ante Pavelić for the express purpose of killing Serbs. “In fact what it is was an agricultural instrument that was used in Germany. It was a sheaf cutter.”

For Byford, the glove, often used in displays on the camp, is indicative of a certain trope delivered directly after its use in the film. On seeing the killing – during which members of the camp staff sneak off to a car to have sex while watching – a Nazi visitor immediately throws up. His superior then walks to his side and says simply, “Welcome to the Balkans.”

“The idea of the Nazis being horrified by the Ustaše is also a complete cliché,” Byford said when I mentioned the moment. “In some sense it feeds into this whole idea of Jasenovac being worse than Auschwitz, and therefore the Serbs have actually suffered a lot more than Jews, because their suffering is not just the numbers, it’s about the brutality of the means by which they were killed.”

Byford said he can’t contest all the events in testimony that support this view of Croatian savagery, but adds that interrogating it at all in Serbia is tantamount to denial.

The fact that there is a long history of denial coming from Croatian officials is all the more reason why Berenbaum thinks “Dara” is an urgent film.

“While Serbs may want to reclaim their own history, there are many others – including Croatia’s post-communist President Franjo Tudman – trying to minimize what happened at Jasenovac to escape responsibility and accountability,” Berenbaum wrote in an as-yet-unpublished letter to the editor to *Variety* he sent to me.

When asked, though, he agreed that Serbia hasn’t been accountable itself for their own more recent complicity in the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks, a Muslim minority native to Bosnia, in the 1990s.

“You’ve got to be careful not to use as justification for your behavior that you were victimized before,” Berenbaum said, but maintained that Antonijevic was not politically motivated.

“The accusation in working with this material is very often that you’re doing it for a political purpose,” he said. While he couldn’t rule out the idea that someone involved in the film may have had an agenda, he argued the work itself avoids contemporary politics. “They told the story. And if you think it’s political, that’s you bringing it to the story.”

Stefan Ivančić, a Serbian filmmaker and producer, agreed with Weissberg’s review’s charge of politics. The reaction within the country – from the campaign to goose its IMDB score to a torrent of negative media coverage on the *Variety* review – says it all.

“When you have the Minister of the Interior ‘defending’ a film from a film review, that’s a sign that something isn’t right,” Ivančić said, “That doesn’t happen in a democracy. To me, that’s the final proof there’s a propagandistic agenda behind it.”

Berenbaum called the *Variety* review “a kick in the gut,” stressing that the film’s story, of the only death camp established by non-Germans, was a history in need of a wider audience. An Oscar nomination would be a way to attract a larger crowd to the project and he believes the review, from a widely-read film industry publication, hurt its chances entering awards season.

On Thursday, the *LA Times* published its [own review](#) of the film, levying Weissberg’s same arguments. The pan called it “baldly nativist and manipulative” and a cynical entrant for the Oscars. “One more regrettable sign that for some, the path to awards and respectability – and, seemingly, effective messaging against a neighbor – goes through the Holocaust.”

Ivančić, one of the few Serbians who has seen the film, doesn’t like its chances.

“I would love it if this, or any film from my country, would be the greatest film ever and we go and win an Oscar,” Ivančić said. “I would be proud of my country and the people who live here. But in order for that to happen, we need to think collectively, and not use the suffering of people to pursue private or nationalistic interests.”

–

PJ Grisar is the Forward's culture reporter.

NEWS

From Fargo to Saskatoon: Tiny Jewish communities team up to build mikvehs in their towns

By Aviva Engel

For Sarah Kats, the 35-year-old spiritual leader of the Chabad Jewish Centre of Saskatoon, the drive to the closest mikveh in Edmonton, Alberta, takes six hours. She is one of about 250 Jews in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; population 331,000.

Her commute may soon become significantly shorter, though, as Saskatoon is one of seven remote Jewish communities – including Fargo, North Dakota; Salem, Oregon; Mobile, Alabama; Regina, Saskatchewan; Arcata, California; and Kelowna, British Columbia – participating in a \$1.5 million [campaign](#) to build mikvehs in their cities.

Married women who observe *Taharat Ha'Mishpacha*, as the laws are collectively known in Hebrew, immerse in a ritual bath following each menstrual cycle. “Observing Taharat Ha'Mishpacha makes me feel spiritually replenished and gives me a sense of renewal,” said Kats. “I love it even though keeping it in Saskatoon has been quite challenging.”

Born in Cleveland, Sarah and her husband Rabbi Raphael Kats, 40, moved to Saskatoon in 2011 as *shluchim*, emissaries of the Chabad Lubavitch community. They welcome Jews of all denominations – including students and professors from the nearby University of Saskatchewan.

The couple views their communal roles as a privilege and have been circumnavigating Saskatoon's lack of Jewish amenities for years. Their seven children attend Shluchim Online School (and did so even pre-pandemic), they order kosher food from Montreal and are thrilled that community members are committed to attending a monthly minyan. They've lived without kosher restaurants for almost a decade, and Sarah has even grown accustomed to driving alone on dark, icy roads, in -40°F, to the mikveh in Edmonton. Sometimes she travels by bus or plane and stays overnight at a local hotel, although COVID travel

restrictions occasionally impact her plans.

Little Manitou Lake, the closest natural body of water, is less than two hours away by car. While Sarah has immersed in it in warmer weather, she has been hurt by jagged rocks, underscoring its precariousness.

While a local mikveh would certainly benefit Sarah, the ritual baths in each community will also be used by men, brides, converts and for immersing dishes.

“The reason for [constructing] the mikvehs is not only because it's challenging for us; we've been doing this for nine years,” said Rabbi Kats. “Part of Jewish life for families is using the mikveh. We can teach them about Shabbat and we can teach them about kosher food and inspire people to eat kosher. But how are you going to inspire people to keep mikveh if the mikveh is associated with a 12-hour, round-trip drive, often in adverse weather conditions in the winter, or an expensive flight and hotel?”

Mushkie Cowen, 31, of Arcata, a remote coastal town in California, agrees. In 2012, she and her husband Eliyahu, 32, established the first Chabad for Humboldt County's 2,000 Jews. Humboldt is a five-and-a-half hour drive from the closest mikveh in San Francisco. Cowen directs the Chabad Hebrew School and, among other programs, runs the Jewish Women's Circle which offers discussions and activities for women of all ages.

“There definitely is great interest in *Taharat Ha'Mishpacha*, but I didn't feel it was fair to teach about how amazing this mitzvah is and then say, ‘Oh and by the way, you have to drive almost six hours over dangerous mountain roads to get there,’” said Cowen. “I'm definitely looking forward to delving into this topic as we're starting construction on our mikveh. The women here are ecstatic about having a mikveh of their own.”

Fruma and Rabbi Avrohom Yitzchok Perlstein, both

39, founded the Chabad Center for Jewish Life in Salem, Oregon in 2007. They estimate that Salem and surrounding Mid-Willamette Valley cities are home to roughly 5,000 Jews. Like Cowen, Perlstein also runs the Jewish Women’s Circle, among other initiatives. In 2016, she accompanied Marlene Eichner, 72, to Portland’s mikveh – an hour away – the day before Marlene and her husband renewed their marriage vows at a Jewish ceremony officiated by Rabbi Perlstein. For Eichner, immersing in the mikveh was a transformative experience.

“I felt the sacredness of the place and the act. I was actually crying at the significance of the connection in the water with God,” Eichner said. “I’m thinking of my daughter, grandson, and his future children. They would be able to surround themselves with the complete Jewish package ... The idea of being able to attain spiritual purity would no longer be naive magical thinking; it would become a living experience.”



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CULTURE

This pastor translated Biden’s name to Hebrew. He won’t like his own Hebrew name.

By PJ Grisar

Every so often, fringe Christian figures look to Hebrew to impute Satanic inspiration. Sometimes, it backfires tremendously.

One-upping this woman who slammed Monster energy drinks [with the sign of the beast](#), right-wing pastor Perry Stone has translated President Joe Biden’s name into Hebrew. When you break it down – eliding some vowels and looking into roots and the biblical story of Jacob’s son Dan – Stone said, it means “Alas, Judgment.”



Right-wing pastor Perry Stone claims to have discovered that Joe Biden's name, when translated into Hebrew, means "Alas, Judgment."



1:20 PM · Feb 8, 2021

It seems like in Stone’s mind this reflects Biden’s executive orders and “contentious” passage of laws, more than the Final Judgment many Christians anticipate.

Now, translating English to an unrelated language group and trying to divine meaning from it is something of a fool’s errand. But let’s play at Stone’s game. After all, he said that he consulted with an

“actual Hebrew scholar.”

What that unnamed scholar didn't tell Stone is what his own name means when it's transliterated. Thankfully, there's Twitter for that.



Perry's first name is easy. In Hebrew it means “fruit,” which is a nice enough name. Good work, Mr. and Mrs. Stone. Though, if we move to the surname we have something a bit less felicitous.

In Hebrew you'd spell that *Sin-Tet-Nun*. It's the same spelling as “Satan.”

So actually, the name could mean “Fruit of Satan.”

But don't get too hung up on that, Pastor. The good news is that none of this translating back and forth really means much. If you are still stuck on this unwelcome fact, though, remember that Biden's actual given name is “Joseph” [the aforementioned Dan's brother] which, more or less, means “to add” or “increase.”

So maybe Biden will add, or increase, judgment – not of the doomsday variety – to his office. Judgment can mean “the ability to make considered decisions or come to sensible conclusions.”

–
PJ Grisar is the Forward's culture reporter. Ha can be reached at Grisar@Forward.com.

Forward

Meet the Forward 50

Ellie Klein Goldman, Temple Shalom and RogueShul parody on Twitter
Jacob Jonas, choreographer and founder of Jacob Jonas The Company
Christa Whitney, Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project
Ariel Zwang, first woman to head the Joint Distribution Committee

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