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LGBTQ students allege culture of alienation and fear at Yeshiva University

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'Second class citizens': LGBTQ students allege culture of alienation and fear at Yeshiva University

By Marie-Rose Sheinerman

Molly Meisels, then a senior at Yeshiva University, was greeted in class last fall with an unusual message from a professor: "I don't care if you're a 'he,' a 'she,' or an 'it.'"

Meisels, 22, one of only a few openly LGBTQ undergraduates at the more than 2,000-strong university, recalled feeling taken aback but not surprised. In keeping with an increasingly [common practice](#) of the remote learning era, Meisels, who identifies as bisexual and non-binary, had placed preferred pronouns (they/she) in a parenthetical alongside their name on Zoom – the only student of the couple dozen in the course to have done so.

"I felt very personally targeted and uncomfortable and unsafe," said Meisels, who attended the Stern College for Women, a division of Y.U. "For the rest of the semester, for that class, I removed my pronouns from my name, didn't speak, just did the work, and that's it."

It was far from the first time that Meisels had felt targeted at their university. The incident felt like one link in a four-year-long chain of what Meisels and the five other LGBTQ students who spoke with the Forward saw as a culture of alienating silence and constant fear surrounding their sexualities and gender identities, empowered by the Y.U. administration's policies and the student body's apparent resistance to change.

Now, in what Meisels has called a "last resort," they and a handful of recent alumni are [suing](#) the school, claiming that in its refusal to recognize the Y.U. Pride Alliance as a legitimate student club, the university violated New York's anti-discrimination laws.

A spokesperson for Y.U. said in a statement that "our Torah-guided decision about this club in no way minimizes the care and sensitivity that we have for each of our students, nor the numerous steps the university has already taken."

"At the heart of our Jewish values is love – love for God and love for each of His children," the statement continued. "Our LGBTQ+ students are our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, family and friends. Our policies on harassment and discrimination against students on the basis of protected classifications including LGBTQ+ are strong and vigorously enforced." The Y.U. office of media affairs did not respond to queries about several specific incidents discussed in the lawsuit and this article.

Though firmly at the center of Modern Orthodox American Jewish life, Yeshiva University is officially a nonsectarian institution of higher education and thus receives public funding, including \$90 million through tax-exempt bond financing within the last decade, according to the [suit](#). In a [memo](#) from 1995, included in the lawsuit as evidence, Y.U.'s own lawyers instructed administrators more than 25 years ago that under New York City's Human Rights Law, the university "cannot ban gay student clubs" and "must make facilities available to them in the same manner as it does to other student groups."

Despite this warning, the lawsuit claims, Y.U. has repeatedly banned iterations of the Pride Alliance – originally called the "Tolerance Club," and then the "Gay-Straight Alliance." Most recently, in September of 2020, administrators declined to recognize the club, [explaining in a statement to the community](#) that "the message of Torah on this issue is nuanced, both accepting each individual with love and affirming its timeless prescriptions." Having a formal LGBTQ club on campus, they claimed, would "cloud this nuanced message."

For Katherine Rosenfeld, the attorney litigating the case on behalf of the Pride Alliance, the case feels "plain and simple."

"Y.U. cannot just opt itself out of civil rights laws, or select which civil rights laws it agrees to follow,"

Rosenfeld said in an email to the Forward. “The same rules apply to Y.U. as apply to N.Y.U. or Columbia or any other eminent New York City research university.” [Y.U. cannot discriminate against non-Jewish applicants, for instance, although non-Jewish enrollment in its undergraduate programs is rare.]

Though Y.U. boasts a rigorous [non-discrimination policy](#), some students and faculty members say that protocols for reporting harassment have never been clear or equitably enforced. [Joy Ladin](#), the first and only openly transgender Y.U. professor, said she is not aware of any rule for faculty regarding treatment of LGBTQ students in the classroom, other than “of course you should treat all students appropriately.”

“There’s clearly not a good protocol in place,” said one Y.U. professor, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of professional reprisal. She recounted an incident from March 2020 when a student confided in her about facing a homophobic comment on their way to class that left them distraught. When the professor asked what she could do to support the student, they said they didn’t have confidence in Y.U. to address the incident. The student had heard of an instance when a peer was advised to leave the school after bringing a complaint of anti-LGBTQ activity to administrators.

“Regardless of what actually happened,” the professor noted, “this is the sense that students have: that they aren’t protected by the university.”

Homophobic comments, according to interviews with six current and former students, are common on campus. In their freshman year, Meisels recalled hearing students casually use anti-gay slurs. They came out as bisexual during their junior year, and although many on campus reached out to express support, Meisels also became the subject of intense public scrutiny – which often turned into name-calling and slur-ridden online debate.

One student, who self-identified as a “heterosexual male,” circulated an unsigned letter telling Meisels – referred to not by name but as “you know who you are” – to “just look in the mirror” if they want to see “true evil.” The writer expressed joy that in a year’s time, the graduating Meisels would no longer be “plaguing” the school.

“I personally felt like a boulder was lifted off my chest to just have that out there,” Meisels said of coming out. “But, of course, it also branded me as the face of this movement.

“I would walk around campus and be myself, but still always look over my shoulder, afraid that people were going to approach me, or start arguments with me, that I was going to be put on the spot,” they said. “I was never at ease on campus after that.”

‘To be queer in that environment is to be an outsider’

One gay student at Y.U., who spoke to the Forward on the condition of anonymity because he is not currently open about his sexuality, said that in his freshman year he considered coming out to his peers.

“I didn’t want to feel like I’m keeping a secret from everyone all the time,” he said. When keeping a secret, especially about such a large piece of one’s identity, he noted, “conversations feel like they’re over before they’ve started.”

But when this student approached a Y.U. counselor about coming out two years ago, the counselor advised against it. The student recalled that the counselor was “honest” with him, saying there would be serious “repercussions” to coming out publicly. On campus, the counselor said, the student would be treated as a “second-class citizen.” Y.U. did not respond to a request for comment about this incident.

“It became very clear to me from the get-go that it was an institutional problem,” Meisels said. “There’s an environment of fear, and not only of fear but just so much silence. To be queer in that environment is to be an outsider.”

Tai Miller, 24, another recent alumnus and a plaintiff alongside Meisels, described a school culture where even the few Y.U. religious leaders who purport to be allies seldom take action.

One rabbi, Miller recalled, asked him what he could do to better support LGBTQ students. Miller suggested putting up a pride symbol in his office, to signal the space as welcoming. The rabbi, according to Miller,

expressed discomfort with that suggestion and never followed up further.

In one case that drew campus newspaper headlines, an “Introduction to Sociology” course, required for majors, posed the following as a midterm-exam question: “Since male homosexuality is forbidden in the Bible, but gays are ‘out of the closet,’ how should the Modern Orthodox Jewish community deal with it?” In a classroom [discussion](#), the same professor asked classmates to debate whether LGBTQ individuals should be included in Modern Orthodox Jewish life.

“Nobody really wanted to talk at first and then one girl raised her hand,” said Chana Weiss, who was a student in that class and the vice president of the Pride Alliance. “She had this attitude of, OK, we’re all on the same page, this professor talks about things we don’t want to hear about, so I’ve got you all: Obviously we don’t want gay people outwardly in our shuls or communities. What they do in the bedroom is their business.”

Weiss, who now openly identifies as queer, said that there were at least three other closeted LGBTQ students in the class. Weiss told the student newspaper at the time, anonymously, “I sat there, sick to my stomach.” The professor was reported for the incidents, but continued to teach at the university, at least through Spring 2020. Two other Y.U. sociology faculty members said they were not aware of any reprimands or consequences for the professor.

That sociology classroom in the fall of 2019 embodied a trend many of the students who spoke with the Forward found throughout their time at Y.U.: For most students, LGBTQ issues make for an interesting debate topic, not part of their lived reality.

“LGBTQ people are often talked about as an abstract topic,” said Doniel Weinreich, a 24-year-old former student. One closeted senior said conversations about gender and sexuality on campus often carry the same distant tone as a discussion of “poverty in India.”

“No one acknowledges the possibility that there might be students in the room who are not going to enter hetero relationships,” one closeted junior said.

And for some, that silence and invisibility, can lead to

what Joshua Tranen, a student who transferred out of Y.U., called a “life or death situation.”

“Each morning, when I awoke, I forced myself to gather the strength required to learn, for yet another day, alongside rabbis that had publicly called gay people an abomination,” Tranen wrote in an [OpEd](#) in 2017. “I lived in constant fear of being discovered, and in my second semester, my mental health took a turn for the worse.”

Some students said they believe conditions for LGBTQ students at the university have been improving. But for others, one of the biggest blows to acceptance on campus came less than a year ago, when [64% of students](#) at the mens’ undergraduate campus voted against adding an anti-discrimination amendment to the student constitution, amid fears the policy would be used to push the Pride Alliance through the student council. The administration offered no public response to the vote.

On campus, the students who are vocal on LGBTQ issues said they’re often accused of acting out of hatred for the school. But in their view, it’s just the opposite: Students said they feel motivated by a love for Y.U. and its student body, present and future.

“Those of us involved in this effort are united by our respect for Yeshiva University,” Miller said.

“Fundamentally we’re not asking Y.U. to change its values. We’re asking for Y.U. to live up to the values it professes to have.”

A ‘glass ceiling’ for LGBTQ faculty

Silke Aisenbrey, a sociology professor at Y.U. who is queer and an outspoken supporter of LGBTQ students, told the Forward she “personally feels that there is a glass-ceiling for faculty who are perceived to be LGBTQ – whether they are formally out or not – or are outspoken supporters of the LGBTQ community.”

In addition to some personal issues, this environment was one of the reasons Aisenbrey took the unusual step of an unpaid leave, “for my own sanity,” she explained. “The administration over and over again decided to ignore the issue and even support homophobic teachers over the protest of faculty.” She cited the incident in the “Introduction to Sociology”

course as having particularly pushed her “over the edge.”

“Leadership positions in the last years did not go to anyone who would push the issue publicly or identify as LGBTQ,” she said in an email interview. The leadership positions she had in mind included honors program director, associate dean and cross-campus chair positions.

In one faculty member’s case, his vocal support for the Y.U. Pride Alliance likely contributed to the abrupt removal of his tenure-track professorship position, according to another professor and one student with knowledge of the situation. [Y.U. did not respond to a request for comment on this allegation, and the professor declined to speak about it.]

Ladin, the English professor and poet, herself was put on “[indefinite leave](#)” in 2007 when she told administrators she would be transitioning as a transgender woman. A letter from her attorney had the decision reversed – and 13 years later, she’s still at the university.

“I’m openly LGBTQ, but it’s not comfortable,” she said in an interview. In her own classes, although she and fellow English professors often include queer literature in their assigned coursework, “I would never dare” to put that in the course title or even syllabus.

This lack of full control over their own curriculums – and lack of faculty influence when it comes to LGBTQ issues more broadly – felt historically ironic to Aaron Koller, a former chair of Jewish Studies at Y.U.

A 1980 [Supreme Court case](#), *National Labor Relations Board v. Yeshiva University*, barred the university’s faculty from unionizing. Y.U. at the time argued that faculty members should not be considered “employees” under the National Labor Relations Act, and the court ruled 5-4 in the university’s favor, agreeing that professors already exercise “managerial power” in academic matters, like curriculums, and thus should not receive collective bargaining rights.

“Y.U.’s argument was that faculty has so much power that they are management,” Koller said. “And now Y.U. is like, ‘Faculty, shut up, we don’t want to hear your voice.’”

‘My chosen family’: An underground support system

In their first year on campus, Weiss put their faith in a secret WhatsApp group for LGBTQ students.

“It was one of the scariest things I’ve ever done,” Weiss, a founding board member of the Pride Alliance, said. “It meant telling a bunch of people this very very personal secret – my biggest secret – just by joining. But through that group, they are really my chosen family. Some of my best friends, who I consider family, are from that group.”

Meisels used the same phrase: “my chosen family.” In their sophomore year, Meisels joined what they called an “underground texting group for queer students” at Y.U., populated over the years by around 60 students, though never that many at any given point.

Group privacy and confidentiality was very important, with 95% of membership closeted. To enter, students were given strict guidelines and interviewed to ensure that no one attempted to infiltrate the group to expose it. The underground club had Shabbat get-togethers at members’ apartments off-campus, but primarily, even after joining, their contact was over text.

“A big reason why this advocacy is so important for me is because I want queer students to have community and space on campus, because I wanted it,” Meisels said. “With the underground group, we did as much as we could, but it’s just students helping students. It’s never enough.”

Plus: “Unless you know someone who’s in the group, it’s a secret, so you wouldn’t really find out about it,” a closeted junior said. She herself discovered the underground group through a friend, but without that friend – and without a publicly available student club – she said she would have been left stranded.

After years of advocacy – from failed club charters and Title IX complaints, to a pride march on campus and guest speaker panels – Meisels is exhausted. Having graduated in January, they’re now living on the West Coast and starting an art history PhD program at UCLA.

"It would have been simple for me to move on – from Y.U., from the activism," Meisels said. "I did flirt with that idea for a bit, of completely separating myself. But I kept returning to the thought that I would want someone to fight for me."

To combat the physical and emotional burnout of their uphill climb, especially as the legal process is just beginning, Meisels said they think back to themselves as a college freshman.

"I would have felt so loved and supported if I knew that an alum was dedicating their time and effort to ensure that I had the best possible experience on campus," they said. "It didn't seem fair for me to just leave the cause."

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Culture

The secret Jewish history of cicadas

By Seth Rogovoy

Do you hear that? What's that buzzing noise?

If you live between Tennessee and New York – especially if you live in Ohio, Maryland, or the Virginias – and if it's mid-to-late May or June, chances are good that what you're hearing are cicadas. Specifically, male representatives of "Brood X," or "the Great Eastern Brood," which only emerge from their underground lairs once every 17 years in order to mate with the female of their species before dying off and leaving their offspring to inter themselves for another 17 years before repeating the never-ending cycle.

Native to the eastern U.S. and not found anywhere else in the world, cicadas are often associated, confused or poetically conflated with locusts, those ancient insects that periodically swarm like cicadas, but, unlike their American cousins, leave devastation in their wake. Locust infestations are often called plagues, the most famous of which afflicted Egypt after the Pharaoh refused Moses's pleas to let his people go.

America's Brood X was first recognized in Philadelphia in 1715, when the cicadas were mistaken for the biblical locust and provided many a happy meal. Locusts are eaten around the world and are the only insects that are both kosher and halal. While generally speaking, insects are explicitly forbidden, the Torah singles out locusts as exceptions to the rule. As it is written in the Book of Leviticus (11:21-22): "The only flying insects with four walking legs that you may eat are those which have knees extending above their feet, using these longer legs to hop on the ground. Among these, you may eat members of the red locust family, the yellow locust family, the spotted gray locust family, and the white locust family."

The rabbis in the Talmud go into greater detail and identify eight species of locust that are kosher. Whether or not these rules apply to cicadas remains



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an open question. I am neither an entomologist nor a rabbi, so consult yours as you see fit.

The *magicicada* species that afflicts the eastern U.S. once a generation are just one of 3,000 varieties, including another periodical cicada that reappears once every 13 years to the wonder of mathematicians and the arithmetically inclined, given that both 17 and 13 are prime numbers, the scientific explanation for which is “go figure.”

That loud, buzzing drone cicadas make is the male’s mating call, produced by a drumlike organ called a tymbal – not to be confused with the *tsimbl* of Old World klezmer duos. The noise has been compared to that of a jet engine flying low in the sky and is reported to reach as high as 120 decibels, which can actually cause hearing damage in human beings. The clever male cicadas deafen themselves while concertizing so as not to destroy their own hearing, making them the envy of fans of hardcore punk and heavy metal. The male cicadas break off into separate groups where they sing in unison, not unlike men in Orthodox Jewish prayer minyans.

According to Rabbi Gershon Avtzon of Cincinnati, in Tractate Shabbos of the Talmud, “One of the works which is forbidden on shabbos is trapping animals. The question arises about applying the law to trapping insects. The Talmud tells us: ‘The Sages taught in a baraita: One who traps locusts, cicadas, hornets, or mosquitoes on Shabbos is liable. This is the statement of Rabbi Meir. And the Rabbis say: Not every insect is the same in this matter. If one traps any insect whose species is typically trapped for personal use, he is liable, and if one traps any insect whose species is typically not trapped for personal use, he is exempt.’”

Rabbi Avtzon also suggests that the cicada’s “singing” is a joyful celebration of their long overdue freedom and liberation. As the Bible tells it, the ancient Israelites also made a musical racket upon being liberated from their Egyptian enslavers. After the Red Sea parted, allowing the Jews to escape before flooding the Pharaoh and their Egyptian pursuers behind them, the Children of Israel immediately broke out in song. “Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took the drum in her hand and all the women followed her with drums and with dances,” in what was perhaps history’s first klezmer concert.

Once the soil warms to 64 degrees in coming weeks, billions – some say trillions – of one-inch- long cicadas will rise out of the earth at a density of 1.5 million cicadas an acre. Some liken the phenomenon to science fiction, or a horror film, or a harbinger of apocalypse. The cicadas’ dalliance above ground lasts from four to six weeks, during which time they mate, lay eggs (individual females can lay up to 400 eggs each), and then die – leaving behind killing fields of cicada corpses. Their offspring then take up residence underground, sucking on tree roots for the next 17 years, waiting until 2038 to emerge and begin the cycle once again.

Seventeen years ago, the Brood X emergence coincided with Shavuot. Rabbi Yaakov Bieler wrote, “The cicadas and Shavuot challenge us to reprioritize our lives in order to make them meaningful and Jewishly driven in a dynamic rather than passive manner. Let us listen to the song of these insects and recognize that even as it serves the biological reproductive purposes of these beings before they go off to hibernate for another 17 years, it is also a potential call to action to all of us, to become more rather than less active vis-à-vis our individual spiritual development.”

Nobel Prize-winning rock poet Bob Dylan seemed to have had some kind of spiritual experience when he found himself being awarded an honorary degree at Princeton University amid an emergence of cicadas. The event, which turned out to be unpleasant for Dylan, inspired his 1970 song, “Day of the Locusts,” the title of which he borrowed from the 1939 novel “The Day of the Locust” by Nathanael West, born Nathan Weinstein.

Dylan rendered the confluence of the cicadas’ drone and the academy’s cluelessness in calling his music “the authentic expression of the disturbed and concerned conscience of Young America” in the song’s refrain thusly: “And the locusts sang such a sweet melody / And the locusts sang with a high whining trill / Yeah, the locusts sang, and they were singing for me.” Ingrate or not, he wrote a pretty good song, even when played at low volume.

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Seth Rogovoy is a contributing editor at the Forward and the author of “Bob Dylan: Prophet Mystic Poet” [Scribner, 2009].

Opinion

For George Floyd's yahrzeit, say his name

By Robin Washington

If you do nothing else over Shabbat on May 14 and 15, whether you go to shul or not, say kaddish. And say it for George Floyd. Say his name.

George Floyd was killed on May 25, or 2 Sivan, which corresponds to May 13 this year. If it is your tradition on the following Shabbat to say kaddish for those to whom you are not related or those who are not Jewish, say kaddish for him. If it is not, say his name sometime during that Shabbat, perhaps when you rise or when you pause during the day.

It isn't an act of baptising the dead and hardly a posthumous conversion. As is oft-repeated, kaddish is a prayer for the living, and an opportunity and responsibility to remember the dead.

And the best thing we could do to go on with our lives in these troubled times is to say his name. It's the ultimate reminder of the inhumanity of racial oppression that we must and shall overcome. It's also, barely a month after the officer who killed Floyd was convicted of murder, a glimmer of hope that maybe, finally, justice long denied to a people wronged for centuries can at last be achieved.

Say his name. It's the constant and needed reminder that Black lives really do matter, heard in chants mixed with prayer for Michael Brown. Say his name. Philando Castile. Say his name. Sandra Bland. Say her name. Eric Garner. Say his name. Walter Scott. Say his name. Breonna Taylor. Say her name. Tamir Rice. Say his name. Daunte Wright. Say his name. Adam Toledo. Say his name.

And among too many others – even if you must add an asterisk to it – Ma'Khia Bryant. Saying her name isn't your vote in a final determination of which deaths are justifiable and which are not. It is, rather, an acknowledgment of the tragedy befalling all who die before their time, and the devastation to those left in their wake. Say her name. Again, for us, the living. Say their names.



And in saying George Floyd's name on the Shabbat of 3 Sivan, remember the little we do know about him – not the terrible pleas for his life and cries for his mother in his diminishing last breaths, but the warmth of his truly infectious smile, lighting up the face of Big George, in photos that can only elicit smiles of our own.

Say his name. Say it because it matters, and not just politically. In another liturgical arena that cast a pall over far more than its own adherents, I can recall covering the Catholic Church sexual abuse crisis at its Boston epicenter nearly two decades ago. In what may be loosely interpreted as that faith's equivalent, the names of those to be particularly blessed are spoken in the intentions during Mass. Somehow, one Sunday, the by-then weekly blanket phrase “for the victims of child sexual abuse by clergy” – was omitted.

As a Jewish journalist listening more than participating, I noticed its absence perhaps more than the worshippers, and asked the church spokeswoman why it had been left out. She apologized profusely; a

clerical oversight, she explained, adding that the priest had not forgotten in his heart, and certainly neither had God.

We can't allow ourselves to forget, not with the pain of just a year ago still unhealed, not unless we want to allow his name and memory to dissipate into meaninglessness. Not if we are to grasp the scintilla of hope that maybe this time, change will be lasting, and begin to apply that hope to our hearts.

And lastly, if we allow that supplication and commitment to justice to take root, say his name because as hard as it is, it's simple to do.

You need no one's permission beyond your own; no special tools or accoutrements, no vast commitment of money or time. Whether in person or online, with others or alone. The only thing required is that you mean it, hear it, feel it, in your soul.

Say his name on 3 Sivan. George Floyd. Say his name.

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

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Culture

How Jewish New York got its very un-Jewish names

By Irene Katz Connelly

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro asked me to meet him on Frieda Zames Way, which is not an easy place to find on Google Maps.

No street view photos, no subway wait times – nothing to feed our iPhone-era inclination to know exactly where we're going, *all the time*. As any serious investigative journalist would, I immediately turned to the internet, where a website called [Oldstreets.com](https://oldstreets.com) informed me that Frieda Zames Way is just an honorary name for the very workaday stretch of East 4th Street that lies between First Avenue and Avenue A.

When I finally made my way there on a blustering, unseasonably chilly afternoon, Jelly-Schapiro told me that the corner named for Zames is responsible for our most accessible catalog of New York City's honorary street names. When a neighborhood resident wanted to know who exactly Zames was [a pioneering disability rights activist, in case you were wondering], she called the borough's historian, who then [commissioned retired urban planner Gilbert Tauber](#) to compile a list of the 1800 or so honorifics adorning street corners across the city – the very list I'd stumbled across on Oldstreets.com.

Jelly-Schapiro, 41, knows a lot about honorary street names and Oldstreets.com because he just published "Names of New York," a lively treatise on the city's place names that's part reference guide, part city history and part travelogue. On the Internet, there's a lot more information about him than there is about Frieda Zames Way. I'd already learned that he's a trained geographer who's made a career writing about place: Before turning to the city's place names, he wrote a travel history of the Caribbean and collaborated with Rebecca Solnit on the quirky New York atlas ["Nonstop Metropolis."](#) I knew he was a

native of Vermont, although I probably could have guessed that – he arrived for our walkabout wearing a puffer jacket under a blazer, displaying the unique Vermonter ability to integrate insulated outerwear into any ensemble.

As we walked down 4th Street, past a crowd of schoolkids just released for the afternoon, he told me it was his own childhood, much of which he spent splayed out with an atlas on the living room floor, that propelled him to become an authority on the many ways New Yorkers have charted their city over time.

“There are two kinds of books,” he said. “The kind that have maps in them, and the kind that don’t.”

We’d met up to amble through the Lower East Side, a neighborhood that once housed the world’s largest concentration of Jews and, decades after those inhabitants dispersed, still carries enormous historical weight as a Jewish enclave. The neighborhood’s history forms only a small part of Jelly-Schapiro’s sprawling city narrative, but it’s also an excellent case study of his broader argument: That while we tend to think of names as defining the places they describe, it’s often places that define their names.

“It’s a banal phrase, just a descriptive phrase for this part of Manhattan,” Jelly-Schapiro said of the Lower East Side. “But across time it gained this name as a preeminent destination for immigrants.”

Many of the neighborhood’s great byways have pre-Revolutionary War names, and while we walked in no particular direction Jelly-Schapiro spilled the tea [terrible pun mine, and very much intended] on their history. In the days when the city proper was just a cluster of dwellings at the bottom of Manhattan, wealthy English and Dutch clans cultivated crops here, and they liked to stamp their presence on the land they occupied. Elizabeth and Hester were two daughters of the Bayard family before they gave their names to intersecting avenues. The De Lanceys named a street for themselves as well as coining Essex and Grand, which marked the boundary of their estate. Staunchly loyal to the British monarchy, they were run out of town after the Revolutionary War. James Rivington, who gave his name to a street nearby, published the city’s leading loyalist broadsheet

during the war; but after revealing he’d been a double agent the whole time, he got to stay.

But when you hear the names Grand and Delancey, Hester and Elizabeth, do those Dutch and English settlers come to mind? Probably not. Do you recall the neighborhood’s mid-19th century tenure as “Klein Deutschland,” a [haven for German immigrants](#)? Unlikely. If you’re a Forward reader, you might associate Hester Street with Ab Cahan’s novel, “Yekl,” or Anzia Yezierska’s coming-of-age story, “The Bread Giver.” Delancey might remind you of “Crossing Delancey,” a 1988 Joan Micklin Silver rom-com that tackled Jewish assimilation and testified to the ascent of Yiddishkeit in pop culture.

If there’s anything you’ll learn from reading “Names of New York,” though, it’s that those resonances won’t last forever. Many of the stops on our walk, once neighborhood mainstays, are now landmarks to a community that has largely moved on. Despite their stuffy monumental plaques, the Romaniote and Bialystock synagogues host Shabbat services. But nearby Katz’s Deli and Russ & Daughters cater to out-of-town crowds as much as locals.

We spent a while looking for a painted advertisement for the [now-defunct](#) Schapiro’s Kosher Winery, a piece of street art Jelly-Schapiro holds dear because it shares the unusual spelling of his surname. The ad proved elusive (later, aided by Google, Jelly-Schapiro emailed to tell me that it’s at the corner of Essex and Rivington), but there was no shortage of murals dedicated to “Loisaida.” That’s the phoneticized Spanish spelling of the neighborhood (as well as an honorific to Avenue C), and it’s a testament to the strong Puerto Rican presence here, which grew during the decades that Jews moved out. Modern and multicolored, the murals seemed to foreshadow a time the Lower East Side’s Jewish story will feel as distant as the Dutch one.

Nowhere is the tension between the neighborhood’s reputation as an immigrant hub and its actual character more apparent than at the old Essex Street Market. Founded by then-Mayor Fiorello La Guardia during the Great Depression, the market gave pushcart

vendors an indoor haven that, by today's standards, looks both atmospheric and extremely dingy. Now the market has gotten a reboot in the form of [Essex Market](#), a sleek food hall hawking New York street eats in every imaginable incarnation. The new Essex Market remains city-owned, and still houses the vendors from the previous premises. But Jelly-Schapiro pointed at the building's glassy exterior, where the names of some of the city's oldest ethnic eateries – Veselka, the 24-hour Ukrainian eatery, and Schaller & Weber, an old-school German market – appeared in trendy block font. Those legacy restaurants have established new branches at [The Market Line](#), a privately-owned food hall housed in the same building. Their names have never been more literally visible; but their absorption into a hipster mecca is ironic proof that they no longer serve the immigrant populations they once symbolized. What used to be an actual Eastern European enclave, Jelly-Schapiro observed, was now “a consumable version of ethnic New York.”

We'd been chatting about the ways in which names gain new meanings organically over time. But “Names of New York” hits shelves at a moment when many cities and institutions are deliberately changing names that commemorate dishonorable people or moments in our national history. As we walked toward the NYU campus, where Jelly-Schapiro is a member of the Institute for Public Knowledge faculty, I confessed I often found his book grim reading: The best and most haunting chapter investigates Native American place names, from Gowanus and Canarsie to Manhattan itself, and is rife with anecdotes of colonists who casually bowdlerized the language of the people they were driving off the land. By his own telling, even the most nostalgic names of the Lower East Side can be read as settlers' desire to stamp their dominance on conquered territory. Had studying this history given him any insight into the name-change discourse?

Nothing “prescriptive,” Jelly-Schapiro said. He pointed out that changing a street name can be much more fraught than, say, removing a monument. For every street with a troubling namesake, there may be hundreds of people who grew up or grew old there, and don't wish to see their own memories erased. He'd seen one ingenious and very Jewish solution but it

required us to travel [metaphorically, at least] to the outer reaches of Brooklyn.

Near Manhattan Beach, there's a street named Corbin Place, after the 19th-century real estate developer Austin Corbin. It so happens that Corbin was a raging antisemite – a prominent member, in fact, of something called the Society for the Repression of Jews. In 2007, residents of the now heavily Jewish neighborhood hit on an unexpected way to address Corbin's legacy: they [added](#) the initial “M,” renaming the street for Margaret Corbin, one of the few female soldiers in the Revolutionary war.

“It was a way to keep the name but change who it celebrates,” Jelly-Schapiro said. If you read the rest of his book, you'll conclude it's a very New York solution.

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Scribe

How getting the COVID vaccine changed my approach to prayer

By Lisa Wolfe

It's the morning of my first vaccine and I double mask and jump in the subway to head to my appointment at Harlem Hospital. I get out of the subway and make a wrong turn, which leads to another wrong turn and worries that I will be late. I start to run, panting under my masks and fogging my glasses, but arrive just in time for a lovely nurse with sky-blue fingernails to give me my injection.

I have been so focused on making and getting to this appointment that I am unprepared for how emotional I'll feel as the needle goes into my arm. But what a year this has been. The suffering. The loss. Fresh horror stories still coming in daily. Though my loved ones and I were lucky to stay safe, I haven't seen my parents or adult son in more than a year—or admitted to myself until now how much I have missed them. Missed everyone. But here is the vaccine, holding the promise of protection and the chance to be together again. I find myself reciting the *Shehechyanu*, so grateful for this shot, so grateful for this prayer that expresses my thankfulness for reaching this day.

I am not an obvious person to be saying it. Though I grew up going to Jewish day schools and summer camps where we prayed every day, I decided after a couple of comparative-religion classes in college and during a semester abroad in Cairo that I did not believe in God and dropped all practice. I was so eager to assert my shared humanity with everyone everywhere that I never attended another Rosh Hashanah service or even hung a mezuzah on my door.

But here I am, not only reciting the ancient words with perfect recall, but filling with a comfort so deep it feels almost physical, like I am grabbing onto a lifeline that connects me to people throughout the world and time.

It is not the first time this has happened. When our first child was born and placed in my arms, my husband and I were floored to hear *Birkat HaKohanim*,

the priestly blessing, traditionally used by parents to bless their children on Friday nights, come out of my mouth.

A few years later, when I was on an airplane that took a terrifying nose dive before the pilot righted it again, I stared out the window not so much reciting as clinging to the words of *Shema*.

And at the start of the pandemic, when I was walking in Central Park and came across the emergency field hospital with the bumper-to-bumper lineup of ambulances waiting to drop patients off, I felt grateful to at least be able to offer a pleading little loop of *Birkat Ha-cholim*, the prayer for the sick.

But this is the first time I have stopped to think about the strange phenomenon, not about to take anything that brings comfort or company at this point in the pandemic for granted. As I head back to the subway under a sky as blue as the nice nurse's nails, I wonder why, if I haven't believed in God in such a long time, these prayers not only continue to come back to me but to provide such deep relief?

Part of the reason, of course, is that I learned them in childhood, and happy associations from childhood tend to bring joy. Like snow. I grew up in Montreal surrounded by snow, and on those rare occasions it sticks to the ground in Manhattan, where I live now, I fill with pleasure. But it's a more limited pleasure than I get from the prayers, one that remains between me and the snow, and does not mystically extend to all the people with whom I've ever built snowmen or had snowball fights.

Another part of the magic surely has to do with the healing power of words, recognized by everyone from the ancient Egyptians and Greeks to Freud and Jung as a way of calming the body and soothing the mind. "Reciting poems dissolved my feelings of solitude,"

said Rachel Kelly, author of *Black Rainbow*, a book about how poetry helped her recover from years of severe depression. “I felt the words of the poets embracing me from across the centuries, assuring me other people have had these challenges and I wasn’t alone.”

And prayers are poems that are ritualized, giving them even more power. When I recited my prayers in those intense moments, I did not simply feel connected to people in general but to a specific community of people I felt I knew and could almost see shopping in shtetls, learning in ghettos, walking to gas chambers, arriving at Ellis Island, jogging on the beaches of Tel Aviv. It is as though the years of showing up in learning and prayer bound me to these people by a spiritual connective tissue that has remained in place ever since, regardless of whatever intellectual conclusions I might have reached about god. Reciting a few words is all it takes to reactivate the connection and stop me from feeling alone.

This is an especially precious gift after the year we have just had. Though it doesn’t bring me any closer to believing in an omnipotent ruler up in the sky, it makes me believe in the value of people gathering to pray to whomever they understand god to be. We have been isolated by more than the virus – also by politics, technology, social media, the harshness of our public discourse, and an unprecedented exodus from places of worship.

According to a recent [Gallup](#) poll, American membership in churches, synagogues, and mosques has fallen 70% in the last 20 years—the biggest drop on record – especially among millennials, who, other polls have shown, are suffering from epidemic levels of loneliness. As we rethink our relationship to the workplace, school, and home, maybe we also ought to look with fresh eyes at prayer, which might have the potential to feed us in ways we do seem to be starved.

I, for one, have already revamped my attitude. Rather than waiting to be surprised by the prayers that pop out of my mouth, I plan to start integrating prayers into my life. I already know which one I am most looking forward to saying. When my friends can finally come over again and sit down at the table for a meal,

I intend to belt out the words to *Hineh Ma-Tov*, which translate roughly as: How good and beautiful it is for friends to sit together.

Amen.

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

Lisa Wolfe is a writer from New York.

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Culture

For Jewish Heritage Month, TikTok has put Jewish creators in the line of fire

By Mira Fox

Going viral overnight is the dream for most aspiring social media influencers. But for Jewish creators on TikTok, it can be a nightmare filled with antisemitism.

For May, which is Jewish Heritage Month, TikTok created a #MyJewishHeritage hashtag and featured it on its Discover page, placing several Jewish creators' videos at the top – even though they had not used the hashtag on their videos. These creators woke up to floods of antisemitic comments on old videos.

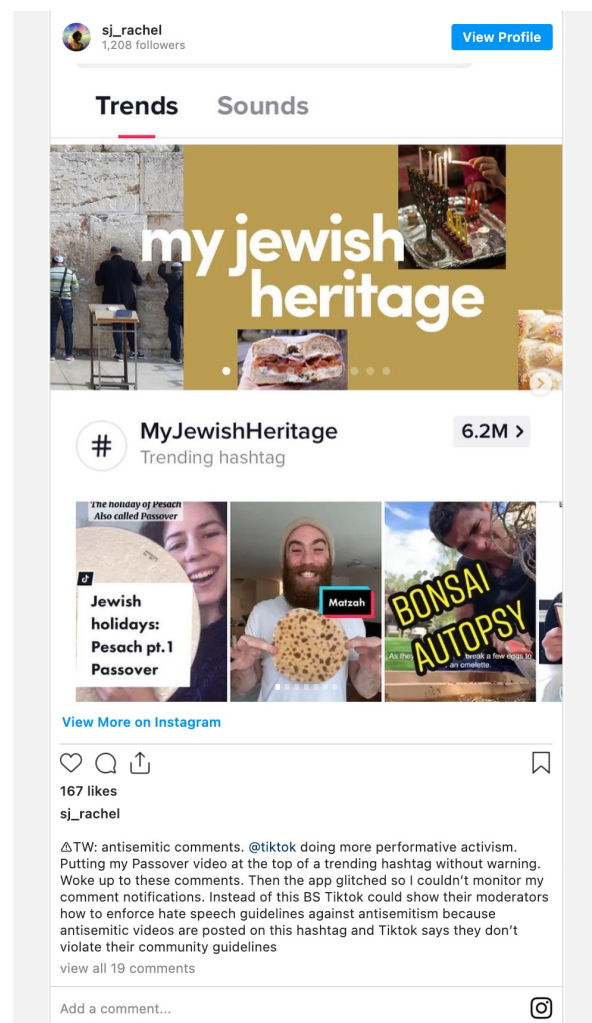
Two of the top three videos on the page had been made for Passover before the hashtag existed, and were bumped to the top of the feed by TikTok without warning or permission, and exposed to a wider – and often antisemitic – audience.

“Normally I would be very excited to be featured at the top of a trending hashtag. I am proud of the content I create and I put a lot of effort into it,” said Rachel SJ in an email; their video, a song about Passover, is currently one of the top three videos on the #MyJewishHeritage page, under their handle @sj_rachel. “But TikTok gave me no warning, which would have allowed me to change my privacy settings to limit comments and video duets/stitches.”

Instead, Rachel spent much of the day trying to delete comments. “I didn’t want to risk the wait times and lack of follow-through that I’ve already experienced from attempting to report antisemitism,” the creator told me. Midday, the app glitched, and Rachel was unable to see new comments, even though they were still pouring in. The hate was posted not only on the video featured on #MyJewishHeritage, but also on videos across Rachel’s profile, which antisemitic users were now exploring thanks to the new publicity.

Antisemitism is not new on TikTok. Some of it comes in the form of hateful comments, such as those about Palestine on apolitical videos about Jewish holidays and ritual, or outright declarations of hatred toward

Jews. This type of comment, unfortunately, seems to be an unavoidable side effect of being online, and appears on most platforms. But other antisemitic trends are native to the app and integrated with its specific functions, such as a meme from last year in which users pretended to be ghosts of children killed in the Holocaust or a current trend riffing on the [happy merchant symbol](#), both of which relied on TikTok’s filters, format and editing tools.



Jewish creators have struggled against this type of hate speech and antisemitism in the app, often duetting problematic videos to call out the antisemitism and urging their followers to report hate speech. But they say they have found little support from TikTok. In fact, they say the opposite has been true; many Jewish creators report that their videos calling out antisemitism have been taken down or put under review by TikTok for hate speech, while the videos they are criticizing, often of people openly declaring hatred for Jews, have remained up, or have been taken down only after several days of repeated reporting and flagging. Several Jewish creators I spoke with mentioned that it takes aggressive campaigns of reporting white supremacists, including usernames and profiles with obvious hate symbols in them, to get them taken down.

A user named Ezra, who goes by @eightfrogsinatrenchcoat, recently responded to a video declaring hate for “joOs.” [Users often purposefully misspell words to get around the app’s content filters.] Ezra said that a post criticizing the video’s antisemitism was taken down for hate speech within a few hours, but the original video didn’t disappear for two days; in TikTok time, two days is an eternity, during which the video may have reached hundreds or thousands of eyes. Another video, from user @kittenqueen, explaining the Holocaust, was instantly put under review and deleted, only eventually posting after the creator appealed the decision, according to a comment. The same pattern has been reported in numerous videos and comments from Jewish creators.

Meanwhile, an account called @germansoldier, with the user’s name listed as “Adof,” posted a video of an oven opposite one of Rachel’s videos, but it was not taken down as hate speech despite attempts to report it.

TikTok seems to know that antisemitism is an issue on their platform. #Jews has been disabled and no longer works as a hashtag, for example, and the company [promised to crack down on Holocaust denial](#). But creators feel this is a meager effort toward providing safety, and wonder why TikTok would

choose to promote a hashtag like #MyJewishHeritage on its main page if it already knows that #Jews is dangerous. “If TikTok is going to make a hashtag to give a platform to Jewish creators during this month, they should probably be doing more to protect us,” said Ezra in a video they posted Tuesday. “Otherwise, that hashtag is just a way for antisemites to find more Jewish people to harass.”

Far from promoting respectful engagement with Jewish culture, or giving Jewish creators a larger platform, #MyJewishHeritage feels more like a publicity stunt and piece of hashtag activism to Jewish creators. Many of the videos under the hashtag are not made by Jewish creators nor do they concern Jewish topics, and are simply using the hashtag in an attempt to get more eyes on their videos by using trending hashtags.

TikTok is also currently featuring a #WeAreAPI hashtag page to highlight Asian and Pacific Islander creators. As is the case with its Jewish equivalent, many of the videos on the page do not use #WeAreAPI and seem to have been chosen for the page by TikTok. While Jewish creators have heard similar stories of TikTok’s lack of protection against other minority groups, the videos under the @WeAreAPI tag do not seem to have gotten the same influx of hate as a result of being featured.

The Jewish creators I spoke with do not know how TikTok chose their video to put at the top of the page, nor whether TikTok has a list of Jewish creators or who curated the hashtag’s page. Rachel was frustrated also with the picture of Judaism presented by TikTok’s choices, which did not include any Jews of color, as well as the fact that many of the featured videos are about Passover, which occurred over a month ago.

“I’m flattered that they liked my content,” said Rachel, “but I don’t appreciate having my safety risked. If they want to promote Jews and tout our content, they have to foster a safer place on their app for Jews.”

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Culture

In 'Here Today,' Billy Crystal and Tiffany Haddish give us the Jewish story we weren't looking for

By Irene Katz Connelly

At the Schmooze, we watch a lot of movies about Jews. But we also spend a lot of time waiting with bated breath for stories about Jews.

We wait for stories in which Jews aren't ancient heroes or [stoic sufferers](#) or [caricature-ish sidekicks](#) that set off all your internal alarms. Stories in which Jewish milestones aren't [exotic events](#) but just [normal things](#) that some people do. Stories in which Jews aren't fighting for the survival of their tribe or fighting to leave it but just living their modern lives and happening to be Jewish at the same time.

When I saw the trailer for "Here Today," a family dramedy starring notable Jews Tiffany Haddish and Billy Crystal, I thought I had happened upon one such story. But I got through about 10 minutes of the film before I realized it wasn't quite what I wanted.

The film stars Crystal (who also directed) as Charlie Berns, an emeritus comedy writer on an SNL-esque sketch show who is slowly succumbing to dementia while struggling to prevent anyone around him from finding out about his disease. Berns knows time is running out, and he has a lot on his plate: He needs to write his memoirs, attend his granddaughter's bat mitzvah, and make up with his children Francine (Laura Benanti) and Rex (a very bearded Penn Badgley and honestly the highlight of the film), who are still resentful of his absent-dad parenting style.

Enter Emma Payge (Haddish), a free-spirited aspiring singer who befriends Berns at a chance lunch involving a near fatal seafood reaction (don't ask) and, for no explicable reason, decides to fix everything in his life. In between developing a strenuously platonic May-December friendship and visiting nearly every landmark in New York City (one wonders, while watching the pair bond during a trip to the Hudson Yards Vessel, what kind of subsidies this movie received), Emma helps Charlie reconcile with his

children and record his memories before it's too late.

"Here Today" does feature a lot of Jewish content, in funny and sometimes surprising ways. There's a synagogue which the Schmooze immediately knew was Reform, because the rabbi says things like "Chai five!" During the bat mitzvah scene, no one proffers a clunky explanation of the hora – if you know, as the saying goes, you know. The bat mitzvah girl, Francine's daughter Lindsey (Audrey Hsieh), is Asian and presumably adopted (both her parents are white), a casting choice that tacitly affirms the oft-contested legitimacy of Jews of color.

While Emma isn't Jewish, Haddish herself worked as a bar mitzvah "motivator" in her pre-fame days and, as an adult, discovered she had Eritrean Jewish heritage, eventually becoming a bat mitzvah with Crystal, a real-life friend, standing beside her at the bima. Some scenes – like an exchange in which Emma remarks she's "never been to a bat mitzvah" and a moment when she rallies flagging guests onto the dance floor – seem like winking nods to Haddish's own Jewish story.

But "Here Today" is also so irredeemably schlocky that its depiction of dementia often feels farcical. This is not the sensitively self-contained drama of "Still Alice," or the sumptuously tragic love story in "Supernova," released just last year. The plot of "Here Today" hinges on characters doing things that in real life would likely result in lawsuits but, in the universe of the movie, play out to lukewarm comedic effect. These incidents include (but are not limited to!): Administering an EpiPen with no medical qualifications, climbing into a sleeping acquaintance's bed, commandeering the DJ booth at a child's bat mitzvah, breaking into an abandoned lake house and calling a professional subordinate a "dumb turd" on live television. Regrettably, the only remotely realistic scene occurs during the bat mitzvah, when Francine suspiciously interrogates Emma, the only Black woman in the room.

Ironically, the remarkably good Jewish notes in “Here Today” throw into greater relief the mushy sentimentality with which it approaches every other theme.

The Schmooze will admit that, against our will and all our intellectual pretensions, we felt kind of moved by the last, tearful minutes of “Here Today.” (We won’t spoil the ending, but we will say that the final scenes look like a montage of stock photos compiled by someone who wants to sell you something on Instagram.) But mostly, we felt disappointed. There

were so many Jewish moments, and we wanted them to tell us something about what it means to be a loving and flawed parent, or to live with a degenerative illness, or even just to make a new friend.

But they didn’t. And without a real story behind it, there’s no amount of Yiddishkeit that can earn this movie a “chai five.”

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